



# Wedded to the Ruthless Duke

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** "Hide those curves from me again, and you will be punished for it, wife."

Lady Grace is always on the scandal sheets. Too wild and not thin enough, it comes as no surprise that her first kiss would be at the front page. But the fact that she's caught with best friend's arrogant brother does...

Duke Philip must protect his reputation at any cost. But he can't resist the spitfire begging to be kissed. So, he offers Grace a marriage of convenience. Only if she abides by his rules:

1. She must never be on the scandal sheets again.
2. She must give him an heir, but they are to lead separate lives.
3. For one month, her days are her own, but her nights belong to him...

\*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *Wedded to the Ruthless Duke* is the novel for you.

**Total Pages (Source):** 96

## CHAPTER1

Grace burst into the ballroom.

“Oh, dear.” Althea’s disapproving tone was already sounding behind her. It wasn’t helped by the short sigh of her cousin, Tabitha.

Grace chose not to look back at her family. Instead, she took off as best as she could between the crowds of the ballroom. She ducked down to avoid being caught in the eye by feathers thrust into ladies’ updos. They were so eager to join the dancers that they had begun to jig by themselves.

The sounds of cacophonous laughter and violin music filled the air, making it even harder to orientate herself in this mess of bodies and overly fine gowns, but Grace knew where to go. It was always the same since Eleanor had married and was now with child.

Eleanor could be found by the table that the food was on.

Grace appeared by one such table decked with punch bowls and glass plates topped with cakes and ice cream. Eleanor stood beside the table, a glass bowl in her hand and a spoon of cream on the way to her lips.

“Grace!” Eleanor smiled. She dropped the spoon back in the bowl and turned to Grace, in danger of knocking her over with the roundness of her belly. “Oops, sorry,” Eleanor caught her wrists and steadied her. “I do not yet think I am used to my new size.”

“I do not need any more help falling over, Eleanor. You know that.” Grace’s jest made them laugh together as they held hands. “I am delighted to see you doing so well though and to see you so happy.”

Eleanor beamed at her and dug into her bowl of cream once again as she pushed her spectacles up her nose.

It was true that Eleanor had never been so settled or as delighted with life as she had been since she married Dorian, the Duke of Dayton.

“Thank you. I wish I could see you smile more.” Eleanor’s own smile faltered. “I trust that you have come running across the ballroom to escape your mother.”

“I swear, she has grown worse.” Grace sighed, blowing one lock of her honey hair which had escaped her updo out of her eyes. “Ever since my cousin has come to stay with us for the Season, it has made my mother realize all the more every way in which I am deficient.”

“Deficient!?” Clearly outraged at the choice of word, Eleanor actually lost interest in the desert she had been demolishing. She put down the glass bowl and turned to face Grace fully. “Grace, you are not deficient.”

“Try telling that to my mother. Ahem.” Grace cleared her throat and lifted her chin higher, putting on a new tone of voice and doing the best impression of her mother that she could possibly master. “I am telling you, Grace, that all my lessons over the years must have gone in one of those ears of yours and out the other without stopping in the middle.”

“Pff, is that what she says? She is getting worse,” Eleanor agreed with a taut nod. “Even though Philip and I have always argued, for we certainly don’t see eye to eye on all matters, we always defended one another to our parents. Does your cousin not

jump to your defense?”

“Tabitha is sweet in nature, but she wouldn’t dare say boo to a goose,” Grace hurried to explain. “It’s one of the reasons my mother has fallen in love with her so much. Tabitha is the perfect lady in every way.”

She is the lady I am not, to my mother’s frustration.

Grace tried to laugh, to pretend it did not matter, though in truth, she had felt like a knife had been stabbed into her heart.

She’d known for years now that her mother was hardly pleased with her, let alone proud of her, but the arrival of Tabitha had only emphasized her mother’s dislike.

“What else does she say, Grace?” Eleanor asked, her tone more serious now.

“Oh, she tells me I go outside too often. That I am far too tanned to be a lady. That I fall over too much to be a lady. That I... that I am in every way, not a lady.” Grace was struggling to hold onto her forced smile now. Eleanor saw it and kindly offered her hand, the two of them squeezing their palms together in comfort.

“I am sorry,” Eleanor whispered.

“It doesn’t matter. I am hoping tonight to spend time with you all, and I will forget my mother for a while. Speaking of which, where are Violet and Diana?”

“Oh, they’re here. Violet’s sister, Celia, is here too.” Eleanor looked up, her face losing any hint of warmth. “Ah, someone else is coming this way too. Erm, Grace, let me pour you some wine.”

“Why?”

“Because I have a feeling you’re going to need it.” Eleanor winked and turned to pick up a glass of wine from the table, thrusting it into Grace’s hand just as two women appeared at their side.

“There you are, Your Grace.” It was Grace’s mother. Althea curtsied low to Eleanor, something Eleanor clearly found very amusing indeed. Both Grace and Eleanor knew that Althea had hardly approved of Eleanor’s bluestocking ways.

Strangely, a lot of that disapproval had vanished when Eleanor became a duchess. “Allow me to introduce my niece to you, Tabitha.”

Grace turned to look at Tabitha, feeling that now familiar tightening in her gut which communicated pure sadness. She liked Tabitha, dearly; she was a kind and sweet woman, but she was everything Grace was not. Try as she might, Grace couldn’t help comparing herself to her cousin.

## Page 2

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“It is a pleasure to meet you at last, Your Grace.” Tabitha’s willowy figure dipped into a perfect curtsy. Her pale golden hair glimmered in the candlelight, one curve kissing her neck in the most perfect way.

Grace had a rather large gulp of wine which did not go unnoticed by her mother. Althea’s eyes glowered in her direction.

“My cousin has told me so much about you,” Tabitha said sweetly to Eleanor.

“Grace and I are dear friends indeed,” Eleanor said with confidence, turning to take Grace’s hand in her own.

“Yes, they are,” Althea said a little tartly, clearly still watching the way that Grace now clung onto the wine glass for dear life.

Before anymore could be said between them, a gentleman walked past them, reaching for a glass of his own from the table. He brushed Grace’s arm, perhaps not even noticing she was there at all, but the quick movement set her off balance.

“Careful,” Althea hissed though the damage was already done. Grace staggered on her feet, only catching her balance because Eleanor was already holding onto her. Yet she managed to tip the glass of wine down Tabitha’s ivory white gown.

Oh no... I did not mean to do that.

“Grace!” Althea squeaked. Momentarily, she seemed to forget in her fury that anyone else was in the room to hear her ire. Her cheeks flushed as red as the wine.

“I’m so sorry, Tabitha —” Grace snatched up cloths, trying to dry the spill for her, but she was cut off by the same gentleman who had knocked into her.

“My dear lady, I am sorry,” the gentleman addressed Tabitha alone. “I should have paid more attention to where I was going.”

“Strange,” Eleanor muttered for Grace’s ears only. “It’s as if he bumped into her.”

“I’m invisible,” Grace murmured back.

“Please, let me help you.” The gentleman gallantly took Tabitha’s hand. “Let us find a maid to help you with your gown.”

“Oh, you are too kind, sir.” She spoke in honey soft tones.

“Too kind,” Eleanor mirrored the words, mimicking the tone but in a sicklier way. Grace had to bite her lip not to laugh.

“Thank you, sir,” Althea called after the pair of them as the gentleman serenely swept Tabitha away across the room. “Too kind indeed!”

Once the pair vanished into the crowd, Althea spun around. Her glower was so sharp that Grace was not the only one to flinch, for Eleanor did too.

“What were you thinking?” she hissed.

“Thinking?” Grace repeated. “Mama, he bumped into me. I didn’t mean to do it —”

“If you had better control of yourself, better poise,” she wrinkled her nose as the words escaped her fast, “such things would never happen, but they always do seem to happen around you, don’t they?” The air was dead for a second as Grace stared back

at her mother, the words cutting deep. “Why can’t you be more like Tabitha?” With this final cutting remark, Althea stormed off, her fingers fiddling with the beads around her neck in a nervous habit.

“She’s as charming as ever, your mother, isn’t she?” Eleanor declared and passed Grace another glass of wine. “Drink that and ignore her.”

Grace found it easier to abide with the first order than the second. She gulped from the wine as Eleanor linked arms with her.

“Feeling suffocated?” Eleanor whispered.

“As if a pillow has been thrust over my face!”

“Then let us get you out of here for a while.” Eleanor towed her away across the room. Grace was enjoying her wine too much to notice where they went. After a minute or so, she realized where they had ended up.

They stepped out onto a balcony leading out of the ballroom and overlooking the garden, and they were not alone. Eleanor had beckoned their friends to join them.

Violet, the Duchess of Barlow, was the first, and she was already talking eagerly of something she had seen in the ballroom. Soft and mild in manner, Diana was behind her, and lastly came the forever seductive Celia.

“Well, that settles it,” Violet said with a huff. “Grace, your mother has to be one of the most determined women I have met.”

Realizing that Violet was scoffing, for she had witnessed the same interaction as Grace and Eleanor had but from a distance, Grace nodded and sighed.



## Page 3

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“Determined not to have me as her daughter, do you mean?”

“Is it truly so awful?” Diana whispered with horror in her tone, her cheeks pinkening. “I’m so sorry, Grace. It is unkind indeed.”

“It cannot be changed.” Grace did her best to shrug and pretend it did not matter. “We all have our trials in life, our obstacles to overcome. Unfortunately, mine is my mother.”

“I think we need a little distraction, don’t you?” Celia suddenly offered up. She moved to Grace’s side and elbowed her. “As much as good claret can distract you for a while, it has its consequences with headaches the next day.”

“Hmm, perhaps you are right.” Grace stared down into the reddish liquid. “Oh well, perhaps it’s worth the headache tonight.” She knocked back more of the wine, happy to take the role of jester and make those around her giggle as she drained the glass. The empty glass was swiftly taken from her, however, before she could ask for a refill. Celia held it at some distance.

“You think too much of what your mother thinks,” Celia insisted with a wave of her hand. “It’s high time you thought of something else for a while.”

“A distraction?” Violet suggested. “A good idea indeed. What did you have in mind, sister?”

“Well, you remember the dares I gave you all, do you not?” Celia looked around them all, arching her perfect eyebrows with a glint in her eyes.

“Oh, those dares.” Diana blushed a deep scarlet with her words. “I am not looking forward to going through with mine.”

“Mine turned out to be the best thing that happened to me,” Violet confessed with a giggle.

Grace couldn’t help smiling. It was true indeed that the dare Celia had given her own sister had led to Violet marrying the man she was now so in love with. Just like Eleanor’s tale of love, the dare had somehow started a journey which had led to complete happiness.

“Not every dare can go as well as yours did, or yours,” Grace added, glancing at Eleanor.

“It was hardly a smooth journey,” Eleanor protested as Violet nodded in agreement. “Yet Celia is right. Perhaps it is time, Grace, that you were to do your own dare.”

Grace swallowed around a sudden lump in her throat. She could remember distinctly unfurling the piece of paper that Celia had handed to her, reading the scribbled note there on the page.

It had filled her with so much nervousness at the time that she had promptly hoped they would all just forget about it. Of course, they hadn’t.

“Do you remember your dare?” Violet asked.

“No,” Grace lied.

“Grace...” Celia’s warning tone was mischievous. “Even if you couldn’t remember it, I remember what I put on all the papers. I could recite them all, so we can figure out which one was yours.”

“Fine.” Grace sighed heavily. “The dare was... to kiss a gentleman.”

There was stunned silence for a second. It was broken first by Violet, who swung around to her sister and swiped her on the shoulder in reprimand.

“How could you do that to Grace?” Violet asked.

“She needed a little shaking up.” Celia waved a hand at Grace. “She doesn’t know her own beauty and could do with a gentleman to boost her confidence.”

“What confidence?” Grace murmured though no one really heard her.

“Was that exactly what was written on the page?” Diana asked in amazement. “To kiss a gentleman?”

“Not only that.” Celia continued to smile with that same glint in her eye. “Grace?” she prompted her on.

“Fine.” Grace sighed again. “It was to steal a kiss from a gentleman under the moonlight.”

“Well, at least you made it romantic too,” Eleanor added with a laugh.

“Some romance if I’ll be attacking a gentleman with my lips.” Grace’s joke made them all laugh again before Eleanor nudged her with her elbow.

“Why not give it a go?” she whispered. “Why not make tonight that night?”

“Because it’s a ridiculous idea!” Grace laughed, brushing off the idea.

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“Are you worried about scandal?” Diana asked, her hands shaking a little.

“Hardly.” Grace cast her eyes to the heavens pleadingly with these words. “With how much I make a mess of myself, falling into people and over things, I am in danger of making a scandal whenever I walk out of the house... as my mother likes to remind me daily.”

There were murmurs of agreement from her friends about her mother.

If Grace was honest with herself, she was also curious to know what a kiss would be like. Having seen Violet and Eleanor wed, she could see that intimacy came with its perks, its happinesses, but she just didn’t believe it was a future open to her.

“Look, let’s be practical. I cannot kiss a man,” she said with sudden seriousness. “No man would wish to kiss me back. I am neither poised enough, prim enough, nor slim enough. It ought not to be attempted.”

“Your mother’s words have poisoned your mind; that is the problem,” Eleanor declared with sudden heat. “Grace, you are beautiful.”

“As beautiful as lichen on a rock, I fancy,” Grace added with a smile, but none of her friends were laughing now.

“You are beautiful,” Celia added. Grace shook her head. She knew the truth. Her mother had been telling her just how much she lacked in beauty and poise for years now.

“Let’s not think of that woman anymore,” Eleanor said with finality. “Let’s pick a gentleman instead for you.”

“Pray, do not,” Grace begged, but her words went unheeded.

“What of Mr. Merryweather?” Violet suggested. “He’s a gentlemanly sort.”

“Too gentlemanly,” Celia said, shaking her head. “He would not kiss anyone.”

“Lord Davenport?” Diana said, chewing her lip. “He is a handsome man.”

“That he is.” Eleanor nodded. “Yet he is not here tonight.”

“Mr. Thorpe?” Celia went on. “What of him?”

“He’s currently infatuated with you, sister,” Violet reminded her. “Despite the fact you keep him at arm’s length.”

“Well forgive me for trying to get rid of him then.” Celia’s words made them all laugh.

“Look, none of these men will work for me,” Grace said, controlling her mirth. “If I was to do this, if I was to even try, then I’d want a kind gentleman. Someone soft in manner, gentle, someone easy to talk to. I neither need a confident lothario, a demanding alpha, nor a passionately infatuated man.”

“Then I have just the gentleman.” Eleanor flicked her fingers then took hold of Grace’s shoulders commandingly. She steered Grace back to the glass door which led back into the ballroom. “What of him?”

“Him who?” Grace asked, squinting as she looked into the ballroom. “I see a sea of

gentlemen.”

“The Marquess of Morton,” Eleanor said with a soft sigh. In time, all her friends then sighed in a similarly besotted way, then laughed at themselves for it. “He’s a sweet man, handsome, kind. He is everything on your list.”

Grace’s eyes settled on the dark blond hair of the Marquess of Morton, the soft features, and the kindly smile as he talked with a gentleman beside him. It was true, the few times she had talked to the gentleman in the past, she had found him kind indeed.

It would be good, wouldn’t it? To think of something else other than my mother’s disapproval for one night.

“Very well, I shall try it. And woe betide the poor Marquess of Morton when he’s got me coming at him in the moonlight.”

## CHAPTER2

“Are you ready for this?” Celia urged in Grace’s ear as the two of them walked back into the ballroom with Violet close behind.

“It will not work, this plan of yours,” Grace murmured back. “When I fall over, most men leap out of the way and watch me fall flat on my face.”

“Do they?” Violet said from behind them. “Well, how kind of them.”

“They do not want the embarrassment of being seen around someone as clumsy as me,” Grace whispered.

“Perhaps that is true of some gentlemen,” Celia said, dragging Grace further across

the room and in the direction of the Marquess of Morton. “Yet the Marquess is a true gentleman. He would never let a lady fall if he had the capacity to help her. It will be easy for you of all people to pretend to fall.”

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“Yes, thank you for that, Celia,” Grace said tightly while Celia smiled comfortingly at her.

“Swoon into his arms, and he will romantically catch you. Ask for some fresh air, and he will gallantly escort you outside on his arm.” Celia made a strong impression of a gentleman offering his arm to her. “Violet, you can run after as a chaperone, can’t you?”

“I can.” Violet smiled. “I can also cleverly disappear into the bushes when you go to kiss him.”

“When I attack him, you mean,” Grace muttered. Despite her words, Grace was curious to know what it would be like. It was this that made her want to do it, rather than her friends encouraging her. She looked down at the gown she was wearing and did her best to smooth the skirt as much as she possibly could.

It was not the dress she had wanted to wear tonight, but her mother had insisted on it. Grace had chosen a rather bold Pomona green dress, cinched high on the waist.

It was beautiful, unlike anything Grace usually chose, but she had fallen in love with the material in the shop, and her father had insisted on having a dress made for her when he saw how much she loved it.

That was before he fell ill. Oh, Papa, how I wish you could still come to events such as these. I would be so much happier then.

She had longed to wear the gown, but Althea had stood at the door forbidding it,



comparing it to Tabitha's choice. The green was not as fashionable as ivory white, and it revealed far too much of Grace's figure. In the end, Grace was made to change into the rather boxy cream gown she wore.

She smoothed the skirt once again.

"Now, go; he's alone," Celia urged in her ear. "Now, Grace."

"God, I will live to regret this; I know it." Grace stepped away.

Across the room, she caught a glimpse of her mother and Tabitha together with the gentleman who had collided with Grace earlier as if she was nothing but a breath of wind beside him. Tabitha was elegant in her tinkling laughter, and Althea's gaze was set firmly on Tabitha in admiration.

Something squirmed in Grace's gut. It was a need to think of something else, to be someone else, even if it was just for a few minutes.

She set her path to walk past the Marquess of Morton, who now stood alone, looking around himself in search of someone to talk to.

Grace barely needed to even fake her trip. She caught the edge of her gown, and her usual clumsiness did the rest. She fell into the Marquess of Morton with much more vigor than she had intended, and he caught her in a fumble.

In a flash, Grace remembered being in another gentleman's arms.

She saw Eleanor's brother, the dark burnished eyes of the Duke of Berkley, then all was gone.

The Marquess of Morton may not have done quite as smooth a job of catching her,

but he certainly steadied her in the most gallant of ways.

“Lord Morton, I am so sorry,” Grace hastened to say, standing on her own two feet again. “Forgive me...”

“Worry not. Are you well?” he asked kindly, his hand still gently on her elbow as she stood straight. “Did you trip, or is it the heat? Sometimes these ballrooms can make one swoon with the heat, can they not? I find myself sometimes struggling with it.”

“You are kind.” She smiled at him. “It’s a wonder we’re not all in fainting fits, is it not?”

“Indeed!”

“Would you care to escort me outside, My Lord? I believe a breath of fresh air might help me.”

“I’d be delighted to help you.” He smiled broadly and offered his arm. “If, of course, a chaperone could be offered.”

Violet appeared suddenly at their side as if she had been summoned there with a magic wand.

“Oh, good evening, Your Grace,” Lord Morton said with considerable surprise as he noticed Violet beside him.

“I will happily be your chaperone, My Lord.” She fluttered a hand in front of her own face. “I agree the air in here is too stifling. I’d be glad to take a turn in the garden myself.”

Grace could have rolled her eyes at Violet’s rather obvious appearance, but she held

herself back and forced a smile for the benefit of Lord Morton. As he helped her outside, she continued their conversation, talking softly.

It was clear Lord Morton was a gentle soul indeed, considerably kind, but Grace strangely found the notion of kissing such a man lacked any luster or attraction. In fact, there was no spark at all.

Oh well. She sighed with the thought. The dare was to steal a kiss, not to fall in love!

## Page 6

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“Philip, what are you doing here?” Eleanor’s words brought Philip to a halt.

He had barely walked into the ballroom before hearing his sister’s cry of surprise.

“I was invited, same as you,” he said drily. “Perhaps you forget my existence, sister, when we are apart?”

“Don’t be flippant,” she pleaded. “You are late; that is all.”

I had no wish to come; that’s why.

It was with some reluctance that Philip had come tonight at all, but he knew he had to. Eleanor may have been safely married, and even if the gentleman wasn’t particularly to Philip’s liking, he knew she would be looked after, but Philip’s own monetary situation was still a worry.

I’ll have to marry sometime, won’t I? I need to find a dowry.

There had been a time when charming a lady had been a common occurrence though he had kept such acts of charm quiet. Whereas some gentlemen had the reputation of being rakes, Philip’s behavior in such areas was less known.

His reputation was something he protected fiercely as a tiger would guard its cubs.

The notion of charming a woman into marriage though was really rather different and

something he was not prepared for, even if he knew it was necessary.

“Have you come to find a spouse of your own?” Eleanor asked with a somewhat knowing smile on her lips.

“Not exactly. I came to check on you and other friends. How are you, sister?” he asked with genuine concern, glancing down at her rounded stomach.

Her humored expression softened into one of love. She placed a hand to her stomach and smiled deeply.

“I am well indeed.”

“Then I am glad to hear it.” He momentarily took her hand and squeezed it tight. A look of understanding and warmth passed between them.

Philip knew that he and Eleanor hadn’t always understood each other completely, but they loved one another, dearly, and it pleased him greatly that these days they were closer than they had been in some time.

“I am even happier tonight for all my friends are here. Even Violet is here with her husband.”

“All your friends?” An image shot into Philip’s head. He saw his hands upon curved hips and the sodden gown of Lady Grace as she stepped out of his pond. The images vanished as quickly as they had appeared.

“Yes, all of them,” she said with a smile. “Well, I won’t hold you up anymore, brother. We can catch up later, but I do not doubt you have come to do the rounds and view the ladies and their dowries...”

“Eleanor, you know I take no pride in being a dowry hunter,” he muttered to her. She arched one eyebrow, somehow knowing this yet dismissing it at the same time.

“Good luck,” she whispered and walked away, one hand on her stomach and another reaching for a glass dish resting on a table nearby that was topped with cake and cream.

Sighing, Philip did as he knew he had to. He circled the room, greeting friends and acquaintances, paying particular attention to any lady who carried herself well with a good turn of her neck or elegant flicks of her fingers when she danced.

Despite it all, no lady left him with any satisfying feeling. Instead, he felt quite stifled from the heat in the room.

He soon left through the open doorway and went out onto the terrace of the garden. Here, to one side, there were gentlemen smoking pipes, and to the other end, a group of ladies had gathered together, all taking the air.

I need a break from conversation.

Ignoring them all, Philip strode out into the garden. Desperate for clear air and quiet, he disappeared between yew bushes, following a gravel path that led deep within the estate. Conversation and music emanating from the ballroom died away, leaving him peaceful and alone at last.

Philip stepped out into a clearing. The rose garden shone brightly in the full moon, each bloom shimmering in delicate dew. Philip was so busy admiring those blooms that it took him a minute to realize that not all was quiet after all.

A lady’s laughter reached his ears. He froze, listening, waiting for it again. The laughter sounded, somewhere off to his left.

I know that sound.

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Without thinking about why he was doing it, Philip followed the sound of that laughter. He turned a corner in the yew bushes and peered between an archway made of wisteria into a small lawn where on a bench, a couple sat together.

The gentleman was familiar to him though Philip could not recall his name in that moment. Philip was sure the gentleman was a marquess though his title evaded him. The Marquess made some sort of jest, then the lady laughed again, her honey-colored hair swinging to the side with the movement.

That laughter...

How often had he heard it emanating from his library when Eleanor had invited around her club of bluestockings? The sound had been absent as of late, ever since Eleanor had married and moved out, but he knew it well.

“Grace,” he whispered her name aloud though the pair were too far away to possibly hear him.

It was indeed Grace. She turned to face the Marquess beside her more fully, her face now visible in the moonlight. She was smiling greatly with the sort of smile that Philip had never seen on her face when she was around him.

For him, Grace wore challenging smiles, triumphant ones when she had won a battle between them or knew that she had displeased him with her informal ways. She had never smiled so... sweetly. It was an aberration.

“Well, what do you think, My Lady?” the Marquess said, leaning forward and



gesturing to the stars. “Beautiful, are they not? Like glimmering jewels.”

The words sounded so poetic that Philip jerked his head forward. He was sure he knew this gentleman from somewhere, but the Marquess was too difficult to place when he was sat so close to Grace.

Why are they out here? Alone? And where the hell is their chaperone?

“Indeed, they are, very beautiful.” Grace smiled though her words were spoken rather woodenly to Philip’s ears. “You study the stars, My Lord? I know so little about them.”

I do not believe that for a second.

Philip would have scoffed if he was part of this conversation now. Grace seemed to know something about everything, her learned and scholarly ways filling her head with facts that many would not know. It was as if she was pandering to the Marquess’ ego, eager for him to tell her something.

Once again, the absence of their chaperone infuriated him. He knew Grace hardly cared about doing what was right or proper, but this was beyond the pale! The two of them could be discovered at any moment.

Philip leaned forward, moving more into the shadows beneath the archway. He caught sight of the woman who was clearly supposed to be their chaperone.

The Duchess of Barlow, Violet, was wandering across the far side of the lawn. She seemed to have developed a very sudden interest in a tall fountain. Her gaze was solely fixed on the water that flowed freely out of an urn and into a pool by her feet. At her distance, it would be impossible for her to hear or see what the pair were doing.

Grace... you are playing with fire.

Philip took another inch forward, trying his best not to crunch the gravel beneath his boots and alert the pair to his attention.

“That up there, is Ursa Major,” the Marquess said, pointing to constellations in the sky. “And that there... is Ursa Minor.”

A small frown creased Grace’s brow. It was there for but a second before she softened her expression and leaned toward him.

She knows he’s wrong.

What little Philip knew about the stars meant he knew it in an instant as well. The Marquess was trying to show off but had pointed instead at Orion rather than Ursa Minor.

“Your knowledge is quite fascinating, My Lord.” Grace bowed her head a little. This look of demureness didn’t suit her, but the gentleman appeared to be lapping it up.

Her wild honey hair was in its usual state with strands falling out of the updo. One such strand now fell down past her cheek. At the movement, Philip’s hand suddenly itched. He had to scratch the back of his knuckles to put an end to the wish to push that strand of hair back himself.

Then the Marquess’ hand lifted, and he pushed that strand back instead. Grace lifted her chin a little, her eyes glinting in the most seductive way.

Philip could have been back at that pond again with Grace climbing out of the water, her sensuality obvious to him even if she was oblivious to it herself. Yet he was not the one there with Grace, but the Marquess.

Something snapped inside of Philip as he saw Grace lean toward the gentleman.

Philip marched forward. The sound of crunching gravel then the firm ground of the grass beneath his boots alerted the pair to his presence, and the two leaned back from each other jerkily.

“What in God’s name are you doing?” Philip seethed with an anger that was almost unrecognizable to him. He lunged toward the Marquess, grabbed his elbow, and tugged him to his feet.

The man stumbled.

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“Your Grace?” he murmured, his voice squeaking in surprise.

“You dare try to compromise this lady, and you will answer to me.” Philip thrust the man away.

“But —”

“Go back to the ball. Now!” Philip barked at the gentleman. He looked around, waiting for Violet to run up to them and demand what was going on, but she had mysteriously vanished from the lawn entirely.

Some chaperone she turned out to be.

“Your Grace, honestly, I meant no harm.” The Marquess was now holding his hands up in defense. “The Lady and I were just talking.”

“And that’s just how it looked without a chaperone, wasn’t it?” Philip said scathingly. “Go,” he commanded again, as if he was ordering a dog around.

Offended, the gentleman scurried back. He rearranged his cravat, his face meek and mild, and with that expression, familiarity clicked into place.

I know who you are.

It was the Marquess of Morton. With this realization came understanding, so much so that Philip could have roared with laughter, for Grace had never been in any danger at all. Any temptation to laugh at his mistake diminished in an instant, for he felt Grace

swipe him around the arm.

“What the hell did you do that for?” She threw the words at him. She was wearing another one of those ridiculous gowns that were too big for her and that hid her curvy figure far too much. She had to grab the shoulder and shift it up before it fell off again and revealed too much.

“What? No ‘thank you’ for defending your honor?” he pointed out drily. “I would have thought that even you, Grace —”

“Even me? What is that supposed to mean?”

“That even you,” he emphasized, taking a step toward her, suddenly aware of just how close he had come to her, “would see the outrageousness of what you were doing out here alone with a gentleman at night. It’s scandalous, and with many men, you would have been in danger.”

“I needed no such protection. I-I knew what I wanted,” she stammered, her eyes wild and flashing with fury.

“And what was that, Grace? Hmm?” he urged her on. “A chance to be ruined? For your reputation to be in tatters around you?”

“I was only after a kiss!”

The words hit him as if she had kicked him in the chest.

“What did you just say?”

### CHAPTER3

Why the hell did I confess that to him of all people?

Tongue-tied, Grace stumbled. She had to work hard not to fall over again as she increased the distance between herself and the Duke of Berkley.

He was staring at her in such astonishment that she felt smaller than she had ever before, as tiny as a mouse. Hurriedly, she pulled the shoulder of her dress up, stopping it from where it had slipped. His eyes slid to what she had done.

“What did you say?” he repeated the words when she made no intention of answering him.

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter.” She looked away, intent on finding Violet and getting out of here as soon as possible, but strangely, Violet was nowhere to be seen. Needing to escape, Grace rounded the bench she had been seated on with Lord Morton, doing her best to get away.

“What did you mean, Grace?” The Duke cut her off, walking the other way to halt her escape.

“Out of my way.”

“No.”

“So gentlemanly as always.” She stepped up onto the bench and dropped down the other side, her quickest way to escape.

“So ladylike as always,” he said with much more of an undertone than had been in her own voice. Rage shot through her as she came to a sudden stop. She spun on her heel in the dewy grass, turning to look at him.

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When she stared at the Duke, she saw everyone in that moment who had ever said a word against her behavior. She thought of her mother, of the maids that sometimes looked at her in incredulity, and she saw the women of the ton who couldn't believe the number of times she managed to drop things in her life or fall flat on her face.

He is just like the rest of them.

Tears prickled her eyes in her anger, but she would not let them fall.

"What I was doing does not matter. Only know that your intervention was not welcome," she said darkly.

"Well, we both know you never welcome my presence," he replied knowingly.

"A feeling that I am sure is mutual." She had often seen him staring at her when she arrived at his house for her meetings with his sister.

She knew the disapproval, the probable outrage at the gowns she wore or the way she behaved. "If you would excuse me." She turned away, once again intent on making her exit though she did not get far.

"You were trying to kiss him?" There was outrage in his tone as he somehow sprinted in front of her and blocked her path. Grace began backing up as quickly as she possibly could, but he pursued her, moving forward.

"I have never seen you in such a fury."

“There’s a first for everything.”

“I didn’t need a first for this!” Deciding the bench was her best option to put an obstacle between them once again, she rounded it, and he halted on the other side.

“Why were you trying to kiss him?” he hissed at her quietly, so angry now that his shoulders rose and fell with each heavy breath. “That man? You want to kiss that man?”

“Why should it matter to you whom I kiss?” She tried to stand taller, move her hands to her hips, and adopt some notion of dignity in this mad situation though that feeling evaporated when she saw him scowl.

“Him?” he laughed. “Something tells me you do not know who you were really trying to kiss at all.”

“Why should any of this matter to you?” she challenged again. “Leave me be, Your Grace.” She stomped off from the bench, yet the Duke was even faster this time.

“Why would you want to do it?” he asked, walking forward as she walked backward. They ended up in a strange cat and mouse game around the bench.

“It was a dare, all right? Just a dare. It was just something I was going to do. It doesn’t matter.”

“A dare? Dear God, do not tell me this is one of Lady Celia’s dares again? This game you are all playing is as childish as anything.”

Grace had no answer for such a thing. She didn’t need to feel anymore belittled by the Duke than she already did. After a few seconds though, as she watched him shake his head in despair, she found her voice.



“As childish as your behavior now?” she asked. “Poking your nose into things that aren’t your business?”

“Did you do this dare to please Celia?” He ignored her questions and pushed on with his own. “Or did you want to know what a kiss was like?” He got closer to her. In amazement, Grace backed up.

She stumbled a little on the earth but managed to catch her own balance as Philip pursued her. They abandoned their place by the bench and ended up in the middle of the lawn. “You wanted to kiss a man, Grace? To know what the thrill would be like?”

“No one was forcing me to do this,” she hastened to explain, aware that he had somehow closed most of the distance between them now and that she couldn’t back up fast enough. “Yes, I was curious. I wanted to know something of it.”

“Then why him — of all people!” He waved a hand madly in the direction in which Lord Morton had made his escape.

“In case you haven’t noticed, Your Grace, I do not exactly have men flocking to my side, do I?” She came to a halt, deciding it was time to stop retreating from him. He stopped too, just a few inches in front of her. So tall, he was intimidating in his dominating height over her.

Is this what he is trying to do, intimidate me into a confession?

“That’s your answer?” he spluttered. “He’ll do because there is no other man interested?”

“Enough.” She raised her hands in the air in a surrender position. “Enough, Your Grace, or all your shouts will bring everyone to us.”

His eyes widened. He took a small step back then spun in a circle, plainly checking every gap in the yew bushes that led to their spot in the lawn. He plainly feared their discovery.

“Oh, now I see,” she mumbled.

“See what?”

He fears being discovered alone with me, that he will now be caught in scandal with me.

“It doesn’t matter,” she whispered. “Look, none of this is any of your business, Your Grace.”

“You are my sister’s friend,” he said, rounding on her again. “Who else’s business is it?”

“None but mine!”

“Shh.” He waved his hands at her. “You were right. We don’t want to be overheard out here, do we?”

“God forbid,” she agreed. “Please just leave this matter alone. Forget this and let us return to the ball and never talk of it again.”

“You expect me to ignore what has happened?” He waved his arm in the air, commandingly. “Really, Grace?”

“LadyGrace,” she hissed, for she could no longer ignore the fact he was not using her title. He was a man so usually set on propriety that even he looked amazed at the slip. He took a step back and thrust a hand through his hair, ruffling it and making the untidiness even worse.

He can tame every part of his life except his hair, can he not?

“I’m sorry,” she said, deciding it was time to try a different tact. “What happened here with Lord Morton was my business. I didn’t mean to bring you into it. I had no idea that you would stumble upon us and risk yourself being in a scandal. I suggest you run away at once before anyone sees you alone in my company.”

“Wait.” He turned to face her again, his manner suddenly as stiff as stone. “You think that’s why I’m angry? You think I fear myself being involved in scandal?”

“It is your usual thought, is it not?” she murmured. “The night we met, you could only think about how my clumsiness and falling into your pond might be misinterpreted if we were seen alone together by anyone other than your sister.”

“That is not it.” He shook his head, quite wild and passionate in anger. She could not remember ever seeing him so out of control before, his manner so flung to the wind with rage. It was almost as if she was looking at a new man.

“Then why? Why are you so angry?”

“Do you really think this is a way to be kissed, Grace?”

“Lady Grace!” she reminded him again.

“Lady Grace.” He emphasized the word and stepped toward her. “Do you think that no man would kiss you for any other reason? So much so, you had to drag out the first man you could find and try to cajole him into a kiss?”

“That’s not what it was.”

“That’s what it looked like.”

“No more,” she begged, holding up her hands. “I don’t want to talk about kissing with you.” She blanched, realizing how the words had sounded. “When I said kissing with you, I meant... well, you know what I meant.”

He jerkily nodded then hurried toward her. Startled by his sudden march in her direction, she moved back a step, but as before, his long legs ate up the ground. She was also in danger of slipping in the dewy grass so fell still very quickly indeed.

“You think no man would want to kiss you?” he hissed, his head bending down toward her.

He came so close that the words died on her tongue. His lips practically hovered over hers, his gaze burrowing into her own.

What is he doing? He has never done this before!

“Grace?” he said, waiting expectantly for an answer. This time, she didn’t bother to correct him about her title.

Her mind was a whirl, startled by how close he had come and what on earth it was doing to her body. She could hear her heartbeat pounding in her ears, her blood was rushing fast, and a sudden heat was enveloping her.

She was all too aware of the handsome line of his jaw, the intensity of those eyes, and how tall and strong he was in figure, compared to her shorter and much rounder one.

Her mouth was dry as she tried her best to swallow, to shift any such attractive thoughts from her mind. Suddenly, everything was here that had been missing with the Marquess of Morton.

While she and the Marquess had just been talking pleasantly enough together, with

the Duke of Berkley, she felt her gut stirring, a heat that made her think of kisses, and those lips hovering so near to hers.

“All you have to do, if you want to know what a kiss is like...” he hesitated, his deep and rumbling voice still having a captivating hold on her as his eyes dropped down to her lips, “is ask.”

### CHAPTER4

“As if I’d ask you or any other man for anything.” Grace jerked her head up with the words, defiance in her expression.

Something stirred in Philip’s gut.

She wants a kiss, and she was willing to give it to that man? Of all people in the world, she chose him!

He could think of nothing else but Grace’s lips now, what a kiss would be like and how it could feel to be the one to introduce Grace to such a kiss, to show her how a true man could kiss her, rather than the pathetic kiss she would have gotten from the Marquess of Morton, if any kiss at all.

“No?” he said, finding his voice as he managed to tear his gaze from her lips to her eyes. Her face was burning red, despite the fact the summer’s eve was chilly. “You like being the one in control, Grace?”

“Indeed, I wouldn’t give up control to any man. Least of all you.”

“I don’t know.” He offered her a small smile, the edge of his lips tilting up on one side. “You might rather like losing control every now and then. There’s pleasure in

giving control to another.”

What am I doing?

It was the sort of rakish thing he only said behind closed doors with discrete women. Grace was not that woman.

“I...” She faltered then her eyes slid down to his lips as well.

He acted on instinct. He wasn’t sure if it was the rage about her trying to kiss the Marquess of Morton that made him do it or the fact that she was looking at him in that way, but he had to do it — had to do it now before she found another to fulfill her foolish dare.

Philip pressed his lips to hers with such a collision of force that the two of them staggered together. It was instant, the heat, the fire, the way they fumbled as her hands found the edge of his tailcoat and his splayed hands went to her hips.

He gripped hard, reliving that feeling of having those curves in his hands from three years ago.

Intoxicating...

He cursed her baggy and ridiculous gowns in the back of his mind as he held onto her, angling his head to hers and deepening the kiss. She gasped, perhaps at the sheer intensity of it all, and he took advantage of the moment, parting her lips to take her tongue with his own. It was a passionate battle as he dominated the kiss, the two of them coming to a halt on the grass at last.

He was too lost in the kiss, thinking only of the heat of her lips, wondering why he had never done this before, broken the rules with Grace before, when a shocked gasp



sounded from somewhere.

Philip pulled back harshly.

What have I done?

That shocked gasp of some onlooker was like ice through his veins. He released Grace and stepped back, looking left and right as he sought the person who must have seen them together.

He could see no one. There were only the darkened gaps in the yew bushes nearby, but no eyes peered at the two of them.

It had to be Violet. As chaperone, she must have come to check on her friend then ran away again.

Panting as he caught his breath, he turned back to face Grace.

Her hands were on her stomach, her face full of astonishment. Her hair looked somehow wilder than before, and that damned sleeve of her dress had slipped once again, revealing a bare shoulder. The hint of her bust was visible above the neckline of her gown now, and she seemed completely unaware of it in her shock.

Don't do this to me, Grace.

"There, it's done," he said with sudden finality.

"Wh-what?" she stammered, her gaze finding his own. Those golden eyes looked quite ethereal in this light.

"At least that will stop you putting yourself in any further danger." Yes, that's why he

had done it, he was sure of it. It was just to make sure she didn't kiss a fool like the Marquess of Morton and find herself ruined for it.

“I beg your pardon?” she spluttered, taking a small step back from him.

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“Well, these dares of Celia’s... they’ll just get you all in trouble. At least now you’ve achieved your dare without any harm.”

“That’s why you kissed me?” The outrage was plain at once.

“Why else?” He shrugged.

Because the thought crosses my mind at least once every time that I see you.

He kept this answer to himself. Little good could come from his attraction to Grace, hence why he had been keeping it at bay ever since he met her.

She was unlike the other ladies he discreetly spent his time with. She was not formal, not elegant, and the way that writers of scandal sheets followed behind her, writing of her clumsiness and unladylike ways, meant any possible liaison they had would appear in the scandal sheets within a day. That eventuality was unthinkable.

“My reputation is not of your concern.” Her expression changed at once. She marched past him, no longer meeting his gaze, as she returned to the other end of the lawn, clearly making her way back toward the house.

“You think not?” he spluttered as he followed her, somewhat angered that she’d had no response to the kiss at all. Had she even liked it? Then he caught sight of her brushing her lips with her fingers. She couldn’t have been untouched by it.

No one could kiss me back like that and not feel something.

“Listen, your reputation is entirely tied up with my sister’s.”

“What do you mean by that?” She flung herself around. “We are not blood related.”

“You are dearest friends. The whole ton knows it.” He waved a hand dismissively. “You know what happens the moment there is a scandal. Someone hears about it, and they start looking at anyone connected to the subject of that gossip. I’m protecting Eleanor.”

“Funny. You didn’t seem very protective of her when you insisted that she found herself a groom.” The artful way in which she spoke and raised her eyebrows made his gut stir again. He felt another urge to kiss her though he kept his feet firmly planted in the ground where they were.

“How little you know if you think I wasn’t protecting her the whole time.” His words made her frown. “You appear often enough in the scandal sheets without needing to go out of your way and flirt with a man who would have every word you said reprinted in a scandal sheet the next day.”

“I beg your pardon!?”

“You heard me,” he muttered deeply in a low warning tone. “The writers love to write about the ways in which you... transgress.” He struggled to find the right word.

“Yes, because it’s a transgression to enjoy a good walk. To ride, to swim, to go sailing. How dare a woman like all the things that many men like and not just...embroider her life away!”

“You know what I mean,” he said, continuing that low tone though it did nothing to dissuade her anger.

“You should have let me kiss Lord Morton instead.” Her words made his stomach knot. “As you so clearly despise me and my reputation so much, it’s a wonder you have stayed in my company for so long now.”

“For God’s sake.” He cursed, knowing now he had to point something out to her. “You weren’t going to achieve your dare with Lord Morton. You would have only had your feelings hurt.”

“And why is that? Do you think he would not have wanted to kiss me?”

“Of course not! You are not his type. It’s not my secret to tell why, but just take my word for it, Grace.”

“Why?” She stood rigid, the full force of her fury plain now. “Because I’m not proper enough. Not ladylike enough.” Philip stayed silent. “Notthin enough.”

Thin!? This thought curdled his gut. Why the hell did she want to be thin? Dear God, a red-blooded man would have loved to have had a woman with her figure in his bed. Philip had certainly imagined it, many times.

“It has nothing to do with you.” He scrambled to keep speaking as he saw her lips fall open in hurt. “His tastes are rather different to mine, Grace. He would have rather kissedmethan spend time being driven mad by the curves you keep hidden beneath those modest dresses of yours.” He waved a hand dismissively at her.

She took a step back, her cheeks pinkening further. Philip wished he could reclaim the words at once, somehow stuff them back into his mouth and forget the thing he had said about her curves, but she didn’t seem to notice that bit.

“Oh.Oh!”she gasped in understanding and threw a hand over her eyes. “That’s why I liked him.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, I so rarely like men. It suddenly makes sense that I would choose a gentle man who turns out to prefer men to women.” She managed a small, humored smile as she dropped her hand from her face.

“You so rarely like men?” He folded his arms, feeling anger on behalf of his own sex.

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“In fact, I hate them.” She smiled at his look of annoyance. “Yourself included, of course, Your Grace.”

“Charmed, as always, Grace. You hate me, do you?” He had a feeling he knew where these words were coming from. “Well, I find it hard to believe you would kiss me like that if you hate me so much.”

She froze, her only movement her eyes as they narrowed to slits.

“Youkissedme,” she pointed out.

“And you were hardly in a hurry to brush me off, were you?”

“I would have.”

“When exactly?”

When they both fell quiet, just staring at one another, Philip felt a need to prove his point. He unfurled his arms and walked toward her again.

Mirroring their actions from earlier, she backed up, but she didn’t move very fast. He caught her in an instant and slid his arm in one swift movement across her waist.

Those hips...

The way they arched up to her waist and back down again was particularly intoxicating when he had hold of her. Their position meant he could gather the loose

gown and show off those curves to their best advantage.

She still didn't brush him off, but those eyes were wide as she looked up at him. So close, their color was even more obvious than before, a pale brown, almost golden.

"You hate me, eh?" he whispered. His voice had gone even huskier than normal, taking on a deep and gravelly tone.

Her eyes blinked, her lips parted, as if she would object to him being so near, but she said nothing. She just waited. He couldn't resist — with his arm wrapped around her waist, he pulled Grace a little closer until their hips were flush together.

"Detest everything you know about me, don't you?" he challenged her further.

"Yes," she insisted, jerking her chin a little higher, that look of perfect defiance in her features again.

A sudden passion raged in his gut. Philip could see the two of them kissing again. To hell with it, he could imagine dragging Grace back to that bench, lifting her skirt, and showing her exactly which part of him she would not hate. He would lift that defiant look from her features with a scream of pleasure instead.

He could imagine pleasuring Grace would be different to any other woman he'd had. She would surely be wilder, more passionate in her movements, perhaps even occasionally take control... that was if he let her, of course. His plans would be to control everything about what passed between them at first.

He leaned an inch toward her, ready for another kiss, ready to break that line between them again, but another gasp filled the air.

"Dear God," Grace muttered, pushing hard into his chest and backing away. He



stepped away too, turning around to see who had interrupted them again.

It was Violet. She had come back and stood in the nearest gap between the yew bushes nearby, her eyes wider than Philip had ever seen them in his life.

Clearly, she did not wish to leave us alone any longer.

Philip ran a hand through his hair, the thrill that he still felt at having Grace in his arms leaving him extraordinarily slowly. He knew it was a good thing that Violet had interrupted them, otherwise Philip might have been tempted to live out one of those fantasies plaguing his mind.

That would have been a bad idea.

“Well,” Violet said, clearing her throat in some valiant effort to dispel the awkward air between the three of them, “I leave her with one man and come back to find her with another, Your Grace.” She glowered, her eyes squinting.

Ah, Eleanor will hear of this now.

“You’re doing a terrible job as a chaperone, Duchess,” he said simply.

Anger coiled within him. Anger at Violet for disappearing off, anger at Grace for trying to kiss Lord Morton, and most of all, pure fury at himself for losing control in the first place.

He walked away, hastening back to the ballroom.

He marched past the crowd of ladies and gentlemen on the veranda, trying his best not to meet any of their gazes. His mind raced with thoughts of Grace, what they had done, and yet how easy it had been to cross that line as well into the unknown.

“Damn Grace,” he muttered under his breath as he decided it was time to leave the ball. He returned to the door, collecting his frock coat from one of the servants before he left through the front door. “That was not meant to happen. Not meant to happen at all!”

### CHAPTER5

“Violet, please,” Grace urged as the pair of them returned to the ballroom.

“You have my word,” Violet promised. “I won’t say anything. But dear God, Grace, of all the people in the world, I was hardly expecting to return to that lawn to find you in the arms of the Duke of Berkley?”

“Well, it’s hardly something I expected either!” Grace needed to talk about this, to find out exactly how much Violet had seen when she had first returned to the lawn. Had she seen in what a passionate way the two of them had been locked together in that kiss?

“I have to go.” Violet motioned across the room. Her husband, the Duke of Barlow, was doing his best to signal to her slyly. “We’ll talk about this, all right? But please, be careful, Grace.”

“What does that mean?” Grace did not get an answer to her question though. Violet hastened off to meet her husband across the ballroom, and the two of them left.

Standing at the side of the ballroom, Grace stared at the empty space left behind by Violet. She didn’t want to look around, fearful that she might meet the gaze of the

Duke of Berkley again.

Why did he do that?

Grace lifted her hand and trailed her fingers across her bottom lip, still stunned at the sensation he had caused. He, of all people, she had not expected to be her first kiss. Though she knew she would be lying to herself if she did not admit she had loved every second of it.

The passion with which he had kissed her, even the flirtation he had offered before clashing his lips against her own had been a thrill. She had felt heady, as if she had drunk five glasses of wine and not just the one she'd had.

Was he going to kiss me again?

The way he had wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close made her feel quite powerless, thrillingly so, for which she was ashamed. Apparently one good kiss and she was willing to be as pliable as clay in the Duke of Berkley's hands.

"Well, did you do it?" Celia's voice suddenly disturbed her.

"Do what?" Grace dropped her hand and flung herself around. Celia stopped beside her, a curious look in her eye.

"With the Marquess of Morton. Did you..." She paused, looking around to make sure no one was paying attention to them before she whispered the next word. "Kiss."

"Oh, no." Her words made Celia's shoulders slump.

"No? Well, we'll simply have to find you someone else to kiss."

“That won’t be needed.” Grace reached out and caught Celia’s wrist. She dragged her to a corner of the room, far away, determined for no one at all to have a chance of overhearing what she had to say. “I still kissed a gentleman.”

“How thrilling.” Celia’s eyes lit up. “And do I get to know the name of lucky gentleman?”

“If I tell you, you cannot tell Eleanor.”

“Why not? Why...” Celia froze, that light fading from her eyes. “My God,” she muttered suddenly. “Are you telling me that you kissed herbrother?”

“Celia!” Grace waved a hand madly at her, urging her to be quiet. “Not so loud.”

“That wasn’t loud. It’s a wonder I didn’t scream it in amazement though, I’ll say that.”

“Please, don’t say anything to anyone, especially not Eleanor,” Grace begged, taking hold of Celia’s hand again but with desperation this time. “If she hears of this...”

“What of it? Eleanor might think it quite amusing, knowing her.”

“He won’t want Eleanor to know. God, you should have heard him, Celia, going on about how he had to protect his sister’s reputation. That I was a risk to her reputation as we’re such dear friends.” The words escaped her fast, blurting them out in her desperation to tell Celia all.

“He said that?” Celia’s eyebrows shot up. “The irony when you consider that there were two people in the kiss between you. Did he kiss you first? Or did you kiss him?”

“Celia!”

“What?” Celia asked innocently.

“He kissed me.”

“How interesting.”

“No, it’s not interesting. It’s very much un-interesting!” Grace countered to which Celia smiled with mischief. “Damn your dares. I wish I had never accepted the challenge.” She started to pace on the spot, turning around in mad circles. “That never, ever should have happened.”

“Well, it did, and you have my word that I won’t say anything to Eleanor.” Celia spoke slowly then raised her hand and tapped her chin in thought. “But how can you not find it interesting that he kissed you, Grace?”

“Please don’t do this, Celia; it meant nothing. We despise each other; everyone knows that! When he saw what I was trying to achieve with Lord Morton, he kissed me just to make sure I didn’t compromise my reputation with any other gentleman. He didn’t want me to be seen kissing another. It was all about... reputations,” she muttered the latter word icily, suddenly feeling a hatred washing over her.

I was honest when I told him I hated him. I do hate him.

Though she’d had no answer for him when he’d threaded that arm around her waist and pointed out that she said she hated him but could not pull back from him.

“Still, maybe there’s something more to this,” Celia whispered.

“No, there isn’t. Celia, you may not have seen him and I together as much as the

others have, but even you must have heard of how he hates me. He despairs of my clumsy ways, of how I turn up in the scandal sheets when I have fallen out of the carriage instead of stepping down, or when I embarrass him in person by turning up at his house with my gown covered in mud.”

Grace sighed, wondering why the thought of him despising her so much now strangely bothered her. It irked, like an itch deep within her gut that could not be scratched. “He hates me; I am sure of it.”

Celia was no longer smiling. She looked quite resigned and nodded slightly.

“Oh, and he hates you and your dares as well by the way,” Grace added hurriedly. Celia’s smile returned in an instant. She smirked but said nothing more to their conversation. She simply linked arms with Grace and drew her away across the room.

For the rest of the evening, Grace avoided looking any other gentleman in the eye in case she came face to face with the Duke of Berkley again.

\* \* \*

Philip tore the shirt off his body. He turned in the boxing room he kept at the back of his house, only known to his staff and a few friends.

With his torso exposed, and only wearing his trousers and low-cut leather boots, he faced a leather bag that swung from a hook in the ceiling. Curling his hands into fists, he took a wide stance and began to strike the bag.

The first few punches did nothing to relieve the tension that was bristling through him. It took about five more hits before he was thoroughly in his stride, striking out continuously, feeling the venom and fury pumping through him.

All night long, Philip had been unable to sleep. Each time he closed his eyes, he either saw himself and Grace together in his bed with him exploring beneath those ridiculous gowns of hers, or he saw the two of them together as they kissed.

“Stop... thinking... about... her...” he muttered the word between each one of his hits, doing his best to try and release the fury in him.

All his life, he had been calm and composed. He knew how to dignify himself, how to carry himself and be proper. The first time he had ever lost control was when he had learned about the debts his father had left him in. That fury had been all consuming.

After that, to release his anger, he’d got into a fight once in the streets. It ended badly, but the thrill of the fight had been enough to ignite a fire for the sport.

He occasionally crept out to the darker edges of London to watch games tucked away in wooden warehouses. He didn’t bet as others did — he was there to watch the fight.

This boxing room was his secret release. He came here when he was angry, and he came here when he was aroused, trying to fight off the demon in his back.

He tried to retreat from the bag, shaking his arms out to loosen the tautness of the muscles in his arms, but it swiftly returned. With it came the image of Grace and the way she had been leaning toward Lord Morton.

She should never have been that close to him.

As Philip saw himself crashing his lips against his sister’s most annoying friend, he struck out at the bag yet again. He pummeled it now, as if it was a thing that refused to submit in a fight. Again and again, he struck until he wound himself and had to back up, the sweat beading down his chest.



A whistle sounded from the far side of the room. Philip looked around, his eyes slipping to the doorway where he saw his friend standing, leaning on the doorframe.

Aaron Baxter, Duke of Rawley, had returned from his life as a soldier only recently. His scarred face, testament to the battles he had faced on the continent, was turned toward Philip.

“Good morning to you too,” Philip said as he noted the sound. “How did you get in?”

“Your butler let me in. Phil, if you need a parrying partner, you know you can ask me.”

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“Thanks, but you’re a soldier. I’d end up more scarred than you.”

Aaron didn’t crack a smile, but Philip knew that was his way. Aaron rarely ever smiled at anything. He was still, defiant, reserved, but Philip liked him all the same.

They understood each other and had known each other for so long now, they fell in step with one another in great ease when Aaron returned from his battles.

“Besides, you could have done me a greater favor by coming to the ball last night. I would have preferred that to being punched in the face.” Despite his words, Philip turned and pummeled the bag again.

With his footsteps covered by the sounds, Aaron crossed the room.

“Well, I assume you’re so angry as you’ve already read the scandal sheets this morning then,” Aaron observed, coming to the side and holding the bag in place. “Again.” Aaron nodded at the bag. “This time, widen your stance further.”

Philip did as Aaron instructed. The bag was easier to hit now with Aaron taking the brunt of the force and refusing to let it move. With the wider stance too, he was able to recoil faster, to come back with fresh punches. After a few strikes, Philip turned away.

The fury he felt was now purely aimed at himself.

I never should have lost control like that with Grace. I should have kept her at an arm’s distance as I have done for the last three years.

“Wait...” Something clicked in his brain. “What do you mean scandal sheets?”

“You haven’t seen them?” Aaron asked, releasing the bag. “You haven’t seen what they say about you?”

At Philip’s obvious look of confusion, Aaron reached into a pocket and pulled out a scrap of folded paper.

“Brace yourself,” Aaron warned coolly.

Philip glanced at Aaron, noting the serious look that was somehow even more tense than it normally was.

He carries the war with him wherever he goes. I know that.

Philip dragged his gaze back down to the scandal sheet and read.

‘Well, there is a surprise in our midst this morning! Someone at the summer ball last night decided to take a turn in the garden for some fresh air when they came upon a scandal unfolding before their eyes.

Lady Grace, a lady who has been mentioned in these pages more than once for her rather unorthodox manners, has transgressed in a way that perhaps will not surprise many though the gentleman she was seen with will surely shock everyone.

Lady Grace was seen clasped in the arms with none other than her dear friend’s brother, the Duke of Berkley. My informant tells me they were tucked secretly away in the garden under the moonlight, and by the strength of their embrace, she would have called them lovers.

Anyone who might have thought Lady Grace and the Duke of Berkley indifferent to

one another for their different manners is clearly mistaken indeed. With such scandal unfolding, one has to wonder if the Duke of Berkley intends to step forward and protect Lady Grace from further disgrace, or if he will let her reputation slip even further than it already has done?’

The piece went on in great detail of what the two of them were seen doing together. The kiss was known; they had been seen.

The curse which escaped Philip’s lips was sharp indeed, so sharp that the poor maid who scurried into the room at that moment jumped in alarm though it had no effect on a hardened soldier like Aaron at all.

Aaron grabbed Philip’s shirt off the nearest hook and threw it at him. Philip pulled the shirt over his head as the maid began to make her way toward them, flushed in the face.

“Well?” Aaron said to Philip in an undertone so the approaching maid couldn’t yet hear. “Is it true?”

Philip didn’t need to answer with words. He looked at his friend, and Aaron nodded.

“You were seen,” Aaron hissed in a low tone. “I thought you were a man of discretion.”

“I always have been.” Philip was beginning to think he should have changed his ways.

When he was younger, he had been something of a rake though as Aaron had said, always discreet. That had calmed down in recent years as Philip tried to battle with the struggling finances that his father had left him. Perhaps the amount of pent-up frustration from not having a release in so long was why he had transgressed so far

with Lady Grace last night.

“Your Grace.” The maid had reached their side. She bobbed a curtsy, still flushing bright red in the face.

“Yes?” Philip said, trying to keep his voice calm though inside, he was raging.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 am*

What the bloody hell am I going to do now?

He crumpled the scandal sheet in his hand, balling it up until it was a tiny ball that he could press between his forefinger and thumb. In his concentration on the paper, he didn't even pay attention to what the maid said to him.

“What was that?” He jerked his head toward her, listening this time to what she had to say.

She looked nervously between him and Aaron, clearly uncomfortable to be in the room when Philip was plainly so furious.

“You have a visitor, Your Grace,” she said meekly.

“Who?” Philip and Aaron asked in time with one another.

A face cut across his mind. Philip had a wild idea for a second that Grace was the one to come and see him. Did she sit in his drawing room now, a crumpled mess? Had she come to fling herself upon him and demand she remedy her reputation?

Grace would never do that. She wouldn't ask anything of me; she said as much.

Though strangely, the image of Grace flinging herself in need at him was really rather pleasing.

“It's your sister.”

## CHAPTER 6

“Well, you’ve gone and made everyone proud of you now, haven’t you?” Eleanor’s words echoed around the drawing room as she pushed her spectacles further up her nose and flung her rounded body down onto the nearest settee. Her hand rested on her stomach, quivering a little.

“Good morning to you too, sister,” Philip said drily as he and Aaron stepped into the room. Philip was still buttoning up his waistcoat, hiding all signs of his boxing though of course, Eleanor knew of the habit. She had not spoken of it to anyone, even to her friends, at his request.

“Are you proud of yourself?” she said in challenge, her voice surprisingly high pitched and ringing around the room.

Philip glanced back at Aaron, who winced a little at the sharp sounds.

“Drink?” Philip suggested.

“Coffee.” Aaron agreed with a nod.

Philip called for the maid, and coffee was arranged. Aaron sat down calmly in the room as Eleanor continued to seethe, her nostrils flaring, her gaze frenetic, unable to settle on anything around the room.

Philip refused to say anymore though until the coffee had arrived. He pulled the crumpled-up scandal sheet out of his pocket and read it again.

When the coffee did eventually arrive, he dropped the crumpled page on the table and snatched up his coffee cup. Aaron coolly picked up the scandal sheet as they waited for the door to close behind the maid.

The moment the door was shut, it was like the stopper had been taken off a champagne bottle.

“What the bloody hell did you think you were doing, Philip?” Eleanor raged, leaning forward.

“Careful, Eleanor,” Philip pleaded. “I doubt becoming this irate is good for your child.”

“I’ll decide what is right for my child.” She placed her hands protectively over her swollen stomach. “Based on your behavior last night, you can no longer tell me what to do in any regard. What a fine example my elder brother has set for me! Scandal!” She thrust a finger at the paper in Aaron’s clutches.

“You speak as if you haven’t had your own fair share of scandal,” Philip reminded her.

Aaron frowned a little more but said nothing. Eleanor looked angrier than ever, her jaw falling slack, her eyes narrowing to slits.

“Philip, you have compromised one of my dearest friends.” The tone broke him.

He turned away, the resilience he’d felt mere seconds before crumpling as that paper had done. He looked at Aaron, waiting to hear his thoughts.

“You don’t want to hear my thoughts,” Aaron said in a low tone, clearly reading Philip’s expression. “You know what I’d do at once.”

Philip grunted in acknowledgement.



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Aaron had had his own fair share of difficulty and heartbreak in his life, but something Aaron always focused on was doing the right thing. A soldier, through and through, he toed the line and followed the rules.

Philip doubted Aaron would have kissed a woman out of wedlock in the first place, but to have been discovered doing so, Aaron would have undoubtedly gone to the lady's house in question this morning and proposed.

Marry Grace? Can I?

An image of Grace walking down the aisle toward him filled his mind. She was wearing another one of those ridiculous dresses with the high collars and baggy material that hid everything about her. Something about the image infuriated him, he couldn't stand the thought, but another thought curdled his gut even more.

I can't do this to her.

"Have you seen her this morning?" Philip asked, turning back to face his sister.

"Not yet." Eleanor huffed and sat back in her seat, offering Aaron a small smile as he passed her a coffee cup. That smile didn't last. "After reading the scandal sheet, I resolved to come here at once. If I had known Celia's dare would lead to this..."

"Celia's dares tend to have a habit of leading to trouble for you all, don't they?" Philip muttered darkly. He chose to ignore the glower his sister sent his way.

"That is beside the point," she continued on with vigor. "This has happened now, and

I would jolly well like to know what you're going to do to help my friend. I see you haven't denied it, have you? You did indeed kiss Grace."

Philip knocked some of the coffee down his throat. It was too hot, and he burned himself. He slammed the cup back down on the table and turned away, grimacing.

"I'll take that as a yes," Eleanor muttered, shaking her head. "Honestly, you of all people, Philip. You never are improper, ever! What possessed you to go and be improper with Grace of all people?"

"She is hardly the pillar of propriety, is she?" Philip asked, wheeling around to face his sister again.

"She has never kissed anyone before. I can tell you that much," Eleanor protested. "But you, Philip. You!"

He couldn't answer her anymore. Unable to sit as the others had done, he marched up and down his drawing room. He folded his arms but found himself too restrained then he thrust a hand into his dark hair and pulled on the tendrils instead.

"You'll have to do something, Phil," Aaron said after a minute of silent pacing. Philip was glad of his friend's presence. It was calming in these minutes of turmoil. Philip nodded briefly at him.

"I cannot believe it." Eleanor shook her head vigorously. "I must see her. I shall see her later today." She was clearly resolved on the matter before her eyes flashed with anger, and she looked at Philip again. "The scandal, Philip. What have you done to her?"

Philip felt a rage burning within him. It was nothewho had done this to Grace. She did it to herself by agreeing to go through with Celia's ridiculous dare in the first

place. Even though he insisted on this, a voice hidden deep within the folds of the back of his mind spoke up.

I still kissed her, didn't I? I didn't have to do that.

“Must I remind you again of what the scandal sheets said about you once upon a time, Eleanor?” Philip reminded her. “It’s a wonder you can sit yourself on any pedestal to preach at me now.”

“That’s different!” She shakily got to her feet, her hand trembling around her coffee cup with so much rage that Aaron snatched it from her before it could go tumbling to the ground. “I am in love with Dorian as he is with me. And we’re remarried now anyway, so it hardly matters.”

“Pff.” Philip waved off this fact with an errant flick of his hand. There was much he’d like to say about Dorian and that man’s actions. He might have begrudgingly accepted Dorian, even tried to like him, but he was hardly enamored with his sister’s choice of husband.

“At least he did the right thing,” Eleanor added, lifting her chin an inch higher. “He’s much more honorable than you, it seems.”

Philip jerked his head to look at his sister. It was as if a bucket of ice had been thrown over him, and the dregs had bled into his veins. Behind her spectacles, her eyes were watery. He saw for the first time just how much he had let her down, disappointed her.

“I shall leave you.” Aaron cleared his throat, excusing himself as he stood.

“Aaron, you don’t have to —”

“It’s best.” Aaron cut him off, holding a stilling hand. “I’ll still see you for the opera tomorrow night, as we agreed, but right now...” He cast a wary glance toward Eleanor. “It’s time for you to talk.” He nodded his head in parting and left the room.

As the door closed behind him, Eleanor lifted her glasses and wiped her eyes, stopping the tears before they could fall.

“Grace is one of the best souls I know in this world.” Her voice shook. “She has the best of hearts. She has had enough misery in her life, too; she doesn’t need anymore because of you.”

Philip flinched at this news.

What misery has Grace had in her life?

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“She doesn’t deserve this,” Eleanor murmured. “Dear God, I can imagine her mother now. I can see just what she’ll say.”

Judging Eleanor was speaking more to herself than to him at this point, he ignored these words. He returned to the table and poured himself a fresh coffee, knowing that if he was going to get through the rest of this morning, he would need it.

“Eleanor, you never had any need to come and yell at me this morning.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Aaron may have only thrust that scandal sheet into my hand minutes ago, but my mind was made up from the moment he did.”

“Oh? Is that so?” She stilled. “What will you do then?”

“Sister, don’t you know me at all?”

\* \* \*

“What on God’s fine earth did you think you were doing!?” The shriek pierced the air so much that two maids scurried past the door of the parlor, diving for cover through the nearest servants’ doorway.

Grace stared after them with pure jealousy, wishing that she could hide from her mother’s outrage too.

“Mama, please.” Grace turned to look at her mother in the parlor, doing her best to remain calm. “It’s not how it reads. Not at all.” Despite her words, her hands shook around the scandal sheet in her grasp.

She looked down at it again. When it had arrived at their breakfast table only a quarter of an hour ago, Grace and Tabitha had been calmly talking about the ball the night before.

The first thing they had known of the scandal was Althea opening up the delivered sheet and shrieking as if a rat had run across her toes.

“You think not?” Althea snapped as poor Tabitha closed the parlor door hastily, clearly eager to keep the staff in the dark as much as possible.

Shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted if you ask me.

Grace looked at Tabitha with the thought, but she appreciated the effort all the same.

Althea marched toward Grace, her taller height towering over Grace for a moment. She snatched the paper out of Grace’s hand.

“You are ruined. Completely and utterly ruined, Grace. You might as well have lifted your skirts for the Duke of Berkley last night and become the harlot the whole of London now believes you to be.”

“Mama!” Grace complained.

“Aunt!” Tabitha exclaimed at the same time. She affected a perfect look of horror, a hand clasped over her mouth. Grace briefly wondered how Tabitha could look elegant and poised even in a mad moment like this, but she brushed it from her mind fast.

“I am not a harlot,” Grace said, cutting across her mother before Althea could rampage even more. “How could you even think that?”

“London will think it.” Althea waved the scandal sheet in Grace’s face, close to striking her on the nose with the sheer animosity of her movements. “Everyone in the town will be reading it this morning. They’ll be laughing at us. All of us.”

“All of us?” Tabitha whispered in horror, moving her hand to her chest.

“Yes, all of us.” Althea looked between the two of them. “I am sorry, Tabitha, but it’s true. You are now tainted by association to my daughter. She has ruined us all.” She broke off and turned to face Grace. “You have ruined us!”

“Mama, would you please calm down, I beseech you,” Grace snapped. “There have been numerous scandals in the past that have blown over with the next coming breeze.”

“And you think they’re wholly forgotten, do you?” Althea marched toward Grace and held the paper toward her again, thrusting it into Grace’s grasp. “Read it.”

“I have already read it.”

“Then read it again then perhaps you will realize the true horror of this situation.” Althea stepped away, throwing her hands in the air wildly. She seemed to have forgotten all sense of propriety at all.

It had not escaped Grace’s notice that in Althea’s anger at her, she would frequently forget that her outrage could be overheard. She had made such a mistake at the ball the night before, and now, she seemed to have no fear of being overheard by the staff, just so long as she belittled Grace enough.

How I wish I could speak to father about this.



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Grace looked longingly at the door, but he hadn't been seen out of bed that morning. Sometimes, he wouldn't rise at all.

"Perhaps Grace is right." Tabitha moved toward her and took up Grace's hand, protectively. "Perhaps this storm will blow over. The next scandal will come, and people will forget this one."

"You are too benevolent of heart, dearest Tabitha." Althea flashed a doting look at Tabitha that made Grace want to wretch. She could never remember being called 'dearest' in her life by her own mother. "You do not see the tragedy unfurling before us."

Althea jerked her gaze to look at Grace. "Do you think a man like the Duke of Berkley will marry you to end this scandal?"

"Marriage!?" Grace spluttered.

"That is what happens when scandal occurs and people are seen in one another's arms, rutting together like common animals —"

"Mother!" Grace practically shrieked to be heard. "That is not what we were doing."

"I don't want to hear what you were doing." Althea cut across her, holding both hands in the air to stem the flow of words. "Men marry the women they have compromised, unless... unless they do not have to. I have seen the Duke of Berkley enough to know that he does not have to marry you. Why would he?"

Her eyes looked down and up Grace again, as if she was judging Grace at her debut all over again. “Why would he marry you, Grace? What sort of wife would you make for him?”

Grace felt as if she had been kicked in the gut by her mother. She took a step back, releasing Tabitha’s hand. Tabitha looked so shocked by the words that she had actually turned the pale color of sour milk.

Tears prickled the backs of Grace’s eyes as she considered how right her mother was.

The Duke of Berkley held a very high position. He could marry any woman of the ton that he wished to. Why would he possibly deign to marry the woman he had kissed one night because of a foolish dare?

All at once, she saw again the way the Duke had turned away from her in that garden after Violet’s reappearance. It was as if the kiss hadn’t happened at all, and the way he had threaded his arm around her waist hadn’t happened. He was back to being the aloof and proper elder brother of Eleanor, nothing more.

I had no idea he was capable of such passion. He kept it well hidden.

She could see all too easily how right her mother was. He would retreat, keep such a side hidden again until the scandal blew over from his side.

He owes me nothing.

“You know I am right,” Althea called to her again. Clearly, her mother was eager to continue this argument, but Grace had had enough. As far as she was concerned, her mother had won.

She planted her hands on the windowsill, turning to stare out through the glass and

into the street beyond their townhouse.

“Grace, you have ruined us. You have ruined us all. Think what you have done to poor Tabitha’s chance of marriage now.”

The first tear spilled out of her eye. Grace hastily wiped it away, feeling the burn of humiliation and gut-wrenching disappointment.

It was just supposed to be one kiss, a momentary escape from the world. Nothing more.

Through her blurry vision, she saw a horse pull up outside of the house. A tall figure jumped down with athletic ease, throwing the reins of the horse to a passing lad. The man offered a coin for the trouble of looking after the horse, and the boy nodded eagerly.

It can’t be.

Then the man turned, taking off his top hat and facing their townhouse.

Grace’s stomach lurched.

“It can’t be,” she murmured though the words were lost in the room for Althea was shouting again, repeating herself numerous times.

“She’s harlotted herself. Made herself into nothing more than a promiscuous woman of theton.”

“Aunt, please —” Tabitha pleaded.

“Dearest Tabitha, you do not know how you will suffer now because of what my

daughter has done.”

In an instant, the Duke of Berkley was at the door of the house. Grace pressed her face as close to the glass as she could possibly get it, the better to keep the Duke in view.

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Why is he here?

He was let inside by the butler.

Grace turned, perching against the windowsill as she watched her mother rant and rage with Tabitha beside her, trying to keep her calm.

“We are ruined. All of us, forever!” Althea wailed.

“Aunt.” Tabitha had hold of her hand. “Breathe a little, I beg you.”

There was the lightest of knocks at the door.

“Not now,” Althea snapped at the person knocking.

Yet the door opened of its own accord anyway. The butler skulked back in the doorway, for he was not the one to open it.

In front of him, his hand on the door handle, was the Duke of Berkley.

Those burnished eyes shot to Grace first. She swallowed around the lump in her throat, doing her best to keep her tears at bay.

“Good morning,” he said, turning to face the stunned gazes of Althea and Tabitha. “I’d like to speak with the Marquess of Garton.”

CHAPTER7

Philip stepped into the room, all too aware that the butler ran off behind him, clearly eager to be away from the shouting voices which had been sounding from this room mere seconds before.

“Ahem,” the Marchioness cleared her voice. She released her niece’s hand beside her and made an appearance of trying to look in control, brushing down the creases of her dress.

Philip looked away from her, his eyes zeroing in on Grace.

It was a far cry from the way she had looked at him last night. She sat slumped against the windowsill, the ridiculously overly frilly dress hiding all the curves which he knew were there, which he had felt the night before. Her honey hair was falling out of its updo completely, wild about her shoulders, and her eyes were red.

She’s been crying.

“I’m afraid it is not possible to speak to my husband, Your Grace.” The Marchioness stepped forward. Any appearance of propriety she was trying to make was fading fast, however, as she cast repeatedly dark glances at her daughter. “Anything you have to say to him can be said to me, I’m sure.”

No chance.

Philip would at least be proper now. He would need to ask for the Marquess’ blessing, and he would damn well get it.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. I must speak to the Marquess himself.” Philip’s firm voice clearly put an end to the matter.

“Well, I suppose you have already taken enough from this family; what can we hold

back from you now?" the Marchioness said with a resigned sigh.

"Mama," Grace hissed from her place at the window. Her mother merely offered another one of those glares in reply.

"Dear Tabitha, would you go to my husband and see if he can accept the Duke as a visitor, please? You'll find him in his study."

Miss Tabitha curtsied and left the room. Her eyes swiveled between Grace and Philip before she parted, slipping past his shoulder.

"Well." The Marchioness tried again to be calm. She clasped her hands together, tapping the fingers, her eyes looking up and down Philip. "I suppose you too have seen the scandal sheets, Your Grace?"

"Strangely enough, I have," he said drily.

He walked away from the lady, having had quite enough of the way she was looking at him. He walked straight to Grace, who stood off the windowsill in alarm.

He briefly looked down at that awful gown again, wishing he could tear it off her, but the thought of Grace in a chemise and stays alone was doing something to him. A heat burned across his skin, and he had to shake it off.

His gaze flicked back to her face. She sniffed as she looked at him.

She's holding back tears.

"You saw?" he said.

He heard the Marchioness huff across the room. The Lady paced toward them, her hands on her hips, watching over them as an eagle might its prey.

"Yes." She pointed to a table nearby where the scandal sheet was left. Unlike his own copy, it was not crumpled. It was perfectly flat, the printed letters obvious in black and white. "My mother informs me that everyone in London reads that scandal sheet."

"Did you doubt it?" her mother cut in before Philip could speak. He shot her a look, wishing he could talk to Grace alone, but the Marchioness just continued on with sudden venom. "Look what you have done, Grace."

Her daughter flinched at the words. The sight of Grace flinching was new to him.

Philip was used to seeing Grace full of fire and defiance. He usually avoided her, but he couldn't help noticing from afar that at balls she would not back down for anyone or anything when she had set her mind on something. Eleanor had spoken often enough of how much she admired Grace for her resilience.

"How have you been?" Philip asked Grace, choosing to ignore her mother's words.

Grace's eyes widened a little at him, clearly shocked. Her lips parted as she blinked, holding back fresh tears.



“I —”

“How do you think she’s been?” The Marchioness’ words made her daughter silent. “Honestly, Grace.” The Marchioness was off again, marching up and down, waving her hands dismissively at her daughter. “What possessed you to even do such a thing? How could you think to do this to us? To do this to the Duke too? It’s unthinkable. Unforgivable.”

Grace flinched again. She stepped back, her hands on the windowsill. She looked smaller than Philip had ever seen her before. A rage erupted in him.

He stepped away, doing his best to ignore the feeling. He looked at the door, waiting for Miss Tabitha’s return, though there was no sign of it.

“Did you say the Marquess was in his study?” Philip asked, looking back at the Marchioness. He was impatient now to have this conversation and be done, to be out of this house again.

“He is, but you must wait, Your Grace.” The Marchioness sighed. “He has been very unwell as of late. He’s not in a position to take visitors when unannounced.”

Philip nodded, his eyes on the door again. He grew aware of the Marchioness moving to her daughter’s side. She was hissing something, reprimanding her yet again though Philip could not hear the words.

He paced, impatiently, then looked back at Grace.

Whatever her mother had said to her in that hissing whisper, it turned Grace into a mere shadow of the woman he knew. She was pale, her red and puffy eyes the only thing that had color in them.

She stared at her mother with tears pooling then one slipped down her cheek. She hastily wiped it away, as if ashamed of those tears.

I cannot let this continue.

Furious, Philip stepped toward the pair again, intent on hearing what the Marchioness was saying to her daughter.

“You know why the Duke is here, don’t you? He’s come to tell your father he cannot marry you.”

Philip stiffened.

“It’s unforgivable, Grace,” she said yet again. “You have ruined us all. How can we possibly take you anywhere again? No one in London will want to look you in the eye.”

Grace wiped another tear from her cheek. She turned away from her mother, but the Marchioness caught her wrist and pulled her back to face her.

“You will look at me when I am speaking to you.”

Grace bowed her head, hiding her tears.

This is not the Grace I know.

The protective voice came from somewhere in the back of his mind. Philip willed for Grace to say something, to snap back at her mother, to tell her to back off, but she wouldn’t.

“Enough,” Philip said coolly, finding his voice when Grace could not.

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The Marchioness looked around in the alarm.

“I beg your pardon?” she said, clearly surprised that he had come close enough to hear their conversation again. “What did you say, Your Grace?”

“I said that I will not be witness anymore to this conversation.”

“She needs to hear it.” The Marchioness released her daughter’s hand but pointed at her as if she was something disgusting that had just slinked into the corner of the room.

Philip was reminded of something that Eleanor had said about Grace having her fair share of misery and that her mother would certainly have something to say about this matter.

“She needs to hear how she has dishonored this family.”

“Dishonored?” Philip spluttered. He wished to bark that it was only a kiss, what dishonor was there in that? Wasn’t it one of the most natural things on this planet for humans to do? “You will not speak to her like that again.”

“I beg your pardon?” The Marchioness’ shoulders twitched. She stood taller, her cheeks pinkening. “She is my daughter. I will speak to her exactly as I wish to, Your Grace. She has tainted you as she has tainted all of us. It’s only right that she is delivered her reprimand, that she knows the full force of what she has done.”

Say something!

Still, Grace did not. She wiped another tear away. She wouldn't even look at him now.

It was very different to the Grace he had seen the night before, the Grace he had held in his arms, the Grace he had kissed because he just couldn't stand the thought of her kissing any other man.

"Grace, you must hear it." The Marchioness rounded on her daughter again. "It's high time you knew what your behavior over the years has led to. How much not behaving like a true lady has led to this —"

"Stop. I will not have anyone speak in such a way about my wife." Philip barked the words loudly, cutting across the Marchioness.

The room fell silent.

## CHAPTER8

There was more than one gasp in the room though Grace could not concentrate on where on earth they came from.

Her eyes were pinned on the Duke of Berkley's face. He wouldn't look at her. He continued to glower at her mother.

Grace's heart pounded so hard in her chest, she thought it might crack one of her ribs and the whalebones of her stays. She felt dizzy with it, unable to move at all.

"But..." Her mother was the first to try and speak though she evidently struggled as much as Grace was doing. Althea stared back at the Duke, her cheeks the color of sour milk, her lips parted in astonishment. "You wish to marry her?" Althea muttered.

The Duke didn't say anything. He stood a little taller and turned away, his shoulders stiff, then he took a step to distance himself from the pair of them.

Grace felt quite sick as she watched him walk away. She raised a hand over her chest, wishing she could calm the thundering of her heart as she watched him.

Eleanor's brother is going to marry me? Why?

Her mother had not been wrong. As a duke, he could have easily brushed off this scandal in a matter of months. It was she who had the greatest damage to her reputation.

Grace managed to step off the windowsill, intent on speaking to the Duke about what he had just said, when she realized who the source of that second gasp had been. Tabitha stood in the open doorway, clearing her throat, having evidently heard the Duke's declaration.

"My apologies for interrupting," she said in her most demure voice. "Your Grace, the Marquess will see you. He is in his study. It's two doors down on your left, but he says he cannot hold an audience with you for very long."

"It will not take long." With these final words, the Duke strode out of the room, passing by Tabitha without even one glance back at Grace.

She stood in the middle of the room, dumbstruck, amazed and reeling at what had just happened.

"Did I hear that right?" Tabitha muttered in a rush as down the hallway, the door to the study shut. "He intends to marry you?"

"My ears are deceiving me." Althea flung herself down in a chair. She started fanning

herself with her hands, trying to cool the sudden pinkness in her cheeks. “I cannot have heard that right. Why? Why would he do it? Why would a duke deign to marry her?”

Grace tried not to flinch at her mother’s words. She jerked her head around, fire in her eyes as she gazed at her mother.

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“Do you think me so disgusting an example of a woman, Mama? Am I not worthy to be your daughter?” Something inside her snapped. She’d had enough of being talked down to all morning, of being reprimanded like a child.

“Enough.” Althea scarcely took notice of her spirit. She merely raised a hand and tried to bat it away as if it was a troublesome bumble bee. “I must have heard him wrong.”

“You did not, Aunt,” Tabitha said, her voice tremulous. “He called Grace his wife.” She reached for Grace and clasped her hand tight. “Are you well? Are you sure of this?”

“Sure!?” Grace spluttered. “He has not even asked me to marry him! He has just declared it as if it is a forgone conclusion.”

“Aunt? What do you make of this?” Tabitha still clutched to Grace’s hand comfortingly as she looked at Althea for her thoughts, but Althea had been struck to silence now. She sat there like a statue in her armchair, immovable.

“I... I need to think about this.” Grace detached her hand from Tabitha’s. “If you would excuse me.”

“What?” Althea was shaken to life. “No.” She stood, fumbling her way across the room as she reached out to Grace. “You shall stay here. We shall talk about this —”

“Talk about what? It sounds to me as if the Duke and my father are the ones doing all the talking.” Grace darted to the side, narrowly avoiding her mother’s clasping hands.

“Are all women’s destinies determined by their fathers, I wonder?”

“Do not be so belittling,” Althea said, following her around the room. “Grace, men’s decisions in this moment could be the very thing from stopping you being discarded in the street like a common harlot.”

“Aunt!” Tabitha wailed, tears springing to her eyes.

Grace passed her cousin, briefly clutching her shoulder in comfort. Tabitha felt things keenly, especially the hurtful things that Althea could toss into the air as if they didn’t matter at all. Grace had to release Tabitha fast though, for Althea was following her again.

“Father would never let me be chunked out on the street, even if you wished for it, Mama.”

“Grace,” Althea boomed again, marching toward her. “If you are going to be a duchess, then there is much to discuss. Much to plan.”

“Aren’t we jumping ahead a bit?” Grace exclaimed loudly, turning her head back and forth as she looked for another way out of the room. “We don’t know if Father will give his blessing yet.”

“He will give his blessing. He’s a sensible man. He knows your only route to safety now is marriage. Now, Grace, come here.” Althea managed to take hold of her wrist. “Duchesses do not scarper like rats when their mothers wish to speak to them.”

Grace saw her way out of the room and away from her mother. The window behind her which led out onto the garden had been opened to allow in a breath of wind. She tugged her wrist out of her mother’s hand and dove toward it.



“Grace?” Althea wobbled on her feet, so startled by the sudden movement that she nearly fell over.

Grace reached for the window and thrust it upward. By the time Althea realized what she was doing, Grace had one foot out of the window.

“Duchesses do not clamber out of windows either!” Althea’s voice reached new octaves.

“I’m no duchess yet,” Grace argued then dropped down the other side of the window to the panicked cries echoing around her ears from her mother. Grace’s feet landed in the garden lawn before she took off at a sprint, darting back around to the back door of the house.

\* \* \*

“Lord Garton? Oh.” Philip closed the door behind him, but he did not take another step further into the room, for the sight which greeted him was a great shock.

The scent of sickness hung in the air, mingled with bouquets of rosemary and chamomile. These bundles of herbs had been tied together with string and placed in various vases around the room. Clearly, the healer to this house believed strongly in the power of healing herbs.

The curtains were half closed, keeping the strong sunlight of the summer’s day from getting in. Just a shaft of yellow light fell into the room, and it basked the man who sat behind the desk in an eerie light.

The Marquess of Garton was but a shell of the man that Philip could remember seeing him in passing at balls. He sat with a loose shirt, not properly tucked into his breeches, and a waistcoat that wasn’t fully buttoned up. He was making an effort as

Philip watched him, trying his best to tie the cravat at his throat though his hands clearly struggled with the task.

His pallor, pale and ashen as stormy clouds, was the thing that shocked Philip the most. With the sunken shadows beneath his eyes, the poor Marquess of Garton did not look long for this world.

“I know. I’m a shock to look at,” the Marquess murmured. “I’d rise to bow to you, to shake your hand, but I hope you will forgive me if I do not.” He grimaced, adjusting in his seat and trying to get comfortable.

“Of course.” Philip stepped toward him, trying not to gag on the strong scents of herbs and sickness in the room. He walked toward Lord Garton, a discomfort growing in his chest as he stared at the Marquess.

This poor man.

“I’ll admit, we did not expect to see you, Your Grace.” Lord Garton waved a hand at the chair on the opposite side of his desk. “My wife has not stopped yelling about that scandal sheet all morning.”

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“Yes, I can well imagine,” Philip murmured to himself. Plainly, there was nothing wrong with Lord Garton’s hearing, for he allowed himself a small smile of humor.

“My wife has always had a habit of making her opinions known.” Lord Garton’s smile soon slipped. His eyes settled on Philip’s face. “Are you here to tell me that you will ride out the storm of this scandal? That my Grace...” he broke off and sighed heavily, a rasping sound leaving his chest with the movement.

He looks in agony at the thought of Grace being hurt.

“No. No, that is not what I have come to say.” Philip lifted his chin a little higher. “My Lord, I intend to marry your daughter if I have your blessing.”

Lord Garton sat forward. It was the most movement he had yet done, resting his elbows on the desk between the pair of them.

“You will marry her?”

“I see your wife’s sour opinion of me is shared by many,” Philip said tightly.

“No, I would not put it like that.” Lord Garton shook his head. “It’s just that you must know, such scandals affect the woman always more than they affect the man.”

“Yes, I do know,” Philip said, his chin lowering an inch or so.

I should have considered that last night. I should have known the danger I was putting her in when I kissed her.

Yet that hadn't even been a thought last night. All that had mattered was that if Grace was going to kiss someone, she should scandalize herself with him. Not another man.

"Before we talk anymore about this..." The Marquess shifted back in his seat. "...there is something you must know."

"What is that?"

"Grace's dowry." He grimaced. "It is nonexistent."

Philip stiffened a little. He'd already had some idea from hints which Eleanor had made that Grace would not have a large dowry, but nothing at all was a surprise.

He couldn't answer right away. He scratched his clean-shaven jaw, deep in thought.

"If that makes you rescind your proposal, I perfectly understand —"

"No, it does not." Philip met the Marquess' gaze. "The dowry is of no importance. I have enough money to see us by."

"You do?"

Philip paused before answering. He couldn't deny that financially, things had been difficult for a long time now. He had intended to marry a woman with a large dowry, to ease his money woes, but it wasn't necessary.

Since Eleanor had married and some of his investments had proven fruitful, he had a little to live on. If he was smart and continued to make such wise investments, no large dowry would be necessary.

"I do." Philip nodded. "I do not require any dowry from you, My Lord. I will marry

Lady Grace as she is.”

“Hmm.” Lord Garton shifted in his seat once again. He sighed, the sound loud in the sudden silence between the pair of them. Lord Garton’s eyes, the same honey hue as his daughter’s, fixed intently on Philip’s face. “What happened between the pair of you last night...”

“I didn’t dishonor her,” Philip needed this to be understood. He didn’t think he could bear it if the Marquess thought he had scandalized Grace completely in that garden.

The imagining took hold of Philip steering Grace back to that bench, of lifting her skirt, of bending down toward her, exploring her, feeling her cry out in pleasure as her hands tangled themselves in his hair...

No.

Philip brushed the thought away fast.

“It was a kiss. That was all, My Lord.” Uncomfortable, he found himself fidgeting as well, matching the same movements as the Marquess.

Slowly, the Marquess nodded though he looked no more at ease than before.

“Well, then you have my blessing,” the Marquess said quietly. “I suppose, I do not have much choice in the matter, do I?”

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Philip winced. The idea that they were all being backed into a corner because of his mistake to kiss Grace was sickening.

Some mistake. It was better than her kissing another.

This thought kept breaking through, no matter how much he tried to stamp it down and forget it.

All night, she had been on his mind. The way she had curved into him, the feeling of her hips through that over-sized gown she wore, the secrets beneath that dress taunting him.

He supposed it had been inevitable in the end. He was going to be weak, sooner or later, when it came to Grace.

“You have a choice,” Philip said calmly. “If you do not want me to marry your daughter, then I perfectly understand. I am offering my hand as a solution to our problems.”

“Oh, I know.” The Marquess nodded. His manner shifted a little, his gaze firm again in that sallow face. “When it comes to money, you would have enough to support the two of you? I know... your coffers are hardly full, Your Grace.”

Philip shifted, wondering how Lord Garton had heard this when he had worked so hard to keep the nature of his affairs a secret.

“I have enough,” he said with coolness in his tone. “My investments are doing better.

I am hardly flush with money, as you might call it, but things are steadily improving. My farming lands in the country as well are producing more and more each year. With care and attention, they'll be highly profitable again."

"Good, that is good." Lord Garton leaned forward, his shoulders slumping. "There is just one thing more I need to know from you, Your Grace."

"What is that?" Philip asked, now longing to be out of this room that stank of sickness. It was unpleasant, reminding him of the loss of his own parents. His chest ached for the pain that Grace must be going through to see her father wilting in this way.

"Did you know?" Lord Garton asked.

"Know what?"

"Did you know what I did to your father?" Lord Garton's voice shook. "Is that why you kissed my Grace, to have revenge on me?"

"What are you talking about?" Philip leaned forward, stunned at the words. "What on Earth would I want revenge for?"

"For it is I you should blame for your money problems, Your Grace." Lord Garton's voice was quiet, as if he could barely stand to utter the words at all. "I am the man who introduced your father to the gambling table."

## CHAPTER9

Philip felt like ice had been pooled in his veins. He blinked, staring at the man before him.

I should hate him, shouldn't I?

"You?" Philip managed, pulling at the cravat around his throat in some desperate need to loosen it. "You showed him how to gamble?"

"We ran into each other one night at our club," Lord Garton said, grimacing and looking very pitiful indeed. "He was looking for a distraction, a rush, some excitement, and I foolishly suggested we go and gamble. He'd never tried it before. To my shame," he paused, just long enough for a heavy exhale to escape him, "he loved it. As I did. We lost a lot of money together at those tables. We parted with our money to cheats and con men."

He grunted then cursed, shaking his head. "I wouldn't blame you for wanting revenge on me for what I had done, but the thought that Grace was part of that revenge..." He paused again, clearly unable to finish the sentence now, for he looked quite sick. He raised a shaky hand and wiped his mouth.

"No." Philip sat on the edge of his chair, speaking in a rush, determined for the Marquess to understand him. "I knew nothing of this. And it does not matter."

I cannot hate him, can I? Look at him.

Whatever anger there should have been sizzling in his gut directed at this man was not there. All he felt instead was sorrow and pity. He just wished he could free the man before him both from the physical and emotional pain he was suffering.

"As for blaming yourself for my father's debts, do not do that." Philip shook his head. "You may have introduced him to the card table, but only one man continued to go back there, time and time again, to lose it all, everything that we had." He tried to keep the disdain out of his voice as best as he could. "That was my father."



I loved him, but forgiving him for what he has put me and Eleanor through is a great task indeed.

“Thank God,” the Marquess mumbled. “I do not think I could have born having another thing added to my list of things I couldn’t forgive myself for. Had it been revenge on Grace, ah, I could not have handled it.” He raised that shaky hand once again and scratched his face.

“You need to rest, My Lord.” Philip stood. “If I have your agreement for the marriage, then I will go and solicit a special license. Lady Grace and I can marry fast, and this whole scandal will be over in a matter of weeks. What do you say?” He extended his hand toward the Marquess.

Slowly, Lord Garton stood. His strength was failing him, but he was plainly dead set on rising to his feet. He outstretched his hand and took hold of Philip’s, shaking it firmly.

“We have an accord.”

“Good, thank you.” Philip nodded. “I shall leave you in peace now.”

“Wait, before you go...” Lord Garton didn’t let him retrieve his hand just yet. Instead, Lord Garton pulled him across the room with a sudden liveliness that was alarming considering how still the man had been before.

The Marquess went to a stack of shelves in the side of the room.

“My Grace, she is not like other ladies of theton.”

“Oh, I know.” Philip muttered these words so quietly that this time, Lord Garton didn’t hear him above the noise he was making searching through the books.

She’s very different indeed.

He thought of the way that whispers followed her, the anger that had possessed him so often when she did not act the perfect lady or when she fell over, her clumsiness plain for everyone to see.

“She likes being outdoors,” the Marquess said in a rush. “If you ever lose her in your estate, it’s because she will have gone riding or for a walk. She’s in her element there.”

“She is?” Philip asked. “Forgive me, but with Grace’s clumsiness, I would have thought she would be likely to fall off her horse.”

“Yes, I was worried about that too when she was younger.” The Marquess allowed himself a small laugh. “Yet Grace rides as if it is as natural to her as breathing. You will allow her these freedoms, won’t you? To explore, to adventure, to be who she wants to be?”

“I will.” Philip nodded slowly.

The Marquess renewed his search of the bookcases with vigor, tearing books down and turning the pages, intent on finding something.

“What is it you are looking for?”

“Something to show you. If you are to be Grace’s husband, then you must understand her. You must see what the scandal sheets do not see when they talk of my Grace.” The Marquess’ manner grew sharp as he glowered at each book in turn.

The anger wasn’t at Philip, but plainly the writers of those sheets. “They can only talk of the fact that she trips on her hem or that she might reach for the wrong glass at dinner or that she couldn’t recognize the Prince Regent by sight. What do any of these things matter, I ask you?”

Philip didn’t answer. He had a feeling Lord Garton wasn’t looking for an answer.

“Ah, here it is.” The Marquess found the book he was looking for and turned the pages frantically. “This is who my Grace is at heart.” He shifted the book toward Philip, encouraging him to read it with a wave of his hand.

Philip turned the first pages. He saw beneath the cover was a flimsy page of writing. Grace’s untidy scrawl was strewn across the page. It read Grace’s notes.

On the next page, numerous detailed illustrations sprung up. They were the most

exact botanical sketches that Philip had ever seen. Beside each plant, Grace had noted down its features, even uses of these plants, everything that could be of interest.

Philip flicked through all the pages, to find the book completely full.

“This is who she is,” Lord Garton said after a minute of Philip’s silent skimming. “I wish for Grace in her life to have the freedom to be who she wants to be. That is all I ask of you, Your Grace... if you will permit me to ask for anything after the damage I have done to your family.”

Philip lifted his gaze from the book and met the Marquess’ eye. He was tongue tied, unable to say anything for a bit.

I am marrying Grace to avoid a scandal. I am not here to take care of her, to be her protector.

Yet the thought of saying this to the man who was so withered and panicked before him was gutting. Philip could not possibly frame the words.

“She’ll have her freedom, My Lord,” Philip assured him softly.

Yet the rest between us will be a matter of arrangement. That is all.

Philip already had a plan of the way this marriage would work. He’d find a way to work out his attraction to Grace, perhaps to ride it out of his system on their wedding night. After that, they could lead practically separate lives.

“She will do as she likes with her life. You have my word on that.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much, Your Grace.” The Marquess offered his hand again. Philip shook it then returned Grace’s botanical book to the Marquess’ grasp.

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“I’ll leave you in peace to rest now. I shall write to you soon with the arrangements for the wedding and the special license.”

“Your Grace, it is usual for the bride’s family to pay for the wedding.”

“Let me,” Philip said in a rush. As Grace had no dowry at all, he didn’t doubt that the Marquess couldn’t afford a wedding. “We’ll arrange a small affair within my budget. If that is acceptable to you?”

“Very.” He nodded then sighed. “I just have to tell Grace of this now.”

“She knows. I may have mentioned it before I came to see you.”

“And how did she take that?” The Marquess’ upper lip raised in amusement.

Philip stiffened.

“She said nothing.”

“Then rest assured, Your Grace...” The Marquess nodded at the door. “...before you leave this house, she will very much have something to say to you on this matter.”

Philip nodded, thanking him for the warning.

“Good day, My Lord.”

“And to you.” The Marquess returned to his seat. He flopped down into the chair,

evidently exhausted. He reached for a bell and rang it, perhaps intent on drinking tea or finding something stronger for his pain.

Philip took the opportunity to leave, slipping out of the door and heading back down the corridor. He was intent on leaving as swiftly as possible, not giving Grace the chance to stop him so they could talk of what had passed.

I do not need to see her. If I do...

The memory of her lips against his crashed through. He practically growled under his breath as his steps grew firmer and more intent, marching toward the door. It was maddening that the mere memory of her could be a temptation.

She is Eleanor's irritating friend. That is all. It will be a marriage of convenience.

His hand closed around the front door handle when he heard her voice.

"Where do you think you're going?"

## CHAPTER 10

"This way." Grace closed a hand around the Duke's arm and jerked him to the side. He stumbled, clearly in shock at what she had done though she didn't stop. She dragged him all the way through the nearest open door into the music room then shut the door firmly behind them.

Confident that no one had seen what she had done, she turned to face the Duke. Her hands shot to her hips as she glared at him.

"What the hell was that about?" she snapped.

“What?” he asked innocently. “Before this conversation goes any further, Grace, do you think this is a wise idea?”

“What is?”

“Us being alone,” he murmured then his eyes traveled down her.

Grace stood taller, her jaw going slack at that look.

He cannot mean.

“It didn’t go well last time, did it?”

“Well!?” she spluttered. To her mind, it had gone well. It had gonetoowell. That was what had got them into this pickle in the first place.

“Forgive me if I put distance between us.” He purposefully rounded the large grand piano in the music room, putting an obstacle there. She followed him a little, stopping on the other side and planting her hands onto the back of the piano.

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“What did you say to my father?” she asked in a firm whisper, glancing back at the door, fearful her mother would come looking and find her at any minute.

“What do you expect?”

“Any conversation you wished to have about me or about... marriage,” she struggled to say the word, watching as the corner of his lips turned up in amusement, “it should have been had with me. Not my father.”

“It’s not the way of the world, Grace; you know that.”

“Lady Grace,” she snapped, reminding him of the need to use her title.

“Not anymore.” He mockingly grimaced and shook his head. “A married man would hardly address his wife with her title, would he?”

Grace moved around the piano, silently, moving her hands fast as she approached him, but he went the other way, avoiding her.

“What did you say?” she murmured.

“I said, a married man. For that is what I soon shall be.” He came to a stop around the piano, having swapped places with her. “You wish to know what we said? Very well, I’ll tell you. I offered to marry you. Your father said you had no dowry though that is hardly relevant now. I shall marry you anyway. Then he alluded to what happened last night. You do not need to worry there. I spared him the details.”



A rage took hold of Grace like she had never known before. How dare he talk of such things in this room and after all that had passed? The memory of the way she had scandalously arched into him, how he had gripped her through the dress, was now appalling to her.

She marched around the piano, and this time he didn't move to escape her. She raised her hand, determined to exact punishment for speaking in such a way.

“How dare you — oh!”

He took hold of her wrist before she could slap him across the cheek. He used it to jerk her toward him. She scarcely managed not to fall into him. One hand rested on the curve of the piano, keeping her standing, as the other hand was still caught in his grasp.

“Careful, My Lady,” he whispered in a deep husky tone. His eyes slipped down to her lips, and Grace felt her stomach coil tight. For a second, he said nothing. They both just stood there, tension radiating between them as he grasped her wrist. “Any hits between us will take place in one room only.”

“What?”

“They will be playful things in the bedchamber and nothing more.”

She hadn't seen where his other hand had gone. She was not prepared for the light slap he made to her rear. Alarmed, she jumped back from him, snatching her wrist out of his hold. Ashamed as the feeling of his hand on her rear had made excitement course through her, she scrambled away from him around the piano again.

“That is some blush,” he murmured with a deep chuckle. “I do not think you exactly disliked that, did you?”

“I cannot believe you did that,” she muttered in a dark tone. “You are never to do that again.”

“Someday, you may beg me to do it,” he said, leaning upon the piano between them.

“Never,” she promised.

Silence fell again as they stared at each other. A wild picture entered her mind. She could suddenly see herself flung across this piano with Philip behind her. He was behind her, exploring her, then slapping her rear in a playful way, not hard enough to hurt but enough to excite.

“Your cheeks look ready to start a fire.” His words broke through her imagining.

“You can’t be intending to go through with this,” Grace said, doing her best to keep her calm. “I am just Eleanor’s friend to you. Nothing more. You can’t be considering marrying me for the sake of our reputations.”

“Reputations matter. Unlike you, I am not willing to leave mine in tatters wherever I go. If I could go back to an untarnished reputation completely, I would, but as I can’t, I’ll do the next best thing.” He spoke in a business-like tone.

It was as if all the flirtatious things he had just said hadn’t happened at all.

“Now, to the crucial points of this discussion.” He folded his arms across his chest, a man of formality and business.

Grace was doing her best not to think of the strong arms she could see pressing against the sleeves of his jacket in this position.

“I’ll obtain a special license. All being well, we’ll marry within a week.”

“A week?” Grace repeated. She felt weakened all of sudden, shocked at the speed of it all. Her palms planted onto the piano between them.

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“Yes.” He nodded. “But if we are going to be married, there will be rules.”

“What kind of rules?”

“Firstly...” He halted, looking down his long thin nose at her. “You will not show up in any scandal sheet ever again.”

“I’m hardly in control of that, am I?” she asked wildly. “I fall out of carriages as easily as another breathes. Writers like to talk of that for some God knows reason.”

“Then you hold my hand when getting out of a carriage.”

“I am not that pathetic,” she warned. “I don’t need to hold your hand to get out of a carriage.”

“We’ll see about that.” His eyes had grown hooded with something. She had no idea what he was thinking about, but the way his eyes had shot down to the frilly high neckline of her dress was a strange thing. His eyes shot up to meet hers again. “That’s the first rule. Secondly, my estate will be your home, so that means you can make any changes you wish to.”

“I can?” Grace stood straight, shock rippling through her.

“Within reason.” The Duke raised a finger in the air in warning. “Make it warm, change the décor as you like, but do not interfere with the order and systems I have in place. I have structure to my home, formality, and I wish it to stay that way.”

She reluctantly nodded. She had a feeling going into the Duke's home would be rather like a bull walking into a China shop, but there was nothing she could really do to stop it now.

At least I will have control over my own home. I can change it as I like, change the wallpaper, buy new chairs...

The idea made her strangely happy.

"You will also stay away from my boxing room."

"Boxing?" Grace spluttered. For a second, she was certain she must have heard him wrong, but the Duke fidgeted and didn't correct her. "You box?"

"That is something none but the two of us will know either."

She nodded hastily though her mind was working fast. The thought that the Duke boxed was an incredible thing to her. It suggested something wild beneath the rigid countenance he always wore. A ripple of excitement shot through her, something she had to tamp down hard on.

"Now, for the third and last rule." Philip loosened his arms from his chest. He mirrored her stance, resting his hands on the piano between them. He was so much taller than her in this position, almost intimidating with his broadness of shoulders that she felt that stirring deep down in her abdomen again.

It was the same feeling she'd had last night when his fingers had gripped her hip tightly through the dress.

"You will give me an heir. Other than that, we can lead separate lives. You understand?"

Grace reeled. She was glad her hands were on the piano, for if they had not been there, she might have fallen over in shock.

He wants an heir? I have not even thought about children.

It wasn't that she was against the idea of children. But she had never really thought of herself as a mother. Whether it was because of the lack of prospects in her future or her dreams of adventure, she couldn't be too sure. But now, the Duke was demanding an heir.

That meant she would have to consummate the marriage. She would have to share the Duke's bed. She would learn what it meant to not only share such a heated kiss with him, as she had done the night before, but to experience everything.

Her eyes ran down the length of him. She considered what it would be like to see the Duke wearing nothing, to see him in his naked glory, the strong chest hinted at through that tight-fitting jacket and the long legs.

The thought of being explored by him, of even being... dominated by him, made a wetness pool between her legs. Shocked at the sensation, she rubbed her thighs together beneath the skirt of her gown, desperate to feel some release from a sudden ache.

"Y-you want an heir?" she managed to stammer.

"Yes. Do we have an agreement?"

She couldn't yet answer him. She was too shocked that he was speaking about having sex with her as if it was a matter of business.

"Look, Grace, you want your freedom, yes?" he asked. She nodded, mutely. "Then

you will have it. We'll spend a month together at the house. We'll make sure you're carrying a child, then after that, we can move apart. You can move to the townhouse or to the Dowager's Hall on my estate if that is what you wish for. My mother has no liking for the place, so it will be free for you to use. You can do as you like there."

"And if I'm not with child after the first month?"

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“Then I’ll visit you until you are.” There was still that infernal formality radiating off him. He didn’t even let his eyes wander anymore.

“And that is what I shall be to you? Like breeding cattle?”

His expression darkened, his face leaning an inch forward and his chin tilting down. There was something dangerous in that expression, but at least, it was a change to the formality. She couldn’t resist wanting to push him further until all show of his formal reserve was gone.

“Let me understand this correctly.” She leaned forward an inch or so across the piano, moving closer to him. “When we are leaving separate lives, we will be free to take other lovers?”

Something snapped in the Duke. He marched around the piano with such purpose that Grace leaned back again. She turned, ready to escape him, but he caught the back of her frilly gown and used it to tow her back to him. She fell against the curve of the piano, planting her hands there behind her as he stood before her.

One of his hands rested on the piano cover beside her own, the fingers not quite touching though they were tantalizingly close to doing so.

He bent down toward her, his lips, finding the curve of her ear.

“I will not have you talking of other lovers when I haven’t even made you mine yet,” he hissed in her ear.



Stunned at the possession in the words, she trembled. A sort of pleasant shiver passed up her spine.

His hand moved from where it nearly brushed her fingers. She thought for a second that he might take her hand, but she was wrong. The stolen touch did not come to her hand but to her hip. He gripped her through the gown and used it to rock her hips toward him.

She inhaled sharply at the excitement rippling through her as her hips briefly brushed his own.

“You’ll be mine first,” he warned, bending his head down toward her. Those burnished eyes were coming closer, those firm lips nearing hers. She was breathless, her mouth dry as she anticipated that kiss. He was about to kiss her again, plaster her with the same heat she had experienced the night before, but at this piano then —

“Ahem,” someone innocently cleared their throat.

Philip released her, stepping back. Abruptly, it was as if the spell had been broken. He moved away, adjusting his tailcoat, formality and reserve in his every movement.

“Grace?” Tabitha’s voice called from the other side of the door. She evidently was the one who had cleared her throat to make her presence known to them. “Your mother is looking for you, and she is heading this way.”

“Th-thank you, Tabitha,” Grace managed to stammer out the words as she called back to the door.

Tabitha’s steps moved away. In the quiet that followed, Grace looked at the Duke.

He was the regal brother to Eleanor again, standing at a distance from her, not a chink

in the fixed expression he wore.

“Do we have an agreement?” he asked, not even looking at her, for his gaze was fixed on the door.

Grace thought of her father. She had so badly wanted to make her father proud of her in her life. She knew it must have been crushing him to see her name plastered across the scandal sheets yet again.

As for her mother, Grace doubted she could ever make her proud, but perhaps this would be a way to at least stop all the insults. Could Althea manage to like her a little more if she married and became a duchess? At the very least, a new home would mean she could escape her mother. She could run away from Althea, and control exactly how much she had to put up with the woman’s company.

Then there was Tabitha, too. Her poor cousin would suffer from association if Grace did not marry now.

I have no choice.

Grace raised her hand and looked at the Duke.

“We do,” she murmured.

He didn’t even spare her a second glance as he strode back toward the door.

“Good. I shall write to your father this week when the arrangements are settled.” Then he was gone, disappearing out the door and leaving her swaying against the piano.

It took her a minute to realize after he had left what he said.

He will not write to me. He's going to write to my father instead?

## CHAPTER 11

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“My word!” Violet declared as Grace stepped into the opera house behind her. “Well, I remember the day when we as bluestockings wanted attention. I’m beginning to regret that wish now.”

“Strangely, I heartily agree with you, Violet,” Grace murmured. As they had stepped into the opera house, it seemed every pair of eyes had swung toward Grace.

She felt as small as she did when her mother was reprimanding her. It had been a day since the Duke had barged into her house and declared they were to marry. The scandal sheets published that morning had talked of a planned betrothal, but it had not been enough to dampen the scandal completely yet.

“They speak like hissing fires,” Eleanor observed on Grace’s other side as whispers tore around the room.

Grace’s friends closed in around her. Eleanor and Violet flanked her, with Diana following close behind. Out in front were Violet’s and Eleanor’s husbands, Xander and Dorian.

“Don’t think about it, Grace,” Dorian said with soft words, glancing back at her. “They soon find another scandal to talk of, and you will be old news.”

“When?” Grace asked with such an ironic tone that her friends all smiled in humor.

“I suggest we go straight to the box,” Xander said, striding ahead of the group. “The less time we are out here being gawped at, the better for Grace.”

She was happy to follow him along with the others. They cut across the foyer of the building, heading to the doors at the far end to take their seats. As much as Grace tried to ignore the whispers around her, she could not.

“Seen clasped in his arms. Oh yes, she was,” one woman’s words reached her ears.

“From what I heard, it was quite a bit more than that,” another claimed. “There were skirts higher than around her ankles.”

Laughter from gossiping ladies followed these words. Grace halted sharply. She was so disgusted by the innuendo that she turned back, intent on saying something, but Violet and Eleanor caught each of her arms and dragged her back again.

“Oi, I had something to say to them —”

“Yes, and much good would have come of it, wouldn’t it?” Violet murmured.

“It’s best to stay quiet,” Diana added, following close behind.

“Where are they even hearing these lies from?” Grace asked in defiance, turning her head back and forth. “Like your formal brother would ever be seen with a lady who had her skirt higher than her ankles anyway.”

“Please don’t.” Eleanor wrinkled her nose. “I do not want to think about my own brother in such positions.”

The others laughed at her words, but Grace could find no reason to smile.

Something in what the Duke had said that morning had led Grace to believe that he had experience when it came to women. He knew exactly how to excite her.

He's had lovers, I'm sure of it, even if he has been subtle.

"This way," Dorian called from up ahead.

They left the main foyer, stepped through some doors, and made their way up a spiral staircase. Near the top of the building, they stepped out into a private balcony box that overlooked the rest of the auditorium and the stage.

"Beautiful," Diana murmured, taking her seat at once and staring around in awe.

Grace sat beside her, quite unable to take it in though she had a feeling it had more to do with the way Eleanor and Violet sat down on her other side, staring at her, clearly intent on speaking.

"I am sorry I did not have the chance to come and see you yesterday," Eleanor said, stifling a yawn as she placed a hand to her swollen stomach. "This baby is making me so tired that I could not drag myself out of the house more than once."

"It is no matter." Grace shook her head. She tried to shift her attention to the stage, but the performance hadn't yet begun. That unfortunately meant Eleanor and Violet had more time to interrogate her.

"I cannot believe this has happened," Violet murmured. She sighed loudly and leaned forward. "Someone else must have seen you that night. Someone saw you together while I was walking. Though I'm still not sure how His Grace ended up there in the first place..."

"Eleanor, I'm so sorry." Something crumpled in Grace's chest with Violet's words as she looked at Eleanor.

"Whatever for?" Eleanor asked, her brow crinkling behind her spectacles.

“For dragging your brother into scandal. Him of all people!” Grace muttered. “No one would think him capable of it. It’s my fault, all my doing.”

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“Really? Is that what you think?” another voice joined them. They all turned in their seats to see that Celia had turned up. She was a little late and adjusted the shoulder of her gown as if it had been rumpled by a man’s touch.

“Where have you been?” Violet asked, a knowing look in her eye.

“Nowhere.” Celia smiled and sat down on Diana’s other side though the smile didn’t last. “It is I who should apologize to you both.” She looked between Grace and Eleanor. “I didn’t realize how much trouble my dare would cause. I thought it would be a distraction for you, Grace. If I had known that it would come to this —”

“In my opinion, you both need to stop apologizing.” Eleanor cut into the conversation. “If anyone should apologize, it is my brother. Is he not the one who kissed you, Grace? Is he not the one who compromised you?”

“He always seems so rigid of manner, so dignified,” Diana murmured.

“Exactly.” Grace nodded.

To her mind, the Duke was beginning to become a man of contradictions. He was Eleanor’s formal and dignified older brother, the man who had barely spoken to her over the last few years, for she was not the sort of company he would keep out of his own choice.

This image was a far cry from the way he had kissed her though, and the possessive way he had spoken about making her his before she ever dreamed of taking a lover.



“Everyone is looking at me tonight as if I have the plague,” Grace whispered. She had leaned forward, looking at the stage again in anticipation of the play about to begin, yet she had merely caught sight of the myriad of people sitting in the stalls who were looking up at her instead. “This is insufferable.”

“Grace,” Dorian’s voice called from the other side of the box, “the best thing you can do when scandal falls is to ignore it. Trust me.”

Beside him, Xander nodded silently in agreement.

“Well, you would know, wouldn’t you?” Eleanor said with an amused glance at her husband. The heat in their shared gaze amazed Grace, and she was not the only one to see it. Even Diana on her other side inhaled sharply in astonishment.

To be looked at like that. What must it feel like?

“Ah.” Violet fidgeted in her seat. “Well, it seems there is now another looking at you, Grace.”

“Who?” Grace asked, sitting sharply forward.

“Eleanor, why didn’t you say your brother was coming?”

“What!?” Grace actually managed to fall out of the seat. She would have fallen completely to the floor had Diana not caught her under the arm and righted her. “He’s here?” She looked back and forth, searching for him.

“I had no idea he was coming,” Eleanor’s words came fast. “Where is he?”

Violet pointed straight across the auditorium.

When Grace's eyes found the Duke's, she froze perfectly solid.

He was seated in the other private box though unlike the busy party on her side, there were just two of them in his own. The Duke sat beside a man she did not recognize, his manner stiff and unyielding.

Unlike some of the men gathered tonight who had taken off their tailcoats to bear with the strong heat, the Duke of Berkley had quite determinedly kept his on. His untidy hair he had done his best to tame though it distracted Grace.

She was rebelliously thinking of running her fingers through it, perhaps burying her face in his neck and inhaling that masculine cologne, when Diana's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"That is some look, Grace," Diana whispered.

"That it is," Celia agreed with a nod. "I can't figure out if it is a look of hate or something else entirely."

"What else would it be?" Grace barked with a laugh, scorning at such an idea. "He must detest me. He has been backed into a marriage now all because of my foolishness. I wouldn't blame him for hating me."

Her friends all hurried to speak, but in that moment, they had to fall silent as the curtain was raised at the opera began. The strong notes of the opening Aria began, but Grace's gaze slipped back to meet the Duke's.

He was looking at her the way he had looked at her when she had talked about taking other lovers.

There is possessiveness in that stare.

For some reason, she didn't mind it.

\* \* \*

“Ready?” Philip said impatiently, jumping to his feet as the closing curtain fell.

“You seem in a hurry,” Aaron pointed out, standing too in order to follow him. “I take it you are not going to ignore her tonight then?”

“I have no intention of ignoring her.” Philip hastened out of the box and crossed through the corridors, aware that Aaron was following closely behind him. Aaron said nothing but just fell into step, his movements matching Philip’s own.

When they appeared back in the foyer, Philip craned his neck back and forth, searching for Grace. He was already irritated at her, for he had looked more at her in the opera than he had at the stage. It angered him, and he shifted that fury in her direction though he knew deep down his staring was not of her doing.

I could not look away.

She had worn another one of those ridiculously frilly gowns he could not stand with the high collar. All he had pictured doing as he stared at her in the other box was tearing it from her throat and chest.

“There she is.” Aaron pointed across the foyer.

Grace was indeed there. She was gathered with Eleanor and her other friends as well as Dorain and Xander, Violet’s husband, the Duke of Barlow.

“You’ll come and speak with them?” Philip pleaded as he led the way across the room.

“I promised to come to the opera with you, not to make merry with strangers.”

“Please,” Philip added. “I could do with a friend right now.”

Something in Aaron’s rigid expression softened, and he nodded.

“Thank you.”

Philip crossed close to the group. Grace hadn’t yet noticed his approach, for she was much busier in talking to her friends. When he reached her side, he caught her hand. A breathy gasp escaped her as she turned to face him. With lightning speed, he kissed the back of her hand, not bothering to linger.

If I linger, I’ll be too tempted.

“Your Grace,” she muttered, her tone dark as she curtsied.

“Well, this is interesting,” Lady Celia said from across the group though Philip thought he caught sight of her sister, Violet, elbowing her in the gut to keep her quiet.

“You’re starting whispers,” Dorian added from his place beside Eleanor.

All around the foyer, many people were facing the two of them now that Philip had Grace’s hand in his own. She was trying her best to retract it subtly, but he wouldn’t let her.

“You would know, wouldn’t you?” Philip hissed at his brother-in-law, trying to remind him of the way in which he had ended up marrying Eleanor in the first place.

“Pay the whisperers no attention,” he said to Grace, noting the way her lips were firmly pressed together.

She was the picture of defiance that was more familiar to him now, her head lifted high. He bent toward her, feeling a longing to make sure the gossipers had something more to talk about. Placing his lips near her ear, he whispered for her only to hear, “I have obtained the special license.”

He then leaned back, watching as her lips parted into a perfect ‘o’ shape. Apparently dumbstruck, he took the opportunity to move on in the conversation.

“Well, everyone,” he said, turning to address the group at large, “meet my friend, Aaron Baxter, the Duke of Rawley.”

“The soldier?” Xander said, clearly recognizing the name at once. He bowed in greeting as did Aaron.

“That’s me. Just returned from the front line.”

The group fell into conversation, leaving Philip the chance to focus on Grace without being watched. His eyes tarried on the high neckline of her gown. He burned to ask her why she wore such ridiculous things. She must have noticed his gaze, for though her head was turned toward the others, as if she paid attention to them, she fidgeted restlessly.

“Did you enjoy the opera, Your Grace?” Diana, often the quietest of the group, spoke up.

Philip turned to see that she had in fact addressed Aaron with these words. To his mind, she seemed a little uncertain of Aaron, perhaps even afraid. She’d ended up standing next to him and didn’t quite dare raise her gaze to meet his as she attempted

to make conversation.

“It was fine,” Aaron grunted in reply.

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Grace's hand slipped out of Philip's own. He turned to see that she had stepped away from the group, waving at another. His gut tightened in anger as she walked a few steps away.

She had seen the Marquess of Morton, who was now approaching her to speak.

The memory of Grace leaning toward the Marquess of Morton on that bench made Philip want to growl aloud. He barely kept himself in check.

"Do you like opera in general?" Diana was trying again to make conversation with Aaron, for the others had broken off into their own chatter.

"Yes."

"Are you a secret romantic, Your Grace?" She tried a smile, daring to raise her eyes this time to meet Aaron's though he didn't seem bothered to look at her at all as he spoke.

"No. I just like that their problems are false."

Philip sighed. Sometimes, he thought Aaron could have done with a little more tact in conversation. He was as ever, constantly and indisputably honest.

"If you would excuse me, I'll take my leave for the night." Aaron bowed to her in parting and then to Philip too. "I'll call on you soon."

"Goodnight," Philip said woodenly, for he was keen not to pay attention to Aaron and



Diana anymore. His eyes slid to where Grace and the Marquess of Morton were talking together. She laughed heartily at something he said. Philip's palms grew clammy, and he stepped away from the group. "Lord Morton," he cut easily into the conversation, struggling to force a smile.

Clearly remembering their meeting from a couple of nights ago, Lord Morton's smile faltered.

"Oh, erm, Your Grace." Lord Morton bowed in an odd and alarmed way. "We were just talking."

"So I saw." Philip took hold of Grace's hand. "If you would excuse us." Without another word, he drew her away.

She was so startled by it that she stumbled, nearly falling into him. He halted enough to look back at her with raised eyebrows.

"Do you have to fall over even if there isn't anything to trip on?"

"Do you have to interrupt every conversation I have with Lord Morton?" she hissed, mimicking his tone.

He led her all the way back to the group, taking a firmer hold of her hand now.

"Grace." He moved his lips close to her ear again. "You must not smile like that at other men."

"What do you mean?" She leaned away from him, so they could look one another in the eye. "You were the one who assured me he was... you know." She hastened to explain with a wave of her hand, looking around them. Plainly, she didn't want to be the guilty party to oust Lord Morton's secret in public.

“You belong to me now,” he reminded her in a heated tone. He drew her hand across his arm, settling it into the crook of his elbow. “Not to him.”

Her honeyed eyes narrowed. It was a perfect look, one that both riled him and antagonized him all at the same time, so he was quite lost as he stared at her. He could hear his heartbeat pounding in his ears, feel the sweatiness of his palm as he held onto her, and most of all, he could hear her breathing.

“You forget something, Your Grace.” She spoke with flawless rebellion. “I do not belong to you yet.”

That low growl escaped him which he had been doing his best to keep in check before.

She will.

He was picturing everything now as he stared at her. He imagined tearing her free from that ridiculous gown. He saw himself untying her stays with his teeth then grabbing her chemise and throwing it over her head. He wouldn't be happy until she was completely bare beneath him, without a stitch on her.

Only when all her curves were on show would he take that perfect body. He would slide himself into her when she was ready, when she was panting for him, her core wet and aching for him.

“What does that look mean?” she whispered.

“You don't want to know.” He tore his gaze away from her. He thought so much of that wedding night, he could feel his length stirring in his trousers.

“Well, perhaps it's time we depart for the night,” Dorian said from nearby. “We shall

escort you home now.”

“Allow me,” Philip cut in. He had no desire to lose Grace from his arm just yet. “I’ll take Ladies Grace and Diana home. Lady Violet, you can get back to your child sooner, and Eleanor, you can get some rest.”

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It was the perfect plan though he felt Grace's hand grow wooden on his arm.

Something tells me she is not looking forward to being alone with me again.

### CHAPTER12

Grace shared a look with Diana in the carriage as they pulled up outside Diana's house. They had managed a few short sentences between them about the opera, but they had not spoken much. The air between them was somewhat tense because of the man sat opposite them in the carriage.

The Duke of Berkley had said nothing the entire trip.

"Good luck," Diana whispered to Grace as they clutched hands, and Diana stepped down from the carriage.

They waited, watching as Diana stepped in through the door. Once she was safely inside, the Duke tapped on the wall of the carriage. It was the signal for the driver to move off again.

The carriage rocked along the cobbles, making the one lantern that swung from the ceiling sway back and forth. The apricot-tinged light sometimes fell on Philip's face. Other times, it merely lit the formal suit.

They rounded another corner before Grace could not stand the silence anymore.

"What you said at the opera house," she began, pausing when the Duke jerked his

head around to look at her, “about me belonging to you.”

“Yes?” he encouraged her on, the slightest hint of a smirk on his face.

Her hands knotted together in her lap beneath the cover of her shawl.

“I will not belong to you. I am not your possession,” she said coolly. “I may have to marry you, but I will not be at your beck and call. Not your pet.”

He quirked an eyebrow at her, the movement illuminated by the orange shine from the burning lantern.

“You wish to belong to another man?”

“What? No.” She shifted, her hands fidgeting together in her lap. “I will be free. As you promised me I would be.”

“So, you plan on taking a lover as soon as you can, do you?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“It’s what you meant, isn’t it?” He suddenly moved off his bench.

Grace leaned away, flattening her back to the cushioned bench behind her as he leaned toward her. He planted his hands to the seat on either side of her, his thumbs buried in her skirt.

“You intend to belong to another man,” he said darkly. “Who?”

“What? There’s no one.” She lost her cool resolve and pushed hard into his chest, but he didn’t move back. “And I will not belong to you. I am not your plaything. Do you

understand me, Your Grace?”

“You will belong to me in that bedchamber for the first few days. The first month, even. You agreed to that. It was one of our rules.”

“You never said anything about possession!” she complained loudly.

He looked away from her, reached toward the carriage window, then sharply pulled the curtain across.

“What are you doing?” she said in alarm.

“I’m going to remind you exactly why you will belong to me for that first month,” he said and reached toward her.

“Wait — Your Grace — hmm!”

His hand had curled around her neck and pulled her toward him. His lips claimed her own in such a heated kiss that she quite forgot what she had been saying. He parted her lips with ease, quite demanding, as if he had done it many times before and not just the once.

It was like fire, the brush of his tongue, and all Grace wanted to do was be consumed by the heat. Her hands left her lap as she reached for him, her fingers hooking around the edge of his tailcoat as she fell into him because of the rocking of the carriage.

He parted a little, just enough to start kissing her down her neck.

“You... will not... talk... of other... men,” he hissed darkly between his kisses. He found a spot in the curve of her neck that drove her mad. He placed an openmouthed kiss to that spot, nibbling her in such a way that she gasped at the dual sensation of pleasure and hint of pain. She wanted more of it and pressed her neck into his lips.

His hand had slid down to her hip. He guided her off her own bench as the carriage rounded another corner. They ended up on his bench with Grace half fallen into his lap.

One of her knees moved beside his hip, straddling him, as he took a firmer hold of her hip and guided it forward. Her hips brushed his. The movement mimicked what they could be doing, prompting a moan to fall from her lips.

He hooked a finger around the high collar of her dress and pulled it to the side. His movements were so sharp that she actually heard the material tear.

“I...” she whispered, trying to hold her ground when she realized what a shameful display she was making of herself.

The formal man had slipped into the passionate one again, and as he had changed, so had she. She had become hungry for his touch.

“I am notyours,”she said determinedly. He placed another open-mouthed kiss to her collarbone, nipping her playfully, as if in reprimand for her words.

“You will be,” he whispered against her skin. “Very soon.”

Then he shifted his hands. One slid from her hip to the curve of her back, his fingers splaying and keeping her pressed against him. The other reached down to her thigh and gripped her between the cover of her dress. She gasped at the sensation of his hand being so close to exploring her.

His fingers inched higher. His fingertips caressed the area between her legs but still through her gown.

“Please,” the word shamefully escaped her. She was ready to beg down on her knees if he’d release this sudden ache. That space between her legs practically pulsed, needing something, needing his touch.

“Ah, you are begging for my touch now,” he whispered against her skin. The neck of her gown ripped a little bit more. The feeling of it made her gasp again. He was setting kisses down her chest, getting closer and closer to the top curve of her breasts. “So improper, my Duchess,” he murmured against her skin.

He didn’t seem to mind her being improper now. He seemed to want it.

His fingers brushed her center again through the gown, not quite giving her a proper touch but merely teasing her then abruptly, it was over. He jerked his head back, looking up at her on his lap.

“I’m afraid, we’ll have to wait.”

“W-what?” she managed to stammer.

His hands took hold of her hips. She yelped in surprise as he raised himself up with her still straddling him then pressed her back down onto her own bench. She fumbled



to sit straight as he released her, retreating to his own bench.

Breathless, she stared at him. His suit was at last a little rumpled rather than the creaseless perfection it always was.

“Are you joking?” she muttered in amazement. “You can touch me like that then you speak of waiting?”

Something dark came over his eyes.

“Just a reminder of who you now belong to, Grace,” he said, his voice deep. “Believe me, the thought of giving you what you want tonight...” he paused, his eyes slipping down her.

Suddenly, she didn’t feel like the clumsy fool in the stupidly frilly dress under that gaze. She felt like a woman who was capable of raising a man’s desire.

“Hearing you shout my name as I enter you? Now, what I would give to feel that tonight.”

She trembled, a dark sort of desire erupting in her stomach.

This was the formal elder brother of Eleanor. A man of strict rigidity and propriety, yet he was talking about entering her.

She rubbed her thighs together beneath her gown, trying to satisfy her longing for him.

“But I’ll be proper. Until the wedding night.” His eyes returned to her face.

The carriage came to a sudden halt.

Grace was so unprepared for it that she nearly toppled off the bench again. As she was flung to the side, the Duke's hand was there. He caught her palm, keeping her in the seat.

“Goodnight, Grace,” he whispered then retracted his hand.

Grace trembled, looking at the door of the carriage as it was opened by the footman. She picked up the shawl which he had discarded on the bench and wrapped it around her shoulders and neck, hiding the fact that the Duke had torn her gown so much. When she knew their actions were masked, she stepped down from the carriage.

She glanced back at him from the front stoop to her house, but she could not see him in the darkness of the carriage. The butler was still up and let her in. She slipped inside, insisting that she would like to keep her shawl with her tonight, even when the butler offered to take it for her.

“Lady Grace, your father is in his study,” the butler said as she reached for the staircase. “He was hoping to speak to you before you retire for the night.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you.” Grace forced a smile for the butler. Once the butler was gone, her smile dropped away. She breathed deeply, trying her best to steady herself and forget what the Duke had just done to her, how much he had tempted and toyed with her, only to thrust her away again.

As soon as she could breathe easily, she headed down the corridor toward her father’s study. “Father?” she whispered, knocking on the door and opening it a little.

John was seated in an armchair beside the fire. He looked weaker than when she had last seen him, nursing a cup of tea in his hand as he raised his gaze from the fire.

“Father, how are you?” She hastened into the room, tucking the shawl tightly around

her neck, so she could sit on the footstool in front of him, and she reached toward him.

“I’m not too bad,” he assured her gently, managing a small smile.

“You need a new physician, Father,” she said, returning to an argument they’d had many times before. “I know my mother is keen for you to keep seeing this healer, but he is doing you no good. You need someone new to look at you.”

“I will consider it.” He rested his teacup in one hand and reached to take her palm with his other. “Now, let’s talk for a minute about something other than my sickness.”

Her gut knotted hard. Not talking about her father’s sickness felt wrong. It was only right to speak of it, especially when she knew how much Althea wished not to speak of it, to brush it under the carpet and pretend it was not happening at all.

I am not ready to lose you, Father.

“This betrothal.” His expression turned very sad. “If it is not what you want, tell me, dear Grace. Tell me and I will find another way out for you.”

“What?”

“I do not want to see you married to a man you cannot stand, Grace. Do not let me have that pain before I die.”

“Father, no speaking of death, I beg of you. We will not lose you so soon. Not if you go to another physician,” she pleaded with him.

“Very well, I shall do so, but in the meantime, answer my question.” He placed his

teacup down beside her on the table, giving her his full fixed attention. "I wish to see you settled and happy. If the Duke of Berkley cannot make you so, then tell me now. I will find another resolution to this scandal."

"There is no other resolution," she said softly as comfortingly as she possibly could. "I'm quite sensible to that, Father." She squeezed his hand tight. "And as for whether the Duke can make me happy or not, well, he has vowed to give me freedom."

"Freedom?" her father repeated, his brows furrowing together in surprise.

"He has said that I can live the life I want, that I can change the house if I wish to. Personally, I'm already planning to take my horse with me. I intend to make the most of riding through the estate and exploring my own home. Now, does that not sound like a happy future?"

"It does." Her father softened in his seat, looking infinitely more at ease. "I am glad he will give you your freedom. You deserve it, Grace. You deserve to be happy."

"Thank you, Father. Do not worry about me. I shall make the most of things."

"You always do." He looked very sleepy indeed.

Grace reached for a blanket nearby and tucked it around his legs. He thanked her gently as she stood, wishing him a goodnight.

As she parted from the room, leaving her father to a much more comfortable sleep than before, she hesitated on the other side of the door, thinking through what she had said.

She was not as confident about her happiness as she had claimed to be to her father, but after that night in the carriage with the Duke of Berkley, there was something she

could not deny. She had so badly wanted to be touched by him, to continue that kiss until she was completely lost in that fiery passion which she had only glimpsed twice now beneath his icy reserve.

“Damn you,” she muttered, thinking only of the Duke as she stormed up to her room. She hid in her chamber, shutting the door tight, then pulled off her shawl and turned to face the mirror. She gasped when she saw the state she was in.

The frilly high neckline of the gown was not the only thing marred though it now hung in tatters around her chest where he had pulled restlessly at it. There was also a pink mark at the base of her throat where he had marked her with his nibbling kisses.

She drew her fingers over it, stunned at the sensitivity of it.

“He marked me,” she muttered in outrage. “He marked me as his own.”

She could imagine now the way that he was smiling to himself as the carriage took him back to his own house. He would go to sleep now confident that his bride-to-be was his and no other man’s.

“Damn you, Duke of Berkley. I am not yours yet.”

### CHAPTER13

“Here, here. These are the last of the arrangements.” Althea rushed into the room, waving two or three letters in the air.

Grace looked around from where she and Tabitha were putting together flower bouquets for the wedding. Tabitha’s arrangement was much more beautiful than Grace’s own attempt though she said nothing.

Althea stopped beside the table though, her happy smile sliding out of place.

“Oh dear, Grace, that will not do. Tabitha, you must show her how to do hers again. A duchess cannot carry this thing down the aisle.” She pointed miserably at Grace’s attempt.

Grace dropped the flowers and rested her chin in her hand, turning to look at the letters which her mother had placed on the table.

“A duchess doesn’t sit like that either,” Althea warned.

“I was hoping a duchess could do as she likes,” Grace muttered though her mother didn’t hear what she said.

“These are the letters from the Duke. All the arrangements are here. See? Take a look.” Althea thrust them into Grace’s grasp.

Grace read the letters which were all addressed to her father. It seemed strange to her that it had been five days since she had last seen the Duke, and he had not once called on her. Neither had he sent her a letter. Every message he had sent had been addressed to her father, and each one was formally signed with his full title.

Grace sighed, sitting back in her chair.

“A duchess doesn’t slouch either,” Althea added tartly, reaching forward for Grace’s bouquet and tearing the string off which she had used to bind it.

Tabitha offered up an apologetic look for Althea’s tart words. Grace managed the smallest of smiles back.

“I thought he might have come,” Grace whispered.

“What was that?” Althea asked.

“Nothing.”

Grace wasn’t sure if the Duke had stayed away because he didn’t intend for them to transgress again before the wedding or if he meant something else by it. Her eyes scanned the letters her mother had brought her, taking in every detail for the wedding.

It was to be held in two days’ time at a chapel in the heart of London. Only a few friends and family members were to be invited. They would then all be invited back



to his country estate on the edge of London for the wedding breakfast. It was to be a formal and traditional affair with the full breakfast, dancing, and toasts.

“He does things by tradition, doesn’t he?” Grace observed as she passed the letters for Tabitha to see too.

“He’s a duke,” Tabitha murmured. “I suppose he has expectations of him. Ways that he must act.”

It’s why he wants an heir, isn’t it? He needs an heir to the dukedom.

The memory of his lips searing her skin with heat that night in the carriage broke through. Absentmindedly, she raised her hand and placed her fingers to her neck, brushing the spot where he had marked her. Now five days later, the mark was gone, but she had worn another high-necked gown for she knew her mother would dislike it if she did not.

Maybe in time, he won’t just be Eleanor’s elder brother. He will be my husband.

Yet as she took the letters back from Tabitha and read the cool distant tone in those letters, a louder voice in her mind told her she was mistaken. The Duke may be interested in an heir, but that was probably the only reason why he had pushed things so much in that carriage.

Perhaps he fears I’d carry another man’s child instead of his own.

She put the letters down on the table, strangely out of sorts just at the mere thought of being with another man in such a way.

“Now, the gown will arrive this evening.” Althea was now helping Tabitha put Grace’s bouquet back together as she talked. “It was a rush to have it made in such a

short space of time, but it will have to do. It's all we could have done in the timeframe."

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“Very well.” Grace nodded. Seeing her mother had taken over the task of the bouquet entirely, Grace reached for her discarded book nearby and opened it, ready to read again. It was a book on botany and plants. It did not last long in her grasp before her mother snatched it away.

“I hope you are prepared for this wedding, Grace.” Althea then nodded at Tabitha. “Perhaps it’s best, Tabitha, if you give Grace some instructions this evening on how to carry herself at the wedding. Lord knows I will want the chapel floor to open up and swallow me whole if you trip on your wedding gown and fall flat on your face.”

“Thank you, Mama, for that vote of confidence.”

Tabitha smiled in a rather sorry way and patted Grace’s hand softly.

“I am sure the Duke of Berkley is marrying her because he likes her as she is.”

“Don’t fool yourself, Tabitha.” Althea waved this thought away with one of the flowers. “He’s marrying her because he has to. If you want to be a good duchess, Grace, then you must learn how to be one. Now, take that.” Having finished the bouquet, she pushed it back into Grace’s grasp. “Let’s see you walking up and down the room as if you are walking the aisle.”

“Is this necessary?” Grace asked with a sigh.

Althea’s harsh look was enough of an answer without words.

\* \* \*

“He’s here,” Grace whispered to herself as she looked out of the window. The maid had left so that only she and Tabitha were still in the room. Tabitha was fussing with the bouquets again as Grace pulled and shifted the wedding gown around her, angered at it.

Pressing her face close to the window, Grace peered down at the Duke of Berkley.

It was the morning of the wedding. As per tradition, he had come to call on her father, but he had not asked to see her. He now parted from the house, reaching toward a carriage that waited for him.

Grace’s eyes were hungry for the sight of him. She couldn’t peel herself back from the glass as she stared at him. He was tall and impressive in his midnight blue suit with a dark black waistcoat. The cravat, alabaster white, was a contrast to the richness of the suit. There wasn’t a crease in his appearance, and his hair had been trimmed perfectly for the day.

How shameful I will look at the side of him.

As he climbed into the carriage without looking up to her window and vanished from view, she retreated into the chamber, struggling with the long train of the gown. She pulled at the frilly neck too. It was so high today that it had a strangling hold upon her, reaching up to her chin.

“How strange it is,” Tabitha murmured from where she fiddled with the flowers.

“What is?”

“Well, it’s unheard of for a groom not to call on his bride until today, isn’t it?” Tabitha asked in a horrified whisper. She put the bouquet down and stood, moving to stand beside Grace, so they could both look in the standing mirror together as Grace

fidgeted with the dress.

“Why should he come?” Grace asked, feeling defensive. “He is marrying me out of duty, after all. Nothing more. I should not have expected him to come.”

I did though. I had hoped for it.

She pulled sharply at the frilly neck again, remembering the way he had torn the last high-necked dress in order to get to her.

“I am so worried for you,” Tabitha said in the softest of tones. Grace softened her own expression, smiling sadly at her cousin the mirror.

“Do not worry for me.”

“But I do. If he is unkind to you, if you do not like him, you know you could ask for an annulment, don’t you?” Tabitha suggested.

An annulment?

Grace hadn’t even considered the idea. Not many married couples had their marriages annulled. Such things were usually followed by scandal and supposition, but it was a possibility. It was an option she hadn’t even considered.

“No one would allow it,” Grace replied after a few seconds of quiet thought.

“They would, if you...” Tabitha hesitated, glancing at the closed door, clearly checking that no one was going to walk in on them before she said anymore. “If you avoid your duties tonight.”

“Oh.Oh.” Grace exclaimed in understanding. Tabitha was suggesting that she avoid

the Duke of Berkley's bed. If the marriage was not consummated, they could then have an annulment. Grace laughed a second later which made Tabitha's eyes widen.

“You could do it, Grace.”

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“Perhaps.” Grace tried her best not to laugh, for she thought it a wild idea.

The Duke of Berkley has every intention of consummating this marriage.

The way he had spoken so possessively, how he had marked her skin, it was plain that he intended to claim her body that night.

I am not sure I could refuse him.

She remembered shamefully how she had pressed her hips against his and pleaded for him to touch her in that carriage. Her body had acted of her own accord, shouting down every dissenting voice in her mind.

“Are you in there, Grace?” Eleanor’s voice suddenly called from outside the door.

“Can we come in yet!” Violet cried.

“Yes, or we might all break down the door soon enough,” Celia added.

“You can come in,” Grace called.

Her friends all hurried in. Diana was the first, hastening to Grace’s side followed by the others.

“I’ll leave you in peace,” Tabitha whispered and left.

“Well, the day is here,” Eleanor declared then she halted a few steps from Grace.

“Oh...”

“Oh indeed,” Celia said with wide eyes. “Grace, what on earth are you wearing?”

“You look... nice,” Diana said feebly, pulling at the baggy sleeves of the gown and trying her best to smile.

“I look like a sack of potatoes.” Grace’s words cut through the tension in the room. Her friends laughed and shook their heads. “Is this actually how I will have to get married today? I look awful.”

She turned back to face the mirror. The gown had been entirely of her mother’s choosing. The high neckline was insufferable, the material cloying, hiding every part of her larger figure, and it swamped her.

“You do rather look like you’re drowning in lace,” Violet added, only to get swiped by her sister who urged her into silence.

“What am I going to do?” Grace asked as she looked back at her reflection and fidgeted with the material.

She could well imagine what the Duke would make of a dress like this. He had once called one of her gowns ridiculous.

Maybe he will not want to bed me if I wear this?

“There are frills everywhere,” Diana said, trying her best to keep horror out of her tone though Grace heard it anyway.

“Look at these cuffs.” Eleanor raised one of Grace’s wrists and flapped her hand. The excessive hanging lace waved in the air. “It looks like you are about to take flight.”



“This won’t do,” Celia murmured and stepped forward. With her hands on her hips, she circled around Grace. “For God’s sake, why does your mother insist on hiding your good figure?”

“What figure?” Grace scoffed. “I am neither slim nor regal in my posture. When my mother looks at me, she sees someone too plump and frumpy. She tries to hide it with dresses like this.” She picked at the skirt in an unfriendly way.

“Plump!?” Violet scoffed.

“I know.” Celia agreed with a nod. “I know many women who would kill to have a chest like yours, Grace.”

“A what?” Grace looked down at her own chest. She had rather large breasts though they were currently completely masked by all the frills.

“I think it’s time we showed off your figure to its best, what do you say?” Celia tapped her chin in thought.

“We have an hour until Grace has to leave,” Diana muttered nervously, glancing at the clock.

“Great, then you be on watching the clock, Diana, to make sure we’re not late.” Celia looked around her. “Grace, you must have an embroidery box here somewhere.”

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“Embroidery? You should see my attempts.” She rolled her eyes. It was another point of upset for her mother. Althea wanted a daughter who could embroider as beautifully as Tabitha could. “Anything I make ends up looking like a cat has got hold of the needle and thread.”

“But you have scissors in your sewing box, yes?” Celia said.

“Oh, yes.” She pointed to where she had unceremoniously stuffed the box under her bed, out of sight. Celia retrieved it with Eleanor at her side, and the two began to retrieve the scissors and various bits of thread.

“What are you doing to do?” Grace asked as Celia moved back toward her.

“We can’t do anything about this skirt,” Violet murmured. “We haven’t got enough time. Though we could make it into a bustle.” She caught the long train and gathered it behind Grace’s rear. “That’s better.”

“Ideal. Pin it, and we’ll do that next,” Celia said with a wave of her hand. Eleanor offered up a tin of pins to Violet who promptly got to work. “I’ll start with all these frills.” Celia came somewhat dangerously toward Grace with the scissors.

“Careful what you’re doing with those things,” Grace murmured with humor. “I’d like my head intact for the wedding.”

“Ha! Not to worry. I’m simply going to make sure that groom of yours knows exactly what he’s getting in his bride. Let’s allow him to see a little more of you, shall we?” Celia took the scissors to the high neckline and the frills. It took three cuts before the

oversized neck fell away, revealing a deep neckline which hugged the fitted bodice of the dress.

“Well, I know one good thing that will come from this day,” Eleanor said with satisfaction as she stood beside Celia who continued to cut other frills away.

“What’s that?” Grace asked as Eleanor adjusted the bodice a little, so the top curves of Grace’s breasts were now even more prominent than before.

“We might give your mother a heart attack when you walk down that aisle.”

Grace and the others burst into a fit of giggles.

Turning her head back to the mirror, Grace watched as her friends worked, and a new gown slowly began to appear. In truth, she didn’t care what her mother would think of the dress. Her mind was plagued with other thoughts entirely.

I wonder what the Duke of Berkley will make of it.

## CHAPTER14

Philip pushed both doors open and marched into the church. Aaron scrambled to catch up with him as those that had already gathered in the chapel looked around in alarm at the sudden sound.

“Philip, this is a wedding, not a military drill.” Aaron’s curt voice made Philip slow his pace but only a little.

He reached the altar fast, turning on the spot as he took in every inch of the chapel.

They hadn’t even bothered with the official rehearsal the day before. Grace had come

separately to talk to the priest, as he had done, for Philip didn't want the temptation of being with Grace again before this day.

I've scandalized her enough as it is. Next time I touch her, we'll be married.

In his absence from the church the day before, he was pleased to see that many of the arrangements he'd put in place had been seen to. The flowers had been placed at the ends of the pews, and the organ player sat ready at the front of the church.

Xander and Dorian stood by the doorway, ushering people to their right seats though Xander clearly took no pleasure in acting as page boy.

"Are you ready for this?" Aaron asked calmly, taking his place at Philip's side. "Because if you are, might I suggest you stop pacing up and down?"

"Wouldn't you pace if our roles were reversed?" Philip hissed as more people entered the chapel and made their way to their seats. He was angered to see there were more people invited to this wedding than he had hoped for. Somehow, he knew this wouldn't have been Grace's doing nor the Marquess of Garton's. He fully expected, from what little he knew of Grace's family, that it was all her mother's doing.

"I hope never to be marched to the altar quite like this, no," Aaron said through gritted teeth. "Need I remind you, though, that you are here out of your choice? And your doing."

"Thank you, but I do not need reminding of what I did." He pulled at his hair, an old habit of stress that had the habit of ruffling it when everything else in his countenance was neat and tidy.

I've not stopped thinking about what I have done since.

Every night this last week, he had either woken up with dreams of Grace and him in that garden or the pair of them in that carriage. The carriage dreams in particular were torturing him mostly.

The way she had pleaded with him, begged him for his touch, had been his undoing. He had a feeling that if there had been longer left on their journey, he might have given it and given her a taste of the pleasure she wanted.

She wants pleasure. She needs it.

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He felt as if a demon rose inside his chest. That demon, clawing to be free, was quite determined to be the man to show her that pleasure.

“Ahem,” the priest cleared his throat.

Philip did his best to stop pacing as he turned to greet the priest.

“I believe all is ready,” the priest said. “Shall we begin?”

“She’s here?” Philip muttered, alarmed that the morning had gone so fast. “Yes. Yes, please begin.”

The priest signaled to the organist who began to play. Xander and Dorian hastily took their seats as Philip turned to look around at the pews. Grace’s mother and cousin had also appeared. They sat in the front seat, Lady Tabitha looking very nervous indeed as Lady Garton was pink cheeked and excitable, unable to contain her smile for she bounced in the pew.

The doors to the chapel opened.

Philip didn’t look at Grace at first. He was too busy glaring at Lady Garton, quite sickened by her look of triumph that her daughter was going to be a duchess.

“Look at your bride, Philip,” Aaron commanded under his breath.

Philip tore his gaze away, turning to look down the aisle.

The Marquess of Garton escorted his daughter. Wan and unable to stand straight, Philip's heart bled for the man. Yet the Marquess of Garton was smiling despite his troubles, and he was smiling at his daughter beside him.

Philip's eyes shot to Grace. The first thing he noticed was her scowl as she looked back at him.

Defiance. It's who you are, Grace.

Something about this thought made that demon lodged in his chest purr pleasantly then his eyes shot further south, and his jaw fell open.

It had to be the first time he had seen Grace in such a gown. There were no frills, no high neckline, and no excessive material around the bodice to hide her figure. It was almost as if lace had been torn from her body, leaving her curves fully exposed.

The deep neckline revealed the perfect cleavage, plump and round. The empire bodice, pressed to the inward curve of her waist, accented the way the lace hugged those delicious hips. The train had been tied up in a bustle behind her back, offering even more of an emphasis to those hips.

Ah, Grace. What are you doing to me?

"Close your mouth," Aaron urged behind him.

Philip did as he was instructed. Grace crossed toward him on her father's arm, the embodiment of sensuality and seduction in that gown. Philip didn't think it would be possible to tear his gaze from his new bride until he caught something out of the corner of his eyes that drew him.

Lady Garton in the front pew was alarmed indeed at the gown her daughter had

chosen. She appeared to have fallen out of her seat, only held there by her niece clutching her arm.

“Thank you,” Philip whispered to Lord Garton as he placed Grace’s hand in his own.

“Good luck to you both,” Lord Garton whispered, sharing a smile with his daughter before he retreated to sit beside his wife.

Philip led Grace the final distance to the altar, standing before the priest. Unable to tear his gaze from Grace in that dress, he felt somewhat like a bumbling fool, nearly walking straight into the altar if it had not been for the priest clearing his throat beside him.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Grace whispered as the priest waited for the organ music to finish.

“Like what?” Philip whispered back to her innocently, glad no one could hear their whispers above the organ.

“As if you are ready to devour me,” she murmured. His gaze darkened as he prayed with that look that she understood it was exactly what he wanted to do.

“Dearly beloved,” the priest began, and they both did their best to shift their focus to him.

\* \* \*

“Well, at least you managed to restrain yourself to a peck,” Dorian laughed as he passed Philip a glass of wine. “The way you were looking at her, I thought we might all be treated to another sight of scandal.”



As Xander laughed, Philip downed the glass of wine.

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“Remind me why I invited you to my wedding, Dorian?” Philip asked.

“We’re family now, remember?” Dorian said with a smile.

Xander clasped Dorian’s shoulder and steered him away.

“I think it’s time we left Philip to stare at his bride across the room, don’t you?” Xander said to Dorian. “If staring is enough, of course.”

Philip glared after them, resentfully, as they both went to get more wine. The wedding breakfast was hardly the celebration he had hoped his wedding would be someday. It couldn’t be denied that around the room, he saw many people enjoying themselves. Even Grace was happy, smiling away with Eleanor beside her.

Philip caught sight of his sister’s lips framing the word, sisters. For that’s what they were now. As Grace and Eleanor embraced, Philip tore his gaze away from his bride.

They’d finished the formal sit-down breakfast. People were milling now, some taking to the small dance floor he’d had set up for the event in the ballroom with a string quarter at the far end playing lively music to accompany them.

Amongst the general clamor and excitement, Philip felt strangely distanced from it all. His eyes kept sliding back to Grace, tension rising in his body by the second.

In law, she was now his, but the deed would not be final until he had her, and he had every intention of following through on those vows just as soon as his guests left. Unfortunately, none of his guests were in a hurry to leave. It left him angsty and

annoyed.

He cast a quick glance back to Grace. As she spoke happily with her friends, her mother was approaching behind her. Philip caught sight of the happy smile on Grace's face falling, as if it had been slapped off her cheeks.

Something stirred in his gut, making the wine curdle.

Philip stepped forward, intending on stopping Lady Garton from talking to her daughter when another moved to his side.

"Your Grace, may I speak to you for a minute?"

"Lord Morton." Philip turned to Grace's father. The man was even paler than earlier today. "Come, sit down." Philip gently took his arm and steered him to the nearest seat in the room. "How are you? Is there anything I can get for your relief?"

"I thank you for your kindness." Lord Morton smiled softly. He took a handkerchief from his top pocket and dabbed his brow, clearly struggling in the heat of the room though he made no complaint. "I have requested for one of your maids to bring me tea. I shall be fine with that."

"Good." Philip nodded and sat beside Lord Morton. He glanced resentfully across to Lady Garton, who had managed to corner her daughter, but Philip could not turn his back on his new father-in-law when he had asked for a word. "What is it you would like to speak about?"

"My daughter." He smiled rather sadly. "It cannot have escaped your notice how sick I am."

Philip didn't know what to say. He shifted uncomfortably for a second before he

could think of anything.

“Is what the physician says so bad?”

“Yes.” Lord Morton didn’t hide the truth. “Grace is eager for me to get a second opinion, and I will, but if this is true, if I do not have long for this world, then I wish to part from this world knowing my daughter is taken care of.” He fixed Philip with an eager gaze. “You will do that for me, won’t you?”

“It’s my duty to provide for her. I intend to follow through on that promise.” Despite the firmness of Philip’s words, he could see that he had disappointed Lord Morton. The man’s face fell.

“I see,” he said in a rather sad tone. “That is not quite what I meant.”

“What did you mean?”

“Ah.” The Marquess looked away. “My tea has arrived. If you will excuse me, I shall go and have it.”

Philip helped the Marquess to his feet again. Lord Morton walked slowly away to meet the maid who had pulled out a small table at the far side of the room, so he could take his tea in peace.

With the Marquess’ words burning in the back of his mind, Philip looked around again, intent on finding Lady Garton and Grace. When he found Grace, he grew distracted. Grace had pulled on a tendril of her honey hair and dipped her chin an inch or two lower.

It drew his attention down to the curves of her voluptuous figure. Without knowing what to do, Philip merely gawped at her across the room.

“The whole room is abuzz about how you’re looking at your duchess as if you might eat her,” Aaron’s voice cut into his thoughts.

Philip turned to see Aaron beside him.

“In jest?”

“I never jest.” Aaron shook his head.

“What do you think of her?” Philip asked, somewhat eager for his friend’s opinion. When Aaron’s eyes raked down Grace’s figure, Philip regretted asking. “I don’t want to hear those thoughts, Aaron.”

“Calm yourself,” Aaron said with a small smile. “She’s yours now.”

Not quite yet.

He had to get her alone first for that.

“I like her,” Aaron said after a minute or so. “Strong, willful, witty. She’ll suit you. Shame about the cousin.”

“The cousin?” Philip muttered. “You’ve spoken to Lady Tabitha?”

“You could say that.”

“What do you mean by that, Aaron? Do you not like her?”

“Not at all.” Aaron chose not to elaborate anymore. “You chose the finer of the two, though, I’ll say that.” He turned away. “I see your mother is enjoying herself greatly.”

Philip’s eyes turned to his mother. She had rarely been seen out in public since she had lost her husband, preferring instead to be tucked away in the country estate they had in Dorset. Today, though, she looked very merry indeed.

“I haven’t spoken to her in years. I shall pay my respects to her for her loss.”

“Thank you, Aaron,” Philip said woodenly as his friend stepped away.

Philip’s eyes slid back to Grace when he saw exactly why her mother had approached her with such purpose. Grace had been given a slice of the wedding cake on a plate. She had the fork halfway to her lips when her mother snatched the fork from her hand.

Eleanor was so amazed that she tried to take the fork back but with little success. Next, the plate was taken from Grace’s grasp too.

That demon which had been slumbering in his chest over the wedding breakfast suddenly raged to life. It was breathing fire now as he glowered at Lady Garton.

Putting down the empty glass that was still in his grasp, Philip crossed the room toward his bride and her mother.

“Lady Garton,” Eleanor was saying pleadingly, “it’s her wedding day. When else can she enjoy her wedding cake?” She took the plate out of Lady Garton’s hand. “Grace, eat.”

“You shall not eat.” Lady Garton took it back again. “Look at you. Look at the display you are making of yourself. How could you do this to the dress we arranged for you? You have butchered it,” she seethed under her breath, no idea that Philip was now so close, he could hear every word. “Every shameful part of your figure is on show.”

“Shameful?” Philip cut in just as Grace parted her lips to say something. As he halted behind her, Grace jerked her head around to look at him. “I thought I told you I would not stand for you to talk about my wife like that, Lady Garton.”

He extended his hand toward Grace. She didn't take it at first, apparently too dumbstruck.

"Dance?" he said huskily. She nodded then placed her hand in his.

## CHAPTER 15

"Your mother," the Duke mumbled angrily under his breath.

"She has a habit of getting under everyone's skin. Don't let her do that to you too." Grace scurried to keep up with him as he marched purposefully toward the dance floor. As the music changed, they stepped onto the floor to join the other dancers.

Grace stumbled a little to which his eyes widened, but he caught her around the waist. The way he took hold of her, as if she was as light a feather, made her quite breathless.

Struggling to find her voice, she let the Duke lead her into the opening movements of the waltz.

"If you wish to eat cake, you eat it, Grace. You understand?" he said, his voice quite determined and resilient. "Remember that freedom I promised you? Well, it is yours now."

Grace smiled. A strange warmth was spreading through her chest, not just because of his words but because he had come to dance with her at all. She'd feared he would ignore her for the whole wedding breakfast. His hand on her waist shifted a little, moving around to her back, so that she danced an inch closer to him than before.

This near, she could smell the cologne he liked to wear. That vanilla and pine scent bled into her, making her remember everything they had experienced in that carriage



together.

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“She...” Grace tried to speak in a level tone. “She is hardly happy. My friends and I took scissors to my wedding gown this morning to make it into something I wished to wear.”

“Good.” The gravelly tone made her insides quake with excitement. The Duke’s eyes traveled down to her rather obvious cleavage. “You’ve been hiding those curves of yours for too damn long, Grace.”

“Curves?” She giggled at the idea. “You mean the fact that I am fa —”

“You are not.” He cut in before she could even finish the word. His hand slid further across her back, pulling her so near now that she was breathless. He bent a little nearer to her, pressing his lips near her ear. “Hide those curves from me again, and there will be punishment for it.”

Punishment?

An excited shiver shot through her. For some reason, the way Philip spoke to her, she was certain that punishment would be a pleasurable thing indeed. Then he stood straight and increased the distance between them. Within the blink of an eye, he was back to the reserved and strict older figure he had always been.

Damn you for tormenting me so.

“You look incensed,” she whispered, marking a change in his stiff countenance she had not seen before. There was a twitch in his jaw.

He glanced away, toward where her mother stood at the side of the floor, clutching rather desperately to Tabitha's hand.

"Does she always control you like this?" the Duke asked, somehow managing to escort her around the floor with ease despite the fact his eyes were glowering at her mother.

"Not anymore," Grace replied with a delighted laugh. "From this day forward, I am free of her. That means no more ridiculous dresses with frilly necklines. No more oversized gowns." She continued to laugh, feeling heady and dizzy with excitement. "It also means no insistent rampages from her that my embroidery is poor or that my piano skills are more like that of a stray cat's than a young lady's."

"Is that what she says?" The Duke laughed.

Grace was startled by the sound as she jerked her gaze up from the center of his waistcoat to his eyes. The Duke had laughed with heat around her before, even scoffed in the past, but this sort of warm and companionable laugh? No, that was new.

"Well, my piano skills are just as bad," he said with a smile. "So, I'll hardly care if you want to throw out the piano from this house." Then his eyes slid down to her lips as he turned them around again. "On second thoughts, don't throw it away. Maybe neither of us will play the instrument, but there's a certain fantasy I want to live out with it first."

Other dancers crowded around them. They were so lost in the middle of the floor, hidden from view, that when his hand took hold of her hip and squeezed, Grace was confident that none but them knew it.

"What sort of fantasy?" she said defiantly, keeping her chin raised toward his own.

“You put it there last week when we danced around that piano in your house.” He bent down, whispering in her ear again. “I rather like the idea of reminding you who you belong to know as I bend you across it.” He brushed the edge of her ear with his lips.

She gasped, shocked at what he had done. Surely now, they would be seen, but just as before, as they moved around the room, he shifted to be distant. His hand was formally on the curve of her waist, and he stood straight.

“You’re torturing me,” she muttered, the confession falling fast from her lips.

“Torture, eh?” He chuckled. “Torture is having to wait all the way for tonight until I can have you.” Then his eyes darkened. “In fact, why wait?”

Her hand trembled within his own as the dance came to a close. Slowly, they parted from one another. He bowed as she curtsied, neither one of them breaking the connection of their gaze.

“Excuse yourself for the privy,” he ordered then marched away from the floor.

Shaking, uncertain whether to obey the command he had just given or not, she made her way back to the edge of the floor. Eleanor stood there, trying to return the slice of cake into her grasp though Althea intercepted her first. Quite expertly, Althea pretended it was just an accident that she had knocked the cake to the floor.

“Oh, how clumsy of me,” she gushed and placed a hand against her chest.

She’s never clumsy. She hates my clumsy ways.

With this thought clear in her mind, Grace glanced over her shoulder. The Duke hadn’t yet left the room.

She chewed her lip, trying to remember when he had admonished her for being clumsy, but she could not recall him doing so recently. In fact, he'd only caught her when she fell off the carriage bench.

"I need the privy," Grace said hurriedly under her breath to Eleanor. "Excuse me." With these words, she parted from the room.

Grace meandered down the corridor. She had been to this house so many times, she knew exactly where she was going. She hovered outside of the privy door, not knowing where to go or what to do now, when sudden footsteps sounded behind her.

The Duke had also escaped the ballroom. He was striding down the corridor toward her with such intention in every step that she actually took a small step back. He moved with purpose, shrugging off his tailcoat as he approached her.

“Your Grace,” she murmured.

“Philip. My name is Philip,” he hissed at her and grabbed hold of her hand. “This way.”

“You expect me to follow every order you make now, do you?” she asked, following behind him as he pulled her into his study.

She could not remember ever being in this room before. She tripped on the edge of the rug though he didn’t reprimand her for it. He took a tighter hold of her hand, preventing her from falling flat on her face.

“Not every order, no,” he said, his tone growing deeper by the second. “But some... definitely.”

“I have no intention of abiding by orders,” she replied, tearing her hand out of his grasp.

He kicked the door shut behind them then grabbed the nearest chair and jammed it under the door handle, preventing anyone else from being able to get in.

“You abided by this one,” he observed, moving back toward her and dropping his tailcoat into the nearest chair. “Just curious, were you?” He bent toward her. “Or were you ready to start begging me again as you did in that carriage?”

“You arrogant man,” she seethed.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

A thought crossed her mind. She could do as Tabitha suggested. She could deny giving him anything in the interest that they could one day annul the marriage, but the way his eyes were raking up and down her was making excitement coil in her stomach. That wetness he could so often cause pooled between her legs again.

Without thinking what she was doing, she slowly backed up. He stalked her, moving toward her like a predator.

“You intend to consummate in here?” she said in outrage, waving a hand toward the study around them. “I will not do that.”

“No?” He looked amused at the idea, sliding his hand across her waist when she could go no further and found herself trapped between him and the desk. “I rather like the idea of being in that chair with you straddling me, Grace.” His words sent a thrilling shiver up her spin. “But no. The first time I take you completely, I want you in that bed upstairs.”

“Then... why are we here?” Her gut knotted tight. There was something incredibly disappointing about the thought that he wasn’t going to take her now. She rubbed her thighs together, trying to get some release to the ache between her legs. He clearly caught sight of what she was doing.

He shifted one of his hands to the desk behind her, leaning toward her as his eyes watched the skirt of her gown. He placed his hand on her thigh, just as he had done that night in the carriage. It was a firm hold that slinked higher and higher up her leg, the fingers caressing her hip.

Grace placed both palms behind her on the desk. She told herself she would not touch him. She would not be desperate for his touch, weak as she had been that night in the

carriage.

“No begging today?” he whispered, bending toward her, moving his lips to the curve of her neck. When he bit down on the curve, she gasped. Her heartrate had just increased tenfold, and that throbbing had started between her legs.

“No,” she said with more vigor than she felt.

“Shame. Maybe I’ll have to remind you of the taste of desire first.” Then he lifted his hand and crushed his lips against hers. The moment his tongue slid against her own, Grace wondered why she was trying to resist him at all. She kissed him back, fiercely, as he took hold of her hips and lifted her onto the edge of the desk.

She perched on the very edge as he took hold of both of her knees and parted them wide, settling his body between hers. His hips rubbed against her own as they kissed, his hardness so obvious that she moaned into the kiss.

He took hold of the lacy skirt and dragged it increasingly upward. Hooking his fingers around one of her stockings, he dragged it down her leg, exposing her whole thigh, then ran his palm up the bare skin inside her thigh.

“Grace,” he whispered, between their kisses. “Do you want to wait for tonight?” he asked, pure taunt in his voice.

“Don’t torture me,” she ordered him. He chuckled against the skin of her neck, moving further and further down her body. He tipped her back, urging her to lay down over the ordered papers on his desk.

She caught sight briefly of how everything had its place. The papers were stacked neatly, the inkwells lined up, but with her splayed across the top, that illusion of neatness was ruined.



“Do you want to wait?” he teased her again, one of his hands reaching high under her skirt to the very bottom of her stays. He was pulling on them now, showing her how much he’d like to rip them off her body. His other hand lifted higher still between her legs.

With nothing hiding her body, she knew if he looked down, he would see the most private part of her, the part that was now wet, needing him. His fingers brushed the very edge of her, his forefinger curling into her center.

Grace had to bite her lip not to cry out at the sudden touch. It was a brief pleasure, but pleasure, nonetheless. It was the promise of more.

“Your Grace,” she begged.

“No,” he ordered, his voice dark as he bent over her a little more. His finger retreated then moved forward again. “Say my name, Grace.”

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He kissed her up her neck, down to the top curves of her breasts then returned to her lips. They kissed with passion, a fierceness that made her leg rise, trying its best to hook around his hip. He took control and held that leg down, keeping her body open to him.

“Philip,” she whispered as he pulled back from their kiss. “Please!” she said insistently, trying to raise her hips a little, to feel more of his touch.

“As you wish, my Duchess,” he whispered, a smile curving his handsome face.

Then his hand let go of her.

“No,” she whimpered, thinking he was pulling away from her entirely. He moved down her body, hooking one arm under her leg, then he pressed his lips to her wet center. “Oh!”

She didn’t bother staying quiet anymore as his tongue started to explore this most sensitive part of her. She flung her head back on his desk, reaching for anything she could get hold of. She knocked papers off the desk and rolled inkwell away with her frantic hands as she felt his tongue on every part of her.

He first found a sensitive spot, just above her opening. He worked it, repeatedly, until she was a shivering mess then he moved downward and plunged his tongue into her.

“Philip,” she moaned his name, raising herself on her elbows to look at what he was doing. She’d had no idea this was a thing that couples could do and certainly had no idea it would feel so pleasurable, but Philip knew. He hooked her leg higher, over his

shoulder, so she was completely open to him on his desk.

She didn't think her body could stand anymore pleasure. She moaned his name repeatedly. It was mixed with gasping sounds as she fell back on the desk again, her hands clamping to the wood above her head.

Then he changed their position a little. He returned his tongue to that sensitive area beneath her curls as his fingers teased her all the way up the inside of her leg. When those fingers shifted to her opening and slid inside of her, she lost control.

Grace clamped her eyes tightly shut as her back arched off the desk. Such a thrill shot through her body that it acted of its own accord, completely beyond her control.

She was writhing with it, her body clamping down on his fingers as he rode out her wave. She was still trembling, still moaning, panting as she opened her eyes to see he had raised his head up again.

He was watching her, drinking in the sight of her, that expression as dark and lustful as it had been briefly that night in the carriage. His fingers still worked that sensitive spot until the tremors had passed through her body completely then he pulled his hand from her.

“That is just a taste of what will happen tonight.”

## CHAPTER 16

Philip's heart was thundering in his chest as he looked down at the perfect unbidden image of Grace. He reached for the skirt of her gown and pulled it down her legs again, hiding her wetness from him, for if he gazed at her any longer, he was in danger of taking her there on his desk.

I will not. As I promised, I will wait for the bed to do that.

She was trembling, biting her lip as she looked up at him, her cheeks the brightest shade of red he had seen.

He bent over her, capturing her lips with his own. This kiss was much slower than their last, more sensual somehow if not as passionate. He slipped his hand under her back, urging her to arch up into him as she had just done when she reached her climax, then he released her.

“Until tonight.” He stepped back from the desk, doing his best to adjust his hard-on in his trousers.

“W-what?” Grace stammered.

He reached for the door, glancing back to see Grace sat up on the desk, staring at him in amazement. Her hair was wild, half falling down from its updo. The gown too was slipping from her shoulders.

“You do that then stop?”

“I thought you were enjoying the sweet torture?” he asked with a laugh. “You can’t pretend you didn’t enjoy that part.”

“You arrogant and insufferable man.”

“Your husband now, Grace.” He winked at her. “I’m your husband now.” She looked as if she didn’t know whether to curse or smile. “I’ll have to hurry our guests out of this house. As soon as they are gone, worry not.” His gaze slipped down her. “That torture will be over.”

He stepped out of the door, leaving her to get herself sorted. As he stepped down the corridor, he had to adjust his trousers multiple times.

Never had he been so hard in his life for any woman before. Never had he expected the sight of Grace beneath him, calling out his name as she clawed at his papers and made a mess of his perfectly ordered life, to be his undoing so much.

When he reached the door of the ballroom, he had to think of dull and mundane things for some time, pushing all thoughts of Grace away before it was safe to return to his guests without any hint of the desire that rippled through him, straining against his trousers.

\* \* \*

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“I hate him,” Grace muttered to herself as she strode back into the ballroom. She’d fixed her hair and straightened her gown as much as she could, but nothing could calm the erratic racing of her heart nor the aftershocks of what he had done to her body. She didn’t know such a feeling could exist, least of all that Philip could be the cause of it. “I despise him,” she muttered again as she marched across the ballroom.

She snatched up a glass of champagne from a passing server, trying not to breathe too fast or heavily as she looked around in search of him. She was trying to persuade herself that she did hate Philip, that she couldn’t stand him, yet her eyes were hungry for him, trying desperately to seek out where he was.

At last, she found him. He was talking in a low tone to his friend and his mother on the far side of the room.

Once again, he was the perfect picture of propriety. His suit wasn’t even creased from what they had done, his cravat perfectly positioned, his sleeves taut. She doubted if she told anyone of what had happened between them, they would believe it. One glance at Philip, and he was perfectly regal and distant.

Look my way. Please.

Yet he did not. His focus was only for his friend and his mother.

“Well, it’s quite an event, is it not?” a familiar voice called, arriving at her side.

Grace looked around, praying once more her heart would stop beating so fast as Celia appeared beside her. Like her, Celia had a glass of champagne clutched in her hand

from which she was drinking most liberally with a big smile.

“Grace, dear friend.” Celia reached out and took her free hand. “I am sorry indeed that my dare rushed you into a marriage, but from what I saw earlier today, the way he looked at you on the altar...” She looked away, straight at Philip across the room, bearing a most thoughtful expression. “Perhaps there is a brighter future yet to come.”

“What do you mean?” Grace asked. As far as she was concerned, Philip had been distant at that altar: wooden, stiff, cool. He’d been nothing like the heated passion she had just experienced in his study.

He is a man of two halves of ice and fire, and it feels like both could burn me up!

“He barely looked at me!” Grace scoffed, trying her best to keep the anger out of her voice. Clearly, she failed, for Celia eyed her cautiously. “His attention was fixedly on the priest. He felt fully the vows he was making to his deathbed, did he not?”

“That’s what you saw? A man going to a condemned life?” Celia laughed, shaking her head. “Strange, you and I saw different things.”

“Oh? What did you see?” Grace asked, finding herself quite desperate to know.

“Well, let me let you into a little secret.” Celia linked their arms and stepped closer to her, whispering in her ear. “When everyone else at a wedding turn to watch the bride enter, I’m afraid I break the mold. I look at the groom.” She smiled broadly. “I saw his face as you appeared in that gown. It was momentary, perhaps, a weakness before he could adopt his cool exterior again.”

“He is always cool and cold,” Grace muttered.

“Is he?” Celia asked with a knowing smile.

Grace felt the blush rage across her cheeks, burning her.

No, he’s not.

It was as if Celia knew what had just taken place between the pair of them without having to ask about it or hear any clue of it.

“Something in his gaze as he looked at you told me there is much more to the Duke of Berkley than we think. Would it be so awful, Grace, if the Duke didn’t just marry you to save your reputation?”

Grace snorted at Celia’s suggestion.

“That is mad,” Grace said, shaking her head. “Celia, Philip was backed into a corner to marry me. You know that as well as I do.”

“Well, it’s just —”

“That is the way it was,” Grace said sharply. Something in her chest was squirming, some sort of fear and anger building at the picture Celia had created, for Grace knew it could not be true. As tempting as it was to hope that Philip felt something more for her, it could not be possible. “He married me to save both our reputations because a reputation is what matters to him most.”

Celia was no longer smiling. Her lips were pressed firmly together in a line, and there was a glint of sadness in her eyes.

“Philip would care no more for me than he would any other woman in his life. Of that, I am quite certain.”



“Maybe in time, things will change,” Celia whispered.

Grace lifted her glass to her lips and downed the contents, praying that somehow the pleasant fizzing feeling would dull the anger swarming in her stomach.

She was no longer sure which infuriated her more. Was it the fact that Philip had left her so fast after he had introduced her to those pleasurable feelings on that desk? Or was it Celia’s suggestion that there could be something more in this marriage?

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It's impossible. He has made it clear with his rules that it can never be anything more.

She glanced at Philip across the room.

At last, he looked her way. It was brief as anything, and there was no heat in that gaze. It was ice cold then his eyes moved away, as if he had not looked at his wife at all but a stranger on the street.

\* \* \*

"I think it's time to go, Mother, don't you?" Philip suggested as kindly as he could. He managed to catch his butler's arm nearby, whispering in his ear. "Would you have everyone's frock coats and pelisses fetched, please? That might persuade them to start to leave."

"Of course, Your Grace." His butler nodded and hurried off to do his duty at once.

"Already? Is it time to go?" His mother, Allesandra, was sipping from her glass of champagne, looking around the ballroom with wide eyes.

Dusk had now started to fall. What had started as a wedding breakfast had become a complete ball with the celebrations continuing long into the evening. Philip didn't mind that his guests were enjoying themselves, but what did upset him was the fact he was being kept away from his new wife.

The memory of her touch in the study, the way she had moaned his name, was too distant now — he was determined to relive that memory as swiftly as possible.

“Mother,” Philip said, taking her arm, “I hope you have enjoyed yourself?”

“Of course, I have,” she murmured sweetly, laying her hand over his on her arm as he led her toward the exit of the ballroom. He was relieved to see that others were now taking their cue as the musicians were finished.

Some drunken men were plaiting their legs as they walked toward the door as other ladies tried to walk as smoothly as possible, pretending they were not in the slightest in their cups.

“It is a pleasure to see you married at last, Philip,” Alessandra said with a soft tone. “I have worried for so long that you might not take a wife.” Distracted, she fiddled with her pearl necklace, staring into the distance, looking quite lost.

I know that look.

Philip’s protective streak toward his mother rose within him.

I will not let Grace suffer as she suffered being married to my father.

“Well, now I am married,” Philip said softly. “No need for further worry. Will you stay in London for long?”

“Oh, no.” She shook her head. “I will stay with Eleanor tonight, and then tomorrow, I’ll return to the country seat. I prefer it there. You know that.”

Philip smiled rather sadly at her.

“I know,” he said soothingly. “Write to me if you need anything, won’t you?”

“Of course.” She nodded. “Yet do not think too much of me now, Philip. You have

your own wife to think of.” She laughed and stepped away, moving toward Eleanor, who was leaning somewhat heavily on Dorian’s arm by the front door of the house.

Philip stepped toward his sister with concern, but she waved him off with an easy smile, pushing her spectacles up her nose.

“I am fine; do not worry yourself,” she assured him. “I am merely tired after being on my feet all day.” She laid a hand over her swollen stomach. “Dorian, take us home.”

To Philip’s relief, Dorian caringly steered Eleanor out of the door. For all the objections Philip had had about Dorian in the past, he did have to accept in that moment that Dorian did protect Eleanor. He would be a better husband to Eleanor than their father was to their mother.

Philip stood calmly by the front door as his guests moved past him. He wished goodbye to Xander and Violet as they left too and to Aaron, who said very little as he shook Philip’s hand. Soon enough, all of his guests were on the gravel driveway, climbing into carriages to leave at last.

When they were finally gone, Philip kicked the door shut. He leaned against it, sighing loudly as he looked around the entrance hall. Back through the ballroom door, he could see his staff were busy already, tidying up. Yet beside the door, Grace stood very still.

Her hands were bundled in her gown, her head turned toward him as she bit her lip.

“You have avoided me all day,” she said sharply. “Are you tired of me already?”

You have no idea what you’re talking about.

He walked toward her, unable to say a word. Infuriated, he had wanted all his guests

to leave hours ago though no one took the hint each time he suggested it. He supposed he should have been glad all their friends and family wished to stay for so long with them to celebrate, but he wasn't.

All I want is for us to be alone.

“Philip?” she whispered sharply, her gaze equally tart as she glared at him. Her chest rose and fell with each deep breath she took, making the cleavage straining against her wedding gown all the more noticeable. He practically growled at the sight of her, watching as those honeyed eyes widened. “Have you lost the power of speech?”

He reached for her hand and tried to tow her away. She firmly stayed put, refusing to go anywhere with him. He stiffened, looking back at her.

Her cheeks were pink, her eyes narrowed.

“You have not said a word to me all day, and now, you expect me to follow you like a lost little lamb? I am not that weak, Philip.”

When she said his name, he lost all patience. It reminded him of the way she had arched her back on his desk, crying out his name in pleasure as he had helped her to reach her climax.

“It has nothing to do with weakness,” he hissed. “Everything to do with impatience.”

She raised her eyebrows, but he had no intention of talking anymore. He glanced back, ensuring that all of his staff were completely absorbed with cleaning up and would not look out the door at him. Seeing they were all indeed distracted, he bent down.

“What are you doing — Philip!” she hissed in a manic whisper as he threw her over

his shoulder.

## CHAPTER 17

“Philip!” Grace kept saying his name, pulling on the back of his jacket as he marched off with her though it seemed to do little good. From this odd angle with his shoulder pressed into her stomach, she was carried away from the ballroom and toward the stairs. “Well, this is dignified,” she muttered in a whisper.

Still, he did not answer her.

“It’s not the way every wife goes to their wedding night, I imagine.”

“It’s the fastest way to get you to a chamber without another argument between us,” he said, wrapping his arm firmly around the crook of her knees as he climbed the stairs.

The heat of his words shot through her, as if he had touched her with fire. She clutched tightly now onto the back of his jacket, no longer fighting or squirming as he reached the top of the stairs.

She heard behind her the click of a door as he stopped walking then the scenery around her changed as he walked into a bedchamber. The purposeful step, the silence, all of it built to a tension that was both riveting and suspenseful.

Do I want this? Should I do as Tabitha said and refuse him?

Grace’s fingers released the back of his jacket as she considered the idea. If she refused to consummate the marriage, then one day, she could, in theory, obtain an annulment. There was just one objection to this possibility.

I am not sure I can refuse him.

“Philip — ah!” She yelped in surprise as she was suddenly flung back again. She landed on something soft and cushioning. She rose up on her elbows, looking around at where he had brought her.

It had to be his chamber. The dark and rich mahogany wood everywhere, coupled with the accents of bright white curtains on the four-poster bed and white cushions, suggested a masculine chamber. Even the chaise-longue she had been thrown on was of a more masculine taste.

All around the room, everything was neat and tidy. Every ornament had its place, and the toilette box was neat on a dressing table nearby. It was a stark contrast to her own chamber where she usually left everything just a little messy.

Philip stood before her. The sound of him tearing his tailcoat off drew her focus back toward him. He was staring at her with such heat, it was as if the last few hours hadn’t passed at all, as though he hadn’t been ignoring her all day.

“You expect me to do this now?” she hissed, moving back on the chaise longue away from him. He stalled when he saw her movements, folding his arms.

“Refusing me, wife?” he asked, his lips lifting into something of a seductive smile. It made her gut flutter, as if thousands of butterflies hid within her stomach.

“You have ignored me all day,” she countered furiously, climbing off the chaise longue on the other side and moving to stand. “It’s as if I have not existed, let alone existed as your wife.”

“Was what happened in the study not enough to give you a taste of tonight?” He shook his head, seeming amused by the idea. “Hmm, I thought it would be enough of



a promise.”

“You have not said a word to me throughout the celebrations!” she said wildly. She walked around the chaise longue, intent on escaping him, when her usual clumsiness got in her own way. She tripped on the leg of the chaise longue and ended up flying forward, but an arm caught her firmly around the waist.

Flung around, Grace was back in Philip’s arms. He’d saved her from falling, only to pull her against him once again.

“And what would I have said?” he hissed. “That I was impatient for a wedding night?” His eyes grew hooded. “You know I’m a man of propriety. I didn’t fancy the scandal sheets tomorrow being full of the fact that I could not keep my eyes off my new wife.”

“I beg your pardon —”

“I needed distance.” He took a step forward, and she took a step back, his hands still on her waist as her palms planted themselves to his chest. “I needed to...behave.” Yet there was nothing in his expression or tone that suggested he wished to behave now.

He walked her all the way to the wall of his chamber. Flattened between him and the wall, she could escape no further.

I do not wish to escape. Not really.

Breathless, she looked up at him as his hips brushed hers. She chewed her bottom lip, wondering if he would show her again what he had shown her on that desk.

“I’m done behaving now,” he said sharply and bent toward her.

Grace didn’t even think of refusing him now. As his lips collided with her own, she kissed him back, fiercely. It was a tangle of tongues, a battle of domination, one that he won, and secretly, she was only too glad to let him win.

Deep down, Grace wanted to know what Philip could truly be like when this hidden fire within him was unleashed. When all signs of coldness in his countenance were gone and replaced with passion. She wished to indulge, to know him, to feel every part of him.

“Don’t stop,” she begged through his kisses as his hands started skimming down the curve of her hips.

“I have no intention of stopping,” he assured her, the whispered vow practically against her lips.

He kissed her again though it was faster, fiercer than before, and his hands moved quicker too. He reached for her skirt and pulled it upward, bundling it around her hips, the heavy train getting in the way though he didn't appear to notice much or care. When Grace's legs were exposed, she felt Philip's knee against her own. He slowly slid her leg to the side, opening her stance wide.

Breathless, with her hands planted against his waistcoat, her stomach quivered as she felt his hands wander. His fingers went to the bare curve of her hips first, squeezing her softly. Then they reached down between her and the wall, squeezing her rear. She gasped into their kiss, allowing him to delve deeper still with his tongue.

That sound seemed to urge him on, for without much warning, his right hand reached around her, his fingers sliding against the wetness between her legs.

She longed to moan, to say his name at the renewed feeling of that pleasure, but it was impossible to do so when he was kissing her in such a way. She could only rock her hips against his hand, feeling both frustrated and overwhelmed that he would not touch her harder, that he would not move his hand faster.

Her body was quaking, that wetness between her legs practically flooding out of her, when he suddenly broke off, not only no longer touching her with his hand but breaking from their kiss too.

“You...” she muttered as he released her, leaving her wobbling against the wall. “You are the most infuriating man.”

“Not for long,” he whispered, reaching for his cravat. In one swift motion, it was gone then he reached for his waistcoat too. “Gown. Off.” He flicked his fingers.

She stood tall, her back rigid.

“I may have made a vow to obey you today in church, but did you think I actually meant it?” she murmured.

He smiled, seeming much more pleased by her words than he had anticipated.

“Very well,” he said huskily. He reached for his shirt and pulled it over his head. When his bare torso was revealed, Grace was fairly certain she had lost the power of speech.

She stared at him, marking all the lines of muscle in his chest, the hidden strength which he had kept pressed between neat suits for so long. Down the middle of his chest was one dark line of hair. It was masculine, emphasized by the strong line of his shoulders.

“If you will not take it off, then I will,” he whispered and reached for her.

Grace was suddenly turned around. She planted her palms onto the wall as the swiftness of Philip’s movements made her wetter still. She could no longer control her breathing as she felt him untie the laces at the back of her gown.

He tore it down her body, enough for her to step out of it, but before she could consider turning back to face him, he reached for her corset too, practically tearing the laces in the effort to get to her.

This is what he’s capable of?

The rough and readiness of his movements made her simply want to know more.

With the corset gone, she now felt him reaching for her chemise, when a sudden

welling embarrassment took over her.

All she had ever heard about her body were bad things. Had her mother not told her repeatedly that she bore too much weight? That she should not eat as much as she did? That she was nothing to the slim and beautifully elegant figure of Tabitha?

These thoughts engulfed her, and she abruptly wrapped her arms around her body, keeping the chemise flat to her figure.

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To her surprise, Philip didn't keep pulling at the chemise. He stood behind her, bending down, his lips finding the space between the edge of her chemise and her neck. It was a soft and gentle kiss, startling in its tenderness.

"You are beautiful, Grace," he whispered. "Don't let anyone tell you any differently."

How did he know? How did he know what I was thinking just because I held onto the chemise?

When his arms reached around her, he threaded their fingers together. Slowly, he urged her arms down from her body. It wasn't demanding, far from it. The simple action, the softness of it, made a trust grow within her.

With him, I am safe.

She let her arms loosen at her sides then turned around to face him. His eyes were dark and hooded again. When he stared at her, he truly did seem to desire her in a way she had not thought would ever be possible for a man to look at her.

He took hold of her chemise once again though he waited this time, looking at her, watching for her assent. She raised her arms over her head, giving him that consent. He lifted the chemise off her in one swift movement, and with it, the speed that had been in him before was unleashed again.

He reached for her head, tangling his fingers in her hair and bringing her toward himself for a kiss. He pressed her bare body to his so that her breasts were flattened to his chest. It was a thrilling thing, the touch of bare skin together, though she could not

indulge in it, for he was soon moving them again.

Grace was backed up, but rather than colliding with the chaise longue as before, she reached the bed. He laid her down upon it, leaning over her, so he still stood beside the bed. He hooked his hands around her legs and parted them, fast, drawing her to the very edge of the bed, so he could nestle his body between hers, reaching for her lips with his own.

The kiss was heated. She trailed her fingers down his chest then up around his back, exploring him, listening to her instinct of what to do. He seemed to love it.

When her fingers touched his chest, he rocked his hips into her, and when she curled her hands around his strong shoulder blades, he growled into their kiss.

Then he reached down between them. He slid his fingers inside of her again though this time, there was no fussy skirt to work around. He had complete access to her, sliding in two fingers, stretching her body. The feeling of pleasure erupted within her, making her moan into his kiss.

Then he pulled back from the kiss, just far enough so that he could watch her as he pleased her.

“Philip,” she moaned his name, finding the sound falling from her lips repeatedly. “Please.”

Something lit up in his eyes. She had a feeling he rather liked it when she begged him in this way.

His other hand reached down to his trousers, and he unfastened them. He had to release her in order to lower the trousers down his hips and kick them away.

Grace lifted her head just enough so she could see all of him. Pushing aside her honey hair, which was now a mess, half falling across her face, she stared at him. The muscular legs went up to a perfect 'v' shape, and his length was far beyond what she could have imagined from all her reading on the subject of the anatomy of men. It was bigger than she had expected, standing to attention for her.

A little fear squirmed in her stomach. She didn't want to stop, but she was now anxious about what was to come.

"Hold onto me," Philip ordered as he bent over her again. Strangely, she had no objection to this particular order. She curled her arms around his waist and back, clinging onto him as he braced his hands on either side of her on the bed.

He brushed his lips against her own, the kiss soft, tentative, a mere tease as she felt his length begin to nudge her entrance. She raised her legs higher on instinct, desperate to know all of him now. Her movement seemed to change everything, for he slid into her fast.

The pain was sudden. She gripped around his chest hard, her head flinging flat back onto the bed. Her lips were captured by Philip in a firmer kiss.

She expected him to move, but he didn't. He held this position, not rocking into her, just allowing her to adjust to his size. He pulled back a little from their kiss, moving his lips along her cheek and down to her neck where he kissed her again.

That sweet spot on her neck made the excitement grow. It was the same place where he had marked her on that carriage ride, identifying her as his own. Then she felt him playfully nip her again.

He's doing it again. Marking me as his!



The pain was gone. With it, she rocked her hips into his experimentally, longing to know what more of this feeling could be like.

He drove his hands firmly down into the bed and raised himself up, no longer kissing her but watching her, watching what they were doing as he rocked himself into her repeatedly.

The feeling was much more intense than Grace had ever expected. It was the shock of pleasure, the intimacy, the way Philip looked at her as well as what they were doing which made it so overwhelming.

Neither of them stopped moving, not once. Her hands continued to explore him. Sometimes, her fingers trailed down his chest, other times, she gripped onto his biceps, needing to feel the strength hidden in his arms as he moved their bodies together.

His own hands were equally restless. He gripped her hair, toying with it sometimes, trailing it through his fingers. Other times, he held onto her hips, using them to rock into her more firmly. When one of his hands simply bore his weight against the bed and the other trailed across her breasts, she felt the pleasure grow tenfold.

He seemed to be adoring every curve of her. He squeezed her breasts, his fingers firm and exploratory. She squirmed underneath him, the pleasure of their connection growing exponentially now.

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He seemed to sense it, for he bent down over her.

“Mine, Grace,” he said possessively in her ear then clamped down with his lips on her neck again in another one of those open-mouthed kisses.

She lost all semblance of being in control then. She felt her world slide sideways as he rocked into her and drove into an oblivion of pleasure. She was fairly certain she cried out his name, multiple times, as her body tightened around him. There were stars at one point, and she had no idea what she did with her hands, whether she gripped onto his arms or the bed, for they were unable to stay in one place.

“Ah,” his own moans started to change.

She was still coming down from her high, still trying to bear with the pleasure when she felt his hands drive more firmly down into the bed on either side of her head. He rocked into her fast, clearly hitting new realms of thrills himself.

He didn’t moan her name, but the sounds were overwhelming. He became more vocal, moaning as he had not done when they had first begun this dance together.

Then he stilled, his firm rocks coming to a halt as he bent down over her.

Grace couldn’t help staring down at their connection, thinking of what they shared, still basking in the warmth of him being inside of her.

“You’re not going anywhere tonight,” he said in a sudden husky voice, kissing her deeply again.

Far from pulling out at her once, as she feared he might now that the deed had been done, he tangled their limbs together. A rush of emotion shot through Grace as she wrapped her arms around Philip, holding him tight. Her hands toyed with his hair — the one part of him that was always messy. She made it even worse until it was a tangled mess.

When they pulled back from their kiss, his seductive smile was enough to make her long to do everything they had just done again.

“Not a bad first night as husband and wife, eh?” he whispered.

She laughed, shocked at the sudden warmth and happiness she felt. When that laughter rumbled through their connection, his smile grew broader, and he bent down to kiss her again.

## CHAPTER 18

Grace woke in a haze of happiness. It had been a perfect night. She could feel the sun's rays warming her as she remembered everything that had happened the night before.

Philip had revealed that full part of his most seductive side. She had no idea he could be so... scandalous in his touches though she had loved every part of it. Even after they had made love, he'd stayed inside her for some time, kissing her, even asking if she was sore.

They had risen and cleaned themselves up before he pulled her back down to the bed again. They'd fallen asleep as nighttime came, tangled in one another's arms.

Grace had a vague memory of him nuzzling her in the night. He had lightly kissed and nipped her neck, finding her lips too, trailing his fingers through her hair and

down her spine to the arch of her back.

She reached out across the bed, lifting the bed sheet in search of him, yet all she found was the sheet. There was nobody beside her.

Abruptly completely awake, Grace's eyes shot open. She sat up in the bed, clutching the sheet to her breasts to keep herself covered as she looked around the room.

The pillow beside her had a divot, showing where Philip had indeed spent the night with his head beside her own. Yet there was no other sign of him in the room. If he'd collected his clothes before leaving, then he'd even done that neatly and soundlessly. The cupboards and bureaus were all closed with no sign of having been rifled through.

"Did I imagine it?" Grace whispered aloud to the empty air, wondering if that sleepy memory of being nuzzled was a work of her imagination.

Perhaps she was wrong. Maybe after they had gone to sleep, he had retreated from her, pulling back. She couldn't even be certain that he had spent the whole night beside her, despite his possessive words last night and declaring that she was his.

Those words could have been all in the heat of the moment, like the kissing marks he left on her skin. Perhaps as desire had left him, he'd understood his mistake.

Grace suddenly scrambled out of the bed. She still clutched the bed sheet to her body and ended up tripping on the very end. She fell to her knees then stood again, keeping that bed sheet as close as she could, hurrying toward a mirror on the far side of Philip's chamber.

The sight of her reflection made her stumble again.

She looked nothing like the Grace she knew. This Grace had wild hair, mussed not just from sleep but Philip's hands. Her face was glowing pink, and on her neck, she could see the sign of another one of those marks he had left upon her skin.

"Damn you, Philip," she muttered, trying her best to remove the mark by wiping her neck though it did nothing. "Mark me then runaway at your first opportunity!"

She hated what he had done though she couldn't hate him. She just wanted him back again, wanted him back in that bed.

"Your Grace?" a sudden voice called from outside the door.

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Grace froze, fearing it was the butler or valet had come to find their master. They'd certainly get a shock if they heard her reply instead.

"Your Grace?" the voice said again. "The Duke asked for breakfast to be prepared for you downstairs. Shall I arrange a bath in your room first?"

Her stomach knotted tight as she hid her face in embarrassment. Of course, the staff would know where she was. It was the morning after her wedding night.

"Yes please," she called back to the voice.

"Very well, Your Grace." Then footsteps sounded, and whoever the bearer of that voice was, they were gone.

In the ensuing silence, Grace turned back to face the mirror. Though she looked at her rumpled reflection, she noticed what was missing this time. Philip should have been there. Her husband should still be there with her, yet there was something in what that voice had said which told her all she needed to know.

Philip asked for breakfast to be prepared for me. He's gone, hasn't he? He's left the house already.

\* \* \*

Grace found the next few hours passed by in a whirl. She had her breakfast and was promptly introduced to all the staff by her new housekeeper, Mrs. Williamson.

The elder lady, stiff with a back as rigid as any metal pole, showed no sign in her firm upper lip of being disgruntled at Grace's clumsy ways though Grace had a feeling she knew what the lady truly thought. Mrs. Williamson was probably like Grace's mother, expecting any duchess to be as grand and formal as it was physically possible to be.

She and Mrs. Williamson ran through the running of the house and discussed if Grace would like any changes to the way her home was done. She made minute changes, for everything seemed to be in very good order, and she simply asked for breakfast to be arranged for a touch later, so she would have time for a walk first thing in the morning.

If Mrs. Williamson thought it strange for a duchess to take a walk so early, with the intention of going alone, she at least had the decency not to show it in her face.

"Your Grace?" Mrs. Williamson called through the doorway just as Grace sat down in her new drawing room. She'd huffed and plopped herself down on a settee, dissatisfied with Philip's persistent absence and the inability of any staff member to tell her where he had gone. "You have visitors."

Grace sat forward as two young women walked in.

Diana was the first, scurrying forward, her usually demure smile full and excited today. Behind her walked Tabitha, who could not stop looking around her, drinking in the sight of the ground Duke's house in awe.

"Oh, Grace." Diana flung her arms around her as she stood. "I am so happy to see you."

"And I you." Grace clung tightly onto her friend. In that moment, there was something incredibly comforting about seeing Diana again. She was a warm and

trusted presence in a house she did not know.

“We had to come and see you.” Diana stepped back, holding her hand tight. “I hope you do not mind us coming so soon after the wedding?” She looked around, clearly expecting to see Philip though she soon stopped when she realized he was not there.

“Of course not. I am glad to see you both,” Grace assured her.

“I’ll fetch some tea, Your Grace,” Mrs. Williamson called from the doorway.

“Thank you.” Grace pulled Diana into the rococo settee beside her as Tabitha finished her circuit of the room.

“Goodness. What a home you now have, Grace,” Tabitha said in awe, choosing another chair nearby. “It is quite staggering.”

“Yes. It is.” Grace suddenly felt awful. She knew she should be grateful for calling such a house her home now, but in truth, she had barely acknowledged this was the case. She had been too busy thinking about where Philip had run off to.

“Are you all right?” Diana asked, holding her hand tight. “Where is your new husband?” She looked around, as if expecting him to manifest from the shadows at any moment.

“He’s... gone.” Grace struggled with the words.

“Gone?” Tabitha repeated, a look of horror taking over. “You do not mean he has run out on you already!?”

“What? No!” Grace countered quickly. “I mean simply that he left the house early, and he... well, he did not tell me he was going before he left.” She was hardly going



to declare that she had been in his bed at the time, and that was why his lack of a goodbye stung so much.

Why didn't he say goodbye?

"I wonder." Tabitha tapped her chin in thought.

"Wonder what?" Grace asked. "Don't keep us in suspense, cousin. Please, what are your thoughts?"

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Tabitha looked uneasy, shifting in her seat. She looked around the room, checking the open doorway to ensure that Mrs. Williamson was not about to return any time soon before she returned her focus to Grace and Diana.

“Dukes are entitled men, after all,” she whispered, as if afraid to say the words. “What if... I mean, you do not think...”

“Out with it, Tabitha,” Grace begged. “I’m on tenterhooks here.”

“Well, do you think he could be having an affair?” Tabitha asked, her voice shaking on the latter word.

Grace felt she had been kicked squarely in the gut. Tabitha looked dutifully gobsmacked at her own thought, but the fact that Tabitha could suggest it made Grace feel even worse.

Even Tabitha doesn’t think I am enough to hold Philip’s interest.

“Ha!” The sudden laugh made Grace jump, she was so surprised. She turned to see Diana holding a hand over her mouth. Usually so quiet, bursting laughter from Diana of all people was something of a surprise.

“You made my heart nearly leap out of my chest,” Grace murmured, pretending to faint and prompting Diana to giggle a little.

“It’s just the idea is mad,” Diana went on. “The Duke would have to work fast to find a lady to have an affair with so quickly, would he not?”

“Perhaps he already had a lover when they wed yesterday,” Tabitha suggested uncertainly, her hands fidgeting together. “I mean only to put you on your guard, cousin.”

“The idea is madness,” Diana went on with surprising vigor. She seemed to realize what she was doing a second later, her cheeks blushing pink as she bent more toward Grace to talk quietly. “It would be nonsense to suggest the Duke of Berkley could do of such a thing.”

Grace couldn’t answer. Her tongue had been tied tight by the thought of Philip being wrapped in another woman’s arms at that very moment, whisperingminein her ear as he had done in Grace’s.

“Why is that?” Tabitha asked.

“Because he’s too proper.” Diana shrugged, as if the matter was obvious. “Grace, you and I have only known the Duke of Berkley from a distance these last few years, but have we not heard Eleanor talk of him countless times? Has she not said repeatedly how the most important thing to him is his reputation and his propriety?”

“Yes.” Grace nodded. She also couldn’t deny that everything she had learned of Philip since had -reinforced that idea. It was just that alone, Philip could be quite a different man.

“A man like that is hardly going to risk his reputation by having an affair, is he?” Diana countered.

Grace nodded again though less enthusiastically now. She had to agree Diana had a good point. It would be a wild risk for a man like Philip to take.

“Oh, on the subject of his propriety, there is something I must talk to you about.”

Grace pulled on Diana's hand, urging her to look away from the daggers she was now throwing with her gaze in Tabitha's direction. "He has stipulated some certain rules."

"What rules?" Diana asked uncertainly.

"Well, I am not allowed to appear in the scandal sheets again. He has made that plain, and though we are a marriage in name, for convenience, he has also made it clear that he intends for us not to spend too much time together." Her mouth felt suddenly dry, and she looked at the doorway, longing for Mrs. Williamson to return with that tea.

"That is a rule?" Tabitha asked in dutiful outrage. "Goodness. It really is a marriage of convenience."

Hearing Tabitha say the words stung Grace all the more, and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. The night before when he had made love to her, it hadn't felt anything like convenience.

The gentle way he had kissed her neck and told her she was beautiful before tangling his fingers with hers, offering comfort when she was nervous about being completely bare with him, suggested a greater warmth of feeling between them.

Perhaps I am wrong.

"Well, if you want to attract his attention, Grace, I know what one of our friends would say." Diana sat taller, her cheeks blushing already before she had even said the words.

"What?" Grace urged her on.

"Celia, not me, I strongly emphasize this — but Celia would suggest that if you would like to get his attention, then you have to start breaking his rules a little. That is

what you want, isn't it? Not to be ignored by him."

"What? Oh, think carefully, cousin," Tabitha pleaded in her sweetest and most concerned tone. "You were so much against this marriage. Do you even really want his attention? It would be a dangerous path to go down indeed!"

Grace smiled when she looked between the two women. She knew how fortunate she was to have them both in her life. Their advice came from a place of love, of concern for her, yet their advice was completely different.

"I thank you for your words, both of you," Grace whispered to the pair of them. "You are right, Tabitha, I didn't want this marriage to begin with, but now, I am here, and I don't see a way out of it."

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“There is a way out. Remember what we talked of.” Her eyes went wide as she clearly referred to the annulment.

I cannot have an annulment now. I don’t even want one.

If there was a chance that Philip would make love to her again as he had done the night before, why would she turn her back on that?

“This game has started now. Maybe Philip thinks that I will play by his rules, but you are right, Diana. I should have no intention at all of doing so.”

Diana clapped her hands together, looking quite delighted with this plan.

“Then you will play at his own game?” she asked excitedly. “Pray, start tonight. The assembly at the Almack’s Assembly Rooms should certainly be a good opportunity. You both have to be there.”

“Very true,” Grace murmured with a nod.

Yet if she was going to play this game as well as she hoped to, she knew that she needed another’s advice. Diana was too shy to help on this score, and Tabitha was still so against the idea of this marriage that she certainly wouldn’t help with this either.

No, there was only one person who could help Grace now.

As she sat forward, purpose in her countenance, Diana looked delighted and Tabitha

more terrified than ever.

“I think this afternoon I shall call on Celia,” Grace said with finality. “Maybe she could help me in this game.”

## CHAPTER 19

“You still up for that boxing match?” Philip asked as he strode into Aaron’s front room.

Aaron, clearly startled to have a visitor so early in the morning, least of all Philip, lowered his newspaper and looked at Philip over the very edge.

“You did offer to be my sparring partner, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Aaron said slowly, clearly looking around Philip for a sign of how he got into the house.

“Your butler let me in,” Philip explained with a wave of his hand. Aaron nodded then folded up the paper.

“Very well, follow me.”

Philip was glad not to have to explain anymore just yet.

As soon as he could, he escaped his bedchamber and his house that morning. He’d gone for a ride first thing, but still unable to go home again, he found himself at Aaron’s door, quite determined to distract himself.

A chance to forget about Grace for a little while would be a fine thing indeed.

A few minutes later, both Philip and Aaron were in a sporting room at the back of Aaron's townhouse. There were racks across the walls of pistols, muskets, and bayonets from Aaron's days as a soldier, yet there were other things too. Framed were newspaper clippings bearing the stories of war, successful battle, and even illegal boxing matches.

"Ready?" Aaron said. He'd shed his cravat and waistcoat, standing before Philip in his trousers and a loose shirt.

"I'm ready." Philip nodded, holding up his hands.

The first strike came fast.

Aaron was indeed a skilled fighter, much quicker an opponent than Philip had ever fought before. He had to move faster, be light on his feet, darting out of the way of each encroaching blow and missing the latter one by a hair's breadth.

"You're too slow," Aaron said, stepping back for just a minute. "Are the men you fight in those illegal boxing bouts of yours too large and sluggish on their feet?"

"Usually. Their might comes in their strength, not their speed."

"Then stand on the balls of your feet and be ready to move. Let's go again." Aaron moved forward. The following blows were a little easier to dodge this time as Philip did as he was instructed and stayed on the balls of his feet.

When he came close to catching Aaron in the cheek with a strike, he found his first caught in Aaron's palm. Aaron absorbed the strength behind the hit then thrust Philip back again.



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“Well, it can’t have been a good wedding night then,” Aaron said, stepping away to grab a towel and wipe his head.

“What?” Philip spluttered, reaching for his own towel.

“You’re fighting like a man full of need. Did you not consummate the marriage?”

“Aaron!” Philip threw down the towel over the racking nearby, startled that Aaron of all people would ask this question. Aaron just shrugged, as if it was a natural thing to ask. “This is my wife we’re talking about. She’s not just another lady anymore. She’s not my sister’s embarrassing friend. She is my wife.”

“Embarrassing friend? A curious description,” Aaron mused on these words. “Let’s go again.”

Philip was still debating what his friend meant by this when the next blows came. Absorbed in the fight, he could only parry, blocking some of Aaron’s hits and coming very close to landing a few of his own though he never quite caught Aaron. He was too much the skilled soldier.

“I was just wondering,” Aaron said curiously as they rocked back and forth on their toes, sizing each other up in a natural pause.

“What?”

“If you had forgotten she was your wife. You’re here, Philip. The day after your wedding, you’re here and not there.”

Sudden vehement anger overtook Philip, and he tried to lash out again, but his fury made his technique sloppy. Aaron blocked the blow all too easily.

“Get your head in the game,” Aaron barked, walking around him. “Or are you not training up for a proper fight?”

Philip didn’t answer. He focused instead on the match for a few hits before Aaron’s previous question wormed his way into his mind, and he had to say something.

“We did our duty as a married couple,” he said, dodging another one of Aaron’s hits. “We hardly need to spend more time together than that.”

Abruptly, Aaron lowered his hands. Rather than Philip taking advantage of the relaxed stance, he stopped too.

“What’s wrong?” Philip asked. “We’re not done, are we?”

“One minute.” Aaron moved to the side of the room and grabbed the towel again. He sat down on a bench, eyeing Philip carefully. Distracted, Philip reached for his own towel and wiped his brow.

“What is it now?”

“Where have you got this idea that you and your wife are best when you’re far apart from each other? Surely not your father.”

Stunned at the intimacy of the question, Philip turned to look at his friend. The serious look told him all. Aaron thought he was perfectly entitled to ask this question.

“Aaron —”

“You and I have told each other plenty of secrets in our time,” Aaron said stoically in a low tone. “You know most of mine.”

Philip sighed, knowing it was the case. There was darkness in Aaron’s past, demons that had chased him from the battlefield. He also knew that it was Aaron’s way of coping not to talk about what had happened at all, but they had spoken a little of it at some point.

Slowly, Philip moved to the bench. He sat down too though at some distance from Aaron.

“You know about my father,” Philip said in a low tone, preferring to stare into the distance across the room at the muskets on the far wall rather than at Aaron at all.

“His gambling, I know. How bad was it?”

“More so than you know.” Philip wasn’t talking about money. Things hadn’t been easy, but he was coping. Just the day before the wedding, he’d heard great news of another of his investments in foreign trade doing surprisingly well. He was now confident of reclaiming the fortune the dukedom needed.

“What is it I don’t know?” Aaron asked calmly.

“He wasn’t just a gambler though that was traumatic enough for my mother. His infidelities also plagued her. His constant furies, his coldness toward her.” Philip muttered curse words under his breath. “Even though he is long gone, it still affects her.”

Philip sighed, thinking of how his mother wouldn’t come up to London particularly often, of how large crowds still made her uneasy, and how often she cried over losing his father.

“She loved him, badly,” Philip said coldly. “And he did nothing but return her love with darkness.”

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At last, Philip looked at Aaron, watching his friend take in this news thoughtfully.

“I see,” Aaron said eventually.

“I will not have that power over anyone. I won’t let it happen,” Philip said with sudden urgency. “Least of all to Grace.”

Aaron’s eyes shot toward him.

“She’s stronger than she looks, Philip.”

“I have no doubt of her strength.” Philip shook his head. “It’s her brightness and freedom I fear strangling.” He remembered the first night he ever met her and the way she clumsily fell into the water then climbed out again, defying his orders.

Secretly, he’d admired her so much for that, despite how scandalous it was.

“I already tell her what to do. That’s not good.”

“I bet she doesn’t listen to you,” Aaron said knowingly.

Philip smiled a little, for it was the case. So far, Grace had only listened to his orders in the bedchamber the night before.

“It would simply be unfair to her to let the past repeat itself.” Philip stood, feeling he was done with this conversation. “I won’t let it happen.”

“Very well.” Aaron nodded, clearly intending not to push him anymore. “As for your boxing, keep practicing with your weight forward. When you tip too far back, it will be easy for an opponent to take you down.”

“Thank you for the advice.” Philip smiled, glad his friend was now moving onto talking of other matters. “I should go.”

“You going home?”

“Maybe.” Yet Philip had no intention of going home. He would have lunch at his club and while away the time elsewhere before he had to return to the house. “Will you be at the assembly tonight?”

Aaron winced.

“You hardly ever come,” Philip said with a sigh. “I’d be glad of your company there.”

“You have your wife’s company for such events now,” Aaron observed thoughtfully.

Philip looked at his friend, feeling that Aaron was trying to walk him to some conclusion, but Aaron said nothing more on the subject. He threw his towel to the side and stood.

“I’ll happily be your sparring partner again, though. Just come back when you need another hit in the face.”

\* \* \*

Philip adjusted his cravat one last time. His valet had finished brushing down the back of his suit, so there wasn’t a hair or fleck of dust in sight. In the low evening

light, Philip turned back and forth, examining every inch of the fine suit in the mirror.

Everything was in place. He was the regal and poised duke again, a far cry from the boxing match earlier today and how he had spent the night.

In the reflection, his eyes caught sight of the bed behind him. His gaze tarried there as he thought of what he and Grace had shared. He thought of the heat, the passion, the pleasure, the thrill of the way she had clung to him, and the feeling of just sleeping beside her.

He'd given into a weakness halfway through the night, nuzzling his head into her neck and tangling their limbs together. She had sighed pleasurably in her sleep, tipping her head back toward him. It was all he could do to hold himself back from taking her again at that moment.

"All set, Your Grace," the valet said.

"Thank you, Thomas." Philip came back to himself, snatching his gaze away from the bed. He brushed a hand over his wild hair that was refusing even more than usual to stay flat then he turned and left the room.

He crossed the landing and walked down the stairs, strange thoughts entering his mind as he went.

He realized that he had never shown Grace to her new chamber, but as he hadn't seen her since his return to the house, he could only presume that Mrs. Williamson had already done so. He hadn't introduced Grace to her new staff either, so they must have all handled it alone.

I haven't been a proper husband or duke today, have I?

The thought irritated him more than before.

As he reached the hallway, he found the butler waiting for him.

“The carriage is ready, Your Grace,” the butler said kindly.

“Thank you. We won’t be long now. Why don’t you retire for dinner?”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” The butler bowed and left, disappearing through the nearest door that led to the servants’ stairwell.

Philip peered out of the open door to see that the carriage was indeed on the gravel drive, awaiting them. The driver and footman were all in place with the door of the carriage even open, waiting for him and Grace to climb inside.

Philip reached for the waistcoat he kept in his pocket and checked the time. It was bang on seven o’clock. It was exactly the time they needed to leave.

He turned and looked back at the staircase, but there was no sign of Grace at all.

“Damn,” Philip muttered under his breath as he started to pace. “I should have added a rule about her being punctual for events.”

He turned to face the hall mirror, somewhat struggling to stand still at all. He adjusted his cravat a little, making it just that inch more perfect. Then he checked his pocket watch again. It was now two minutes past.



We're late.

He paced once more. He itched, scratching his chin and running his hand through his hair, now realizing that he should have kept the butler here, so he could go and find Mrs. Williamson and ask her to check on what was keeping Grace.

Wait... we are husband and wife now. I can simply go to her chamber and find out for myself what is taking her so long.

He waited another minute, but when the hands of his pocket watch showed four minutes past, he lost all patience. He turned sharply back toward the staircase and marched toward it.

His first footstep on the bottom step, however, was matched by another step, much higher. He froze, his body feeling it turned to an icicle as he looked up at the bearer of that step.

It was Grace. She was here at last.

Her eyes found his as she took hold of the banister and walked down the stairs though his gaze could not possibly stay on her face, for he was taking in every inch of her.

Her honey hair was curled beautifully, fastened into an updo high at the back of her head, so it cascaded down and emphasized the curve of her neck. A thick ribbon necklace hid the place where he had left a kissing mark upon her the night before.

The deep burgundy material was a shock indeed. The fashion for ladies of the ton may have been pastel, but Philip didn't care in that moment. The deep burgundy suited Grace perfectly, contrasting the tanned hue of her skin and her honey hair.

What had Philip's mouth turning completely dry though was the cut of the dress.

Unlike any of the frilly or oversized gowns he had often seen her wear, this one was completely fitted.

It hugged her breasts perfectly, the deep 'v' neckline revealing her round and perfect cleavage. The empire line of her gown stretched a bit deep down her ribcage, emphasizing how slim her waist was compared to the voluptuous curve of her hips. The burgundy silk skimmed those hips, taunting him with what was hidden beneath.

She looked down as she walked, picking up her skirt a little to reveal not only her burgundy shoes and a flash of ankle but even the curve of her calf.

A rumbling started in Philip's chest, a rumbling he was sure would not be satisfied until he took Grace in that dress.

"That's quite a look," Grace whispered as she stopped in front of him, just two steps up so she was at his head height.

He swallowed, struggling to phrase any words at all.

"That's what you're wearing tonight?"

## CHAPTER 20

Grace felt her stomach knot tight. Despite the look Philip was giving her, as if he'd like to do nothing more than tear the gown right off her, those words were something her mother would have uttered.

Fury shot through her as she swept around him.

"Yes, I am wearing this gown," she said tartly. "Celia helped me with it."

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Celia had been most helpful that afternoon. They had taken one of Grace's old dresses, and like with the wedding gown, they transformed it into something new.

"I have no intention of changing," Grace said tartly, wondering if Celia had been wrong about the dress.

Celia's words from that afternoon still rang in her mind.

"He could not possibly ignore you in a gown like this."

"Changing? Why would you change?" Philip's hand suddenly caught her elbow.

She swung back around to face him, stunned at the words.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Do you have more gowns like this?" he asked, his eyes no longer on her face but on her cleavage.

"I intend to," she whispered. The way he was looking at her, drinking in the sight of her, made her feel more confident. Her stomach was no longer knotted tight but swirling excitedly.

"Good," he said, his voice husky and deep. "Let's go." He released her and strode out of the house.

The sudden loss of touch left her heady. She raced after him, eagerly climbing down

the front stoop and toward the carriage. The footman offered his hand to help her into the carriage, but Philip's hand appeared in front of her, and Grace took that instead, climbing into the carriage.

He sat beside her as the carriage set off, jolting them from side to side. With the movement, their shoulders just brushed together.

It was a great distance from the touches they had shared the night before though Grace still trembled at that touch. She wanted more of it.

"So, how was your day?" she asked, turning to face him on the bench.

He frowned, but he didn't look at her. Instead, he pulled out the pocket watch and checked the time. Her lips pursed together when she realized he was fussing silently about them potentially being all of five minutes late to the assembly.

"Where have you been all day?" she asked when he still didn't say anything.

He looked at her, eyes narrowed, clearly startled at her questions.

"Your frequent silence is becoming something of a pain, Philip. Tell me, do you intend on not talking to me ever again? Just so I know and can prepare myself for living with a sullen mute." Her sharp words actually made the side of his lips lift a little in humor. She raised her eyebrows, challenging him to say something.

"I will be no mute, but we have our rules, Grace, remember?" He eyed her warily.

Grace felt as if the carriage floor had opened up and swallowed her whole. With this one phrase, he was putting distance between them.

"We're only spending this one month together. What would be the point in getting to

know one another more than we already do?”

Grace blinked. With one question, he had quite expertly put up not just distance but a great wall. It was as if the Philip before her was not her husband anymore, not the man who had practically ravaged her the night before on the bed. No, he was Eleanor’s cold, distant, and proper brother again.

“How about for common courtesy’s sake?” she said smartly. “You could at least exchange pleasantries.”

“Very well, I had a good day. Did you?”

Seeing he wasn’t going to tell her anything about where he had been or what he had done, she turned away on the carriage bench.

Tabitha’s words entered her mind, and she considered that maybe her cousin was right. It was perfectly possible that Philip did indeed have a lover, someone he already knew before they married. He would simply be a man of discretion in any affair he had.

“It was fine,” she said woodenly. “I introduced myself to your staff as you were not there to do it for me. I found my own chamber, too.”

“Good.”

“I changed it.”

“What?” He jerked his head toward her.

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“Mrs. Williamson said you wanted me to have the room on the opposite side of the house. As far from your own chamber as possible, I saw.” She shot him a glare, showing she had seen what he had done. “I prefer the view from the chamber in the center of the house, so I asked to swap. You do remember telling me it was my home too, don’t you? That I could change it as I liked?”

“I remember.” He looked away, staring out of the window.

Grace glowered at the back of his head, wondering if the thought of her being in a nearer chamber added to temptation at all or if it made no difference.

Their shoulders were no longer touching. In fact, there was a space so large between them now on the carriage bench that a rather large man with a rounded stomach could have fitted there, keeping them far apart.

Grace parted her lips. She was going to ask again where he had been that day, to try and discover something about her husband, but Philip plainly had no interest in talking to her. Either he was very interested in watching the people they passed in the street, or he was doing a very good job of feigning it.

Grace slunk back away from him, increasing the distance even further. Resting her elbow on the wall of the carriage, she placed her chin in the palm of her hand, well aware her slumped posture was different to his rigid one.

How wrong Celia was about Philip marrying me for anything more than the sake of his reputation.

She couldn't wait to get to the assembly and leave all thoughts of Philip behind.

\* \* \*

Philip had a tight hold on Grace's hand as they entered the ballroom of the Almack's Assembly Rooms.

"The Duke and Duchess of Berkley," one of the staff announced their arrival.

Many pairs of eyes turned to look at the pair of them. Philip imagined many looked out of curiosity after their recent scandal, but he also saw many men's gazes linger far longer than they should have done on Grace. There was brief hunger in those gazes. They were attracted to her in this gown, and they made little effort to hide such obvious looks.

Philip's fingers tightened even more around Grace's as he led her into the room.

"You have done your duty now," Grace said under her breath as they crossed the room. Behind them, the next guests were already being announced. "Go and spend the evening as you like, and I shall do the same myself."

She snatched her hand out of his grasp and walked away.

Philip felt empty as he stared after her.

This is what I want, right?

Yet his eyes traced where she went.

Nearby, he could see Xander and Dorian sharing a drink together. He could go to them, join in the conversation. He always got along well with Xander, and as much as

it was paining him to admit it, he was even getting on better with Dorian these days, but he could not.

Instead, his eyes followed where Grace went.

She moved first to her friends. She met Eleanor, Violet, Celia, and Diana, who all hugged her in turn. The group conversed eagerly together, speaking so fast it was as if they hadn't seen each other in weeks, let alone just a day.

Philip took a glass of punch offered nearby from a server and circled the room. He occasionally greeted people he knew but did not stop to linger in conversation, for his eyes kept returning to Grace.

At one point, she nearly dropped a champagne glass in her clutches, but Violet saved it for her. She smiled with her friends as she hadn't done with Philip in their whole carriage ride here. Repeatedly, she adjusted the ribbon on her neck that hid that biting kiss he had given her.

Strangely, Philip felt a wish that it wasn't hidden. Despite the fact he knew how improper it would be for a husband and wife's intimacies to be so on display, he longed for Grace to embrace it, to not hide it at all.

Then another crossed toward the group.

The familiar face of the Marquess of Morton reached the group and started talking to Grace.

What the hell is going on?

Philip nearly broke the spindle off his punch glass.



He had heard long ago that the Marquess of Morton's tendencies were more for men than women, yet increasingly recently, he was beginning to doubt this.

Had the Marquess of Morton not been caught alone outside with Grace? Had he not made a special effort to talk to her that night of the opera? Now, he was doing the same thing again!

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Philip put down his punch glass on a nearby table, very aware that the bowl of the glass was somewhat at an angle to the spindle now. He crossed the room himself, making his way fast toward the group.

He caught Eleanor's eye first. All semblance of laughter and smiles on her face faded. Through her spectacles, she looked at him with narrowed eyes, clear suspicion in her gaze.

As Philip reached the spot where Grace and the Marquess of Morton stood together, he halted, waiting silently for one of them to notice his arrival.

"You look quite beautiful this evening, Your Grace," the Marquess said smoothly. He took Grace's hand, about to kiss the back.

Philip's eyebrows shot up in alarm.

Out of the corner of his eye, he was aware of Violet and Eleanor elbowing one another, both staring at his face though he didn't care.

"MyGrace." The words erupted from Philip's lips.

Violet and Eleanor were both staring at him openmouthed, glasses halfway to their lips at the words.

The Marquess of Morton had spun around fast in alarm, and Grace's face was at last fully visible to Philip. The smile vanished from her face, and she looked at him with perfect hatred.

“What did you say?” she hissed.

“MyGrace,” he happily said again for her to hear, capturing her hand with ease. He took the champagne glass out and passed it to Eleanor, who took it in a fumble, then he took a firmer hold of Grace’s hand and led her away. As he left, he was sure to glower once at the Marquess of Morton, who now looked to be trembling in his fine court shoes.

“What the hell are you doing?” Grace said angrily as Philip threaded her arm purposefully through his.

“Joining the dancers.”

“Are we? So kind of you to ask first,” she said with full irony. “What did you do that for? You know perfectly well the Marquess of Morton was not flirting with me. He was simply being kind.”

“You forget something, Grace.” Philip halted at the side of the floor, looking her straight in the eye as the last song ended. “Just because I know the man’s inclinations doesn’t mean I have to like seeing him touch you.”

Her lips parted. Before anymore could be said between them, he towed her onto the floor.

They took the places of the dancers leaving, joining with others. In the quiet, they were unable to keep talking. They had to wait for the music to start, when they bowed and curtsied together then he took her hand and led her into the first movements of the dance.

A slow and steady cotillion, the feeling dramatic — it was a strong and purposeful dance. With steady steps, they walked around one another, holding just one hand

each.

“I am adding a new rule to our list,” he whispered to her as they released one another and walked the other way. This time, they did not hold hands.

“Another? Aren’t there enough stifling ones already?” she muttered, looking him in the eye with that defiant way he had seen so often in her.

“You must not let another man touch you,” he whispered in her ear as she turned to stand in front of him, facing him.

“I cannot believe you have suggested such a thing.”

“Why not?” He took her hand and turned her under his arm, repeatedly. She kept whipping her head around to look at him again. “You are my wife now, Grace.”

“And what of a casual hand touch? Or if a man was to help me in and out of a carriage? Are all things banned?”

“Completely.”

“You arrogant —”

Yet whatever else was in her list of insults was broken off as they were forced to step away from each other. They circled other dancers, joined hands with groups of four, and completed a whole circle here too. When they came back together, he took both of her hands and turned her around. The locking of their arms brought her face closer to his.

“This is exactly why I thought marriage was a bad idea, why I never wanted it in the first place.”

“What do you mean?” he asked as they walked around one another in a syncopated step, their locked arm position keeping them close.

“I detest being told what I can or can’t do in life. I’m a human being, Philip, not your lapdog.”

“I never said you were.”

“Yet you are acting like it,” she hissed. They parted, and she turned on the spot, coming back to face him. They went back to the beginning of the dance, circling one another and holding hands. “How would you feel if I instructed you that you were never allowed to touch another woman until death do us part? That you could not help an older woman trying to cross a street to keep her safe from carriages?”

“There’s a difference —”

“No, there is not!” she hissed, her cheeks red with fury. “It’s just as mad, just as absurd, for me to ask you not to even think of touching another woman again.”

He didn’t reply, for he could not, and she seemed to have reached the end of her tether.

Rather than taking his hand for the next figure of the dance, she stepped back. She broke line, surprising the other dancers around her, then turned and marched off the floor early.

Philip watched her go, well aware that he should have been furious at this sense of impropriety, but there was another feeling shouting this one down. It was much stronger and certainly overwhelming.

He stepped off the floor too, allowing the other dancers to fill the space as some watching on whispered and pointed in his direction.

“I do not think I could touch another woman now, My Duchess,” he whispered possessively.

## CHAPTER 21

“Oh, I cannot stand him!” Grace flung herself toward Eleanor and Tabitha.

The two women had taken refuge in the corner of one of the smaller assembly rooms. Eleanor was seated, evidently needing the rest, with Tabitha keeping her company beside her.

“Grace, I’m so sorry.” Tabitha looked almost in tears out of worry. “To think you are married to such a beastly man who causes you such pain.”

“Beastly?” Eleanor’s eyes flashed with sudden anger as Grace threw herself into the seat beside Eleanor. Whatever was going on in Eleanor’s mind at the insult, she managed to restrain herself from barking back at Tabitha. “Could you do me a favor, Tabitha. Could you give us some privacy? I need to speak to Grace alone for a minute, please.”

“Of course.” Tabitha stood. She offered a comforting squeeze to Grace’s shoulder then left.

Grace watched her go, seeing that at the other end of the room, Tabitha was greeted by Grace’s mother.

Grace hadn’t even seen that Althea was here tonight. She realized in shock that her own mother hadn’t even bothered to come and greet her.

“My brother is no beast,” Eleanor said with fierce protection in her tone as she turned to face Grace.

“I’m not the one who described him as such,” Grace hastened to remind her. “Though I have a few choice words I could describe him with now.”

Eleanor looked sorrier than anything else, shaking her head in sadness for Grace’s situation.

“I know he’s a difficult man,” she said softly. “He has never been the easiest of men, but he’s had hardships of his own to deal with. Hardships that have made him into the man he is today.”

“What hardships?” Grace asked, but Eleanor didn’t say. She merely winced. Grace sighed, realizing that despite their close friendship, Eleanor and Philip’s sibling bond ran very deep indeed. Eleanor would not betray his trust. “You are both admirable in your protection of him and infuriating in equal measure.”

“I know.” Eleanor sighed with the words. “I wasn’t expecting Philip to come up as he did so. To see him so possessive of you? Outlandish! Quite incredible.”

“Possessive indeed. How about dominating? Controlling?” Grace hissed angrily. “I will not be controlled by him, Eleanor.”

“Then don’t be.” Eleanor smiled with victory. “You’re too free spirited to ever let a man control you anyway.”

“Why on earth does he have to be so demanding all the time?”

“He can be demanding.” Eleanor’s expression cracked into a grimace. “It’s his way. He especially seems to me to be more demanding when he’s trying to protect people around him. It’s how that protection comes out of him.”

“Hmm.” It was Grace’s non-committal reply. As far as she was concerned, Philip was



a man who was often protecting himself.

He had married her to save her reputation, yes, but wasn't he also saving his own? He focused so much on propriety that his own rescue was probably the prominent thought in his mind.

“He may be a demanding man, but I promise you this.” Eleanor leaned toward her, conspiratorially. “He has a good heart, deep down. He just hides it well. He hides it beneath reserve and —”

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“Demands?” Grace finished for her to which Eleanor nodded.

At that moment, Grace wasn't convinced about the state of Philip's heart.

She had believed him to be a good man, for he had married her when her mother did not believe he would. She knew, too, that Eleanor loved him dearly, that he must have proved himself worthy of that love somewhere along the line, but right now? She had little evidence of goodness.

She'd been bedded then ignored and told promptly that he wanted nothing to do with her.

“I feel awful,” Grace whispered. She looked again to her mother across the room, who was now introducing Tabitha to every eligible gentleman in sight. Althea gazed at Tabitha with adoring eyes. “I suppose it's no surprise really that he wants little to do with me, is it?”

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor asked. “The possessive man I just witnessed wasn't someone who wanted nothing to do with you, Grace.”

Yet Grace was scarcely listening. She had a feeling that possessiveness was really just Philip's desire to be in control and had little to do with her at all.

As my mother always told me, I am not worthy of a man's love, affection, or even respect, am I?

Grace slumped in her seat and looked down at the burgundy gown, feeling now that it

was a grave mistake to try and get Philip's attention at all.

"Speak of the devil," Eleanor whispered, elbowing Grace to get her attention.

"What?" Grace looked up.

"The devil is walking this way." Eleanor pointed across the room.

Philip was indeed walking toward them. Well, not so much walking, as stalking. There was great purpose and even anger in his stride as he made his way through the crowds toward them.

"I'm beginning to think he is a devil," Grace whispered.

After all, was the devil not supposed to be seductive? To lead a woman into doing such things as she had done the night before?

"Philip, you look happy," Eleanor declared with full irony as he reached their sides, breathing so fast his nostrils were practically flaring. "Are you enjoying the assembly?"

"Not in the slightest." His eyes shot to Grace. "I'm ready to leave."

Grace flinched. She looked at Eleanor, who looked equally shocked, then turned back to face Philip.

"Well, I'm not ready. We have only been here half an hour, at most."

"We're leaving anyway." He stepped toward her and offered his hand. Grace glowered at that hand. Eleanor wasn't the only one watching the pair of them. Other curious eyes were watching from a distance. Whatever Grace did next, she feared she

could end up in a scandal sheet the next day. “Or are you going to defy me, wife?”

\* \* \*

The carriage came to a sudden halt. Philip reached for the door and flung it open, leaving Grace behind, open mouthed.

She stared after him then scrambled to follow.

They’d had a very silent ride. Neither of them had said a word to the other, neither had they looked at each other, choosing instead to stare out of their respective windows.

As Philip marched up the gravel path toward the house, Grace ran to follow. She tripped on the hem of her gown and nearly went flying in the gravel. She barely managed to catch herself in time. When she stood straight, she saw that her trip had made Philip freeze in the doorway.

He’d looked ready to jump back toward her, to catch her, but then she figured that was all in her imagination, for he turned and marched into the house without another word.

I cannot continue like this. I refuse to!

She cast one glance back at the staff, who were now towing the carriage toward the stables, then followed Philip into the house. He didn’t head to his chamber but headed along the downstairs corridor.

She followed him, snatching off her pelisse and throwing it across the banister as she passed, suddenly feeling hot all over with her anger. She came face to face with his shut study door. Grabbing the handle fast, she turned it and stepped inside.

He was shrugging off his tailcoat, folding it up incredibly neatly as he placed it across the back of a chair though his movements were sharp. Clearly, he was as enraged as she was.

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“How could you?” she cried, her hand on the door.

He didn’t even look back at her. He walked around his desk and reached for a carafe of whisky. He poured out a glass for himself as she shut the door behind her.

“Why did we have to leave? I was having fun.”

He didn’t answer. He knocked the whisky down his throat instead.

“I don’t understand you.” She walked toward his desk, planting her hands down on the surface as he lowered the glass, looking at her at last. “You asked many things of me in your rules. So far, I have fulfilled my side of the bargain.”

“What?” he asked, clearly caught off guard by her words.

“I have behaved as properly as I know how to do. I have tried everything to avoid appearing in the scandal sheets. Tonight, in order not to cause a scene, I even left when you wished us to. I have held up my end of this deal, so why haven’t you held up yours?” She thrust an accusing finger toward him. “You promised me freedom. Yet at the end of our first full day being married, you take that freedom away.”

She couldn’t decipher his look. All she knew was that there was fury behind it.

“All you have done is order me around. You’ve not let me do as I wished to this evening.” She pushed on, determined for him to listen to what she had to say whether he was going to reply or not.

“I hardly thought you’d care.”

“What does that mean?”

“You are so often staring out of the windows at balls, longing to be outside, I hardly thought you’d care leaving an assembly early, did I?” he challenged sharply as he topped up his whisky glass.

Wrongfooted, Grace didn’t reply right away. She shifted her weight between her feet, moving her hands to her hips.

When did Philip even notice that?

It was true. It was often what she did. Yet this meant that Philip had noticed her at balls and assemblies before. When she had thought she was barely like a fly on the wall when beside him, beneath his notice, he had noticed her after all. He had even deduced something of her character.

“You normally look suffocated at such events,” he said, gulping from his whisky again.

“I do.” She nodded tartly. “I don’t pretend they are my favorite things to attend, but I love my friends. I love being with them, and tonight, you took me away from them. You chose to take me away from them. How could you do that?”

“For God’s sake, Grace. I can’t have this argument anymore.” He gulped from the whisky and tried to walk away from her. He moved toward the mantelpiece, turning his back to her.

“No. We will continue to have this argument. Order me around as much as you like, but understand this right now — I will not adhere to every single one of your

demands, Philip. I am your wife, not your puppet on a string —”

“We had to leave, Grace.” He turned back and threw the words at her. “All right? Just leave it as that. Tonight alone, we had to leave.”

“Why? Why on earth did we have to leave so soon?”

He placed the glass down on the mantelpiece and turned to her with rage.

“Because I could not stand to look at you any longer!”

Grace stepped back. Horrified, she felt trodden on like a mouse. Her hands rose, and she covered her own stomach, as if she could somehow protect her gut, stop that feeling of inadequacy before it could bleed much further outward. She failed, it overtook her body, and before she knew what was happening, her eyes prickled with unshed tears.

“I had no idea I embarrassed you to this great an extent,” she said in challenge. She raised her chin higher, doing her best to hide with her blinking that he had hurt her this much.

“Embarrassed?” He jerked his head around to face her. He actually laughed though it was completely humorless. “I was the one who was in danger of embarrassing us.”

“What?” she asked, certain she had not heard him right.

What can he possibly mean by that?

“For Christ’s sake, Grace.” He was marching toward her. “Another minute at that assembly, and I would have ripped this bloody gown off you in front of everyone.”



CHAPTER22

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:57 am*

Philip took hold of Grace's waist and pulled her so sharply into him that she fell into his chest.

He loved it. He wrapped his arms firmly around her waist and bent his head toward hers in a kiss.

All he knew was that he had to get rid of the sign of those tears. He had to make her happy, had to see her smile as she had done before, to end this argument, for her to understand everything now.

He half expected Grace to throw him off her, to demand he stop kissing her, but she didn't. Her hands had snaked up his chest. One hand was pulling on his cravat, tugging him down toward her, as the other clung to his waistcoat, pulling on that too.

He kissed her with such ferocity that they could not stand still in one place from the strength of their movements. They wobbled back on their feet, ending up in the middle of the hearth rug as he embraced her tightly, keeping her to him as close as was physically possible.

"I... don't... understand," she said between kisses, clearly struggling to get the words out for he just kept kissing her.

I can't stop. Not now.

He planted his lips to hers again, tangling her tongue briefly with his own. When she playfully nipped his bottom lip, he growled aloud.

I have to make her mine again.

“Do you think I could stand it?” he said, pulling back an inch. He helped her with his cravat. Together, they pulled it free of his neck. “Every man looking at you in that dress. The Marquess of Morton daring to touch you.”

“He didn’t mean —”

“I don’t care,” he hissed angrily. The waistcoat came next. Their fingers fumbled together as they both unbuttoned it. “When he touched your hand, I was enraged. He went to kiss your hand, Grace —”

“I’m married to you in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Good.” He bent down toward her and kissed her again as they both fumbled, pushing the waistcoat off his shoulders. “You’re mine, Grace,” he said possessively in her ear, fearing she might hate these words, but he had to say them anyway.

When he heard her breathy moan, it was his undoing. He tore that ribbon off her neck and set his lips to the perfect curve of her throat again. He feasted upon her skin, loving the scents she always carried with her of rose and honey. He marked her yet again, listening as she moaned, her hands now burying themselves in his shirt.

She didn’t seem to mind him claiming her as his own again. It was a break in their argument, that fierceness now shifted into passion, and he was intending to take advantage of every second of it.

He reached for the gown and hurried to untie the laces situated at the front of this one. As he pulled it down her shoulders, he kissed her exposed skin, going for her bare shoulders first then the crests of her breasts just visible above the stays and chemise.

With the gown on the floor, rather than urging her to step out of it, he wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her in one clean movement out of it. She gasped against him, that sound filling him with ideas of what more they could do together once there were no clothes between them.

He kicked the gown away, leaving a bare stretch of hearth rug beneath them. Rather than taking her down to that rug straight away, he had other ideas. He urged her to turn around. Under the guise of undoing her corset, he took hold of her waist and encouraged her forward.

She planted her hands onto an armchair in front of her with her rear toward him, now in a perfect position for him to have access to her. He drew her chemise up around her waist, revealing all her curves.

“Perfect,” he whispered against her skin, kissing her all over her hips and rear, even up to the small base of her back. “You do not know how wild this drives me, Grace.” With the words, he gripped both of her rounded hips and drove his hips into hers.

She moaned, her fingers splaying on the cushion in front of her.

Quite determined to hear not only her making such sounds, but to have her moaning his name again, he reached down between her legs. He toyed with her first, teasing her, trailing his fingers up and down her legs. She grew impatient, arching her back, moaning in frustration.

He reached across her back, pulling on the laces of her corset until she was free, and it dropped from her body. He took hold of her hair next, pulling out as many pins as he could find until her honey hair was wild about her shoulders.

This was one of the things he quite adored about Grace. It was one of the things that rendered him weak around. When she was so undone, unbidden, wild in both

appearance and manner, he couldn't resist her.

He trailed his fingers through her hair, his other hand moving higher and higher on the inside of her left thigh until she groaned and rocked back into him. He could feel her heat and was sure she'd be wet and ready for him already.

Before he touched her with his fingers, though, he bent down, moving to his knees and placed his tongue to her entrance instead.

"Philip!" she cried with sudden amazement and pleasure.

Philip knew the way she had cried his name would haunt his pleasurable dreams now. He rocked his tongue into her repeatedly, driving her wild, thinking of the other things they could do in this position.

When she was trembling, her fingers gripping the cushion of his armchairs so much she was in danger of leaving permanent creases there, he shifted their position.

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He stood and unfastened his trousers, licking his lips when she looked back at him over her shoulder, so she knew that he liked her taste. Her back arched again, accenting her curves in all the right areas as he moved his length toward her.

He needed her. He wanted to take her fast, but he also knew it was so soon after he had taken her the first time that she might still be sore. Not wanting to hurt her again, after all he had done to hurt her feelings that evening, he took her slowly at first.

He nudged his length inside of her, watching as she looked down at the cushion again. Her hair, wild about her head, hid her completely from view as moans escaped her lips.

He rocked into her, slowly, his hands running over every part of her he could reach. He sometimes gripped her hips, other times her whole rear. He even reached forward and slipped his hands under her chemise, taking hold of her breasts and squeezing softly as he rocked into her.

Her moans grew faster, but he wasn't ready for this to end. Not just yet.

He pulled himself out of her and took her waist, urging her to stand and face him. She was breathless, bright pink in the face, her bottom lip almost red from where she had bitten it in an effort to stifle her moans.

He raised a hand and ran his thumb across that lip, thinking of how much they had kissed, of how he would be the only one to bite that lip.

She cannot take a lover. The mere thought of her doing so... it enrages me.

He kissed her again, taking that lip and sucking on it as he wanted to do. When she was dithering, her hands reaching for his shoulders, he urged her down onto the hearth rug.

He lifted her chemise over her head and threw it aside, just as he kicked off the last of his trousers too. When they were completely naked, he laid himself over her, raising her knees high around his hips, though he didn't quite enter her again yet.

He stared down at her instead, taking in the sight of her, of the way her eyes gazed up at him. It was as if she had been waiting for this, wanting him as much as he had longed for her all day.

This is far from any normal attraction, Grace. I know that.

Yet he didn't say it. He bent forward and kissed her again, taking hold of her knees and lifting them high, so she was nearly bent in half, then he entered her.

The sounds she made were so perfect that he stopped kissing her. He hovered his face over hers instead, watching as her lips parted into the perfect 'o' shape. She moaned his name, her eyes closed with the pleasure then they opened again, watching him.

Her heat and wetness were his undoing. He was so close to his end, but he was determined to have her there with him so that they could tumble over that precipice together, just the two of them.

"Hold onto me," he pleaded in a husky tone. She did as he asked, wrapping her arms up around his back and clinging onto his shoulders. He loved that grip.

It grounded him, allowing him to thrust into her faster, to take her with such heat and purpose that she was dithering with his touch.

“Ah, God, Grace,” he started moaning, unable to stay silent anymore. “You’re mine,” he whispered, bending over her. “Say it,” he pleaded as he buried his head in her neck.

“I’m yours, Philip.”

It was the thing that tipped him over the edge, hearing those words.

He thrust into her again, driving his hands onto the rug on either side of her head. As he did so, she reached her climax too. As he had hoped for, they fell into that oblivion together with him constantly rocking their bodies together, sating their need for one another.

With such pleasure overwhelming him, he could not think straight. It felt like very little blood was left in his head at all. He had to rock forward and rest his weight fully on his arms on either side of her as they both panted, trying to come down from their pleasure.

He couldn’t think about what it meant to desire Grace this much or to be enraged by any other man even looking at her, let alone touching her. He also couldn’t think about why Grace’s signs of tears had crushed him.

All he could think about was Grace and this feeling.

He bent over her, moving his lips against hers. It was soft, sensual, and when she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him in for a deeper embrace, he happily molded his body to hers, not even considering pulling out of her any time soon.

When they did part their lips, he buried his face in her neck for a while, just inhaling her scent. Her fingers ran up and down his spine in the most tantalizing and yet soft way. It was an indulgence, a gentleness that he hadn’t been prepared for.



“I’m sorry,” he said suddenly into the curve of her neck, their bodies still connected.

“For what?” she asked as her hands stopped moving. He raised himself up a few inches, the better to look into her eyes.

She was still pink cheeked from what they had done, her lips red, too, in the most delicious way.

“For stealing your freedom tonight,” he whispered. “You’re right, I should not have done that.”

No matter how jealous I was.

She smiled and reached up, kissing him lightly on the lips.

“You’re forgiven.”

He turned it into a firmer kiss. There was such warmth between them that he had little desire to end this moment. He swept an arm under her waist and rolled the two of them together. His length left her, but their bodies stayed flush, so she fell onto his chest, her legs straddling him.

“I have a suggestion,” he said, tucking her head under his chin as they kept their arms around one another. She peppered sweet kisses to his collarbone. It made his gut tingle again, wanting more of such kisses. “Tomorrow, we could go for a ride. I could show you the estate.”

She stopped kissing him. In one swift movement, she sat up on him, completely straddling his hips now.

In all her naked glory, she was visible to him now, her honey hair wild about her shoulders, her breasts and curves glistening in the sweat of what they had shared. Any second, he thought his length might be hardened for her again.

“A ride?” she said in clear disbelief. “You wish to go riding with me?” She pointed between the two of them.

“Is that so surprising?”

“Of course, it is!” she said hastily.

“You like riding? You’ve already liked the outdoors.”

“I know that.” Grace shook her head, clearly exasperated by him. He grew distracted, though, his fingers tracing the curve of her hips. She placed her hands over him, stopping his movements. “Keep doing that, and I’m simply going to want to do it again.”

“Now, there’s a temptation.” His length was indeed hardening once again, an incredible thing after he had only just spent himself inside of her. Yet he knew they should not. They had already had sex twice in a short space of time. So quickly after her first time, this second incident would surely leave her sore.

“Why do you want to come riding with me, Philip?” she asked, her fingers moving from his to traveling up his arms. She moved them all the way to his biceps, leaning over him. It made her hair hang down on one side, cocooning them as her breasts hovered temptingly above him. “What happened to your rule of barely wanting to spend time together? Of not even having a conversation in the carriage because you did not want to become entangled with me?”

“Some rules are harder to keep than others.” He raised one of his hands from her hips, tangling it in her hair, then drew her head closer toward him. “Maybe for this month, and just this one month...” He reminded himself of this, for no matter what was going on between him and Grace, he intended to keep distance eventually, to keep her safe from him.

“This one month?” she urged him on. She bent down, her lips hovering over his, teasingly close to kissing him again.

“We can get a little messy with the rules.”

## CHAPTER23

“Your Grace.” The butler placed the silver tray down on the table and escaped the room fast.

Philip had barely looked up from his breakfast in time to see the butler make his quick exit. It was an unusual thing.

For a second, Philip just looked around the dining room, wondering what could have possibly spooked his butler into making the quick exit. He could have put it down to the butler wanting to give him and his wife some privacy as they were newlywed, but Grace hadn’t yet risen.

Philip had to fight a smile just at the thought of Grace. After what they had shared on his hearth rug, neither one of them had been in a hurry to go to bed. They had retired to their separate bedchambers with Philip very acutely aware of just how close Grace’s chamber now was to his.

He hadn’t yet seen her that morning though he was still planning to hold to his promise of that ride and picnic today.

It’s the very least I can do, isn’t it? After how I behaved last night.

He sipped his coffee and turned his attention to the silver tray that the butler had brought in, presuming something on this tray was the source of the butler’s consternation. There were a couple of letters addressed to Philip, the addresses all written in formal hand. He identified them all with ease as correspondence with his business associates.

However, at the bottom of the pile, there was a long thin white sheet of paper, folded up neatly into three sections. The black ink across the surface told Philip at once what

it was. Too small to be a newspaper and too large to be a pamphlet, it had to be a scandal sheet.

He snapped it up, in danger of dislodging all of the letters as his eyes darted down the scandal sheet.

He found the problem straight away. Printed in black and white was Grace's name.

'The new Duchess of Berkley is already making an exhibition of herself, it seems. Though naturally, she has never been one whose name has been out of these sheets for long. The only blessing her mother can take comfort in is the fact that she at least didn't trip up and fall on her face last night at the ball.

Entering on the arm of her new husband, the Duke of Berkley, a poor man who must have felt heavily rushed into this marriage, the Duchess wore an audacious gown indeed. As so many ladies were keen to point out last night, she did not opt for the fashionable pastel colors but something infinitely bolder that made many men turn away in shame.'

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:57 am*

Philip paused, disgusted at the words, for one thing, they were a lie. Every man who saw Grace couldn't help but stare at her in that beautiful gown. She was hardly dressed like a harlot. Oh no, she had simply worn a gown that was stunning.

The writer must be jealous.

He went on, eager to read what else they had to say of his wife.

'Yet the Duchess did not limit her embarrassment of her new husband to her choice of gown but to a dance too. Perhaps there is trouble in paradise already, for the Duchess was seen to flounce from the floor mid dance. When her husband hastily hurried her out of the assembly rooms a few minutes later, one can only conclude that he had been embarrassed by her enough for one night.'

Philip screwed the scandal sheet up into one hand. It became a tiny ball before he stood and reached toward the fireplace which had been lit this morning in the dining room. The unusually cold morning was proving most convenient as Philip thrust the scandal sheet into the fire and watched it burn.

The pages, filled with ink, became nothing but black ash. Snatching up the poker, Philip stabbed at those ashes, making sure the words were gone for good.

"Philip?" Grace's voice made him turn around sharply.

She stood in the doorway of the dining room, already in her riding habit, ready for their excursion. The way her hands fidgeted, fingers tangling together, and how she watched the fireplace showed to him that she may have been there for more than just

a minute, watching him.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing.” He strode away, back to the table, and snatched up his coffee cup, drinking it hurriedly just so he had something else to do other than look at her with guilt.

I was the cause of that story, not her. I was the one who made her walk away mid dance then demanded that we leave. This is my doing.

“Well, that sounds like a truth, doesn’t it?” she said with full irony, walking toward him. She picked up some toast from his plate that he had not finished eating and nibbled at the edge. The idea of sharing his food was strangely warming. He stood beside her, watching her. “What is wrong?” she asked, more tentatively this time.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Ah, are we back to you refusing to have a conversation with me again?” she said tiredly, dropping the crust back down to his plate. “I thought we had dispensed with that last night.”

“Don’t remind me of last night if you wish me to behave,” he said in a husky tone. With her sharp voice, they had seemed on the precipice of another argument, but his words dispelled it momentarily, and she smiled.

“You can tell me things, Philip. I don’t want you to think you can’t.”

“You really want to know?” he scoffed, that anger returning tenfold. Why did the scandal sheets always have to come back around to plague him? They were an internal constant in his life, a forever torture! “The scandal sheets have written of you

again.”

She flinched as if she had been struck, her eyes wide.

“Those damn writers,” he muttered. “Do they have nothing better to do with their lives than write of others? Perhaps their lives are so interminably boring, it’s all they can think to do.”

“This is why you’re angry. I’m sorry. I broke your rule.” She stiffened, guilt spreading across her face. “Maybe I should not have worn that gown. It probably got their attention in the first place.”

“What?” He looked away from his coffee cup, staring at her in confusion. “Good Lord, Grace, you should be able to wear whatever you like. It’s not up to them what you wear. That’s not what’s wrong.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her voice a touch quieter now.

“I mean I intend to find who did this, and I will make them pay.” He turned and stared into the fire where the ashes of that scandal sheet still remained. “You’re beautiful, Grace. You should show off more.”

She said nothing. When the silence stretched, he noticed it and looked toward her.

She was staring at him in a way he could not decipher, those honey eyes wide, and her lips opening and closing of their own accord, as if she couldn’t quite fathom what exactly she should say.

“I... erm...” She managed eventually. “Did you still want to go for that ride?”

“I do.” He nodded at the table. “Eat something more before we go, and I’ll arrange



for a picnic to be made.”

“Very well.” She took her seat and pulled forward her plate, avoiding looking him in the eye now.

Before Philip left the room, he glanced back, staring at her in wonder. What exactly about what he had said had startled her so much? What was it she was feeling now as she firmly avoided looking at him and stared down at her plate? Her slice of toast was abruptly the most interesting thing in the entire room to her.

Philip left the room and hastened down the corridor, fortunately finding the butler at the very end, who was giving some instructions to two of the footmen.

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“Horace?” Philip called, needing to speak with him.

The butler bowed and sent the footmen on. When he stood straight, Philip caught that look of fear and understood. Horace had not wanted to bring that scandal sheet to Philip’s attention, fearing what would entail in his mood.

“Would you do me a favor?” Philip asked.

“Of course, your Grace.”

“Any further scandal sheets that mention my wife, would you put them in my chamber please? I don’t want her to stumble upon them and be upset.”

Something in his words seemed to soothe the butler, for he smiled.

“Yes, of course.”

“Thank you, Horace.” With these words, Philip turned away and hastened to find his riding jacket. He caught sight of Grace again through the doorway of the dining room, who was now slowly sipping her tea and staring into the distance.

Philip felt a longing to know what she was thinking about so avidly.

\* \* \*

“Race? You wanted to race me?” Philip asked with a deep laugh.

Grace smiled at the sound. She was discovering there was something unique about Philip when astride a horse. He was not as stiff as when he walked, nor as proper and refined. He'd shed his jacket, now that the morning dew had heated up into a pleasant day. With his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, he was quite the informal picture.

This new Philip was easier to talk to, even easier to provoke and tease.

"And you think you could beat me, do you?" Philip asked, tauntingly, as they trotted alongside each other on their horses.

They had already explored the lower grounds together, and Philip was now steering their path toward the trees in the parkland. Here, it felt like they were a world away from London, rather than just on the very edge of it.

"Oh, I don't doubt it," Grace said with a delighted smile. She had threaded some of the cow parsley and rosemary flowers they'd found on their ride through the bridle of the horse. This scent wafted up to greet her as she teasingly steered her horse a few steps in front of Philip's. "Yet if you are so confident that you will lose and you wish to maintain your dignity in not losing to your wife..."

She trailed off, looking back at Philip with a taunt in her tone. He was smiling too now.

Something had changed in this last hour of exploring the estate together. There was an ease in one another's company that had only been there before when they were making love.

"On the count of three?" he said, moving his horse to stand alongside her own. "First one to the top of the hill wins. One..."

"Two..." Yet she hadn't even got to three before his horse leapt forward. "Oh, you

cheat!” she called after him, flicking the reins and racing after him. She could hear his rumbling deep laugh sounding from far ahead of her.

She wondered how she had gone so long without hearing him laugh in such a way. When in her bluestocking group with Eleanor and her friends, not once did she hear his laugh echoing from another room in the house. He was always quiet, always reserved, never this... free.

She flicked the reins harder as they reached the hill and began to climb. Her horse, stronger, lithier, and also carrying the lighter load, managed not only to catch up to his but also to streak out in front of his. She looked back at him victoriously then concentrated on her path ahead, streaking through the trees as quickly as she could, jumping tree roots and fallen logs.

When she appeared on the crest of the hill, she slowed her horse, ambling the mare around in a circle to face Philip as he appeared through the trees.

“You cheated,” she accused him with a mocking glare.

“You still won.” He smiled. “I had to try something to win.” He trotted the horse near to hers. “Picnic?”

Grace nodded and slid off her horse. The two of them moved around one another, setting up their picnic with ease, and leaving the horses to graze on the grass at the top of the hill. With an extensive view of not only the house and estate but London too before them, they sat together, eating their lunch.

“Well? What do you think?” he said, nodding at the horizon.

She saw an opportunity to tease him more as he leaned on his elbow on the ground and tore up a pork pie, handing her half to eat.

“I think that you and I are able to enjoy one another’s company without rules between us.” Her challenge made him look at her, offering the smallest of smile though he said nothing on this subject.

He still intends to keep to some rules, doesn’t he? He still wants to part from me after a month.

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Yet Grace was finding this very notion of parting from him a very difficult one.

That morning in the dining room when he had defended her, talking staunchly of how mad he was at the writer of the scandal sheet and that she should be able to wear whatever she liked without consequences, she had been stunned.

She saw what Eleanor had spoken of the night before.

“He especially seems to me to be more demanding when he’s trying to protect people around him.”

Grace wondered if she was now one of those people he was so keen to protect. She found herself moving to sit that bit closer to him, wanting to be near him.

“Here, for you.” He passed her a small box from the picnic basket.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.” He urged with a wave of his hand.

She pulled back the box and found inside was a small book. It was a delicate thing, tiny even, no bigger than the palm of her hand. The leather binding was pressed with flowers and tiny leaves of herbs. The botanical drawings were astounding in their detail.

“I realized something,” he said, not really looking at her as he spoke but tearing up another pork pie. Like with the last, he shared it with her, not keeping anything solely

for himself. "I never gave you a wedding gift. Not a proper one. I hope you like it." He still looked down at the pork pie.

Is he nervous?

She had never seen Philip anything but confident and in control. He cleared his throat, looking very keen to move on fast.

"So, what do you think of the view from your new home?"

"I think it's beautiful." She ran her hand over the botanical book, wondering when exactly Philip had learned about her love of plants and her interest in recording them on pages. "The book, Philip. I love the book."

She smiled at him. Inside, there was a warmth growing toward Philip. It was a shocking and all-encompassing feeling, much greater than she had been prepared for. It was something she found difficult to put into words at all.

"I'm glad," he said, still not looking at her. "Now, where shall we ride to this afternoon? We need a re-match of our race at some point, and this time, I shall win."

## CHAPTER 24

Grace hurried down the stairs. For three days in a row, now, she and Philip had begun their day with a morning ride. She was praying today would be no different. Dressed in her riding habit, she hastened into the dining room only to find that Philip was scarcely aware of her presence.

He seemed uninterested in food for a change. His plate was empty, his coffee cup equally so. In his hand was a thin scrap of paper. Even from this distance, Grace could recognize it for what it was.

“Another?” she said, quite forgetting to say good morning.

Philip jerked his head around in surprise from where he sat at the head of the table. He looked on the verge of hiding it then seemed to think the better of this idea. He laid the page flat on the table in front of him.

Grace walked forward on her toes, nervous about reading what was in the sheet. The last few days, Philip had seemed much more at ease around her, but all semblance of ease was gone now. In its place, there was a sharpness.

She had barely reached the table when he suddenly slammed his fist down onto the table in anger.

All of the crockery clinked and jolted as he leapt to his feet and paced up and down the room, unable to bottle up his anger. He pulled at his hair, making it wilder than she had ever seen it before.

“Philip?” she whispered.

He didn’t answer her. He swiped out at the nearest chair, looking ready to destroy everything in his own house.

She flinched and reached for the scandal sheet, determined to read it fast.

At the top of the page, her name and title were printed in black.

‘The Duchess of Berkley continues to astound us all. It seems just days after making such an exhibition of herself at the Almack’s Assembly Rooms, the Duke’s new wife is determined to embarrass him.

It’s said that she has been outside of the house, not in her new husband’s company



but quite alone. Up to her usual tricks, she has been seen falling out of carriages, and according to one trusted source, falling off her horse in such a way that her skirt blew up for all to see. Surely the poor Duke of Berkley must be horrified at the continued embarrassment his wife is causing him!’

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:57 am*

“I never,” Grace whispered. “I fall readily off my own two feet but not off a horse. Philip?” She looked up. He had barely noticed she was speaking at all, for he was still busy pacing.

“Why do they continue to do it? Why do they always write about you?”

“I don’t know!” she countered fast, her voice also full of anger now. She discarded the scandal sheet quickly, tossing it back down to the table. “Philip, you know I haven’t been out of this house since I arrived. I have spent nearly every minute in your company. As for my skirts being blown up, quite frankly —”

“I know, I know.” Philip held his hands up in the air, speaking just as loudly as he attempted to stem the flow of her argument. “I know you haven’t been out. I know, too, this is all a lie.”

She sighed with relief though it was momentary, for he was still pacing.

“The question is, why the hell are they so fixated on writing about you? Someone out there is determined to make a spectacle of you. To make sure your reputation is trodden into the ground.”

“And by extension, you mean your reputation, don’t you?” she hissed.

He halted walking and turned to face her, thrusting his hands into his pockets.

“You do,” she murmured, not needing him to confirm it. “Does your reputation matter to you more than anything?”

“Don’t do that.” He shook his head and turned away again.

This argument was fierce, and it cut deeply for Grace. It had to be one of the worst they’d yet had. This wasn’t bickering but something infinitely more full of feeling.

“You remember our deal?” he asked, returning to his pacing. “Our arrangement was that you wouldn’t appear in the scandal sheets anymore.”

“Oh yes, I remember it vividly — because you somehow seem to think that it is within my control not to appear in these things.” She waved a hand toward the sheet. “May I remind you that you have just agreed with me that it is all a lie? How am I possibly supposed to avoid that?”

“I know, I know!” he said again, whipping back around fast. When he looked at her this time, something seemed to crack in his expression. He sighed, deeply. “I’m sorry.”

“What?” She stumbled as she moved around a chair, startled. “What did you say?”

“Dear God, are such words so foreign on my lips that they are unbelievable?” He raked a hand through his hair again and walked toward her. “I’m sorry,” he murmured the words once more. “I know you haven’t done anything. It’s just...”

He paused when he reached her, raising a hand and tangling his fingers into one of the loose locks of her hair that hung down about her cheek. He wrapped it around his fingers for a second then pushed it back behind her ear.

In that sudden silence, she wanted to tremble with excitement. She was remembering what it was like to feel his hands upon her, to be the subject of his desires. If he kept playing with her hair in such a way, then she may be tempted to beg him to relive those moments.

“I can’t help it,” he muttered. “Protecting a reputation has been something that’s been drilled into me since I’m young. I don’t like it when someone out there is intentionally trying to destroy us both.”

The guilt raged inside of her. She hung her head, making his fingers drop from her hair. She focused on the floor, the excitement that had swelled in her stomach moments before now vanishing as the guilt overtook her.

She had never minded too much appearing in the scandal sheets. It was hardly a pleasant thing, no, but she could live with it. She didn’t mind being the antithesis of what others expected in a fine lady. Had she not found friends who loved her for who she was? Why would she need the approval of theton, most of whom she would never speak to in her life?

“I’m sorry they write about me so much.”

“Don’t you start apologizing,” he whispered with a slow chuckle though there was little humor in it. “I shouldn’t be angry when it is out of your control.” He turned away.

The sudden distance as he walked a little away from her hurt her all the more. She watched him as he rubbed his hands across his face, the stress palpable, as if it hung in the air around them like a thick fog.

She was shocked at the power of the feelings swelling within her. It was a sadness that she had let him down. She didn’t want to hurt him.

“You haven’t eaten,” she whispered, pointing at the table, trying her best to move onto a new conversation.

“I don’t feel like eating this morning.” Then he marched from the room.

The apology he'd given, the soft voice and the touch to her hair, seemed like a great distance away as he vanished from the room.

Grace's breath hitched in her throat as she watched the door close behind him.

"I'm always going to be a disappointment to him," she whispered to herself in realization.

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That horrible feeling locked inside of her grew exponentially worse. She understood suddenly that it wasn't just the shame of appearing in the scandal sheets which was hurting her. It was the fact that she had disappointed him, that she would always disappoint him.

She left the room though she did not follow him. Rather than asking any of the staff where he had gone, Grace left the house and headed straight for the stables. By the time she reached her horse and found the stable boy already preparing the animal for her, her eyes were prickling with unshed tears.

I care for Philip, don't I? That's why it hurts so much when I disappoint him.

She was thankful the stable boy said nothing as the first tears slipped down her cheeks, and he handed her the reins.

\* \* \*

Grace didn't know how long she had been riding for, but soon enough, the estate had not felt large enough to hold her in, despite its size. With rain starting to fall, she had left the park and rode into the streets of London.

She urged the horse down one road after another with no real sense of direction or purpose. All she knew was that she needed distance from Philip at that moment and most definitely needed distance from this heartbreak though it didn't work.

When she rode through Hyde Park, she thought of how many times she would fall over in her life and how Philip would be the man forced to stand beside her as she did

so, grimacing at her behavior.

As she rode through Covent Garden, she thought of the way people whispered about what she wore. Philip would have to suffer listening to people gossip about her.

Only when her stomach started growling with hunger did she turn the horse around, intending to head home again.

A carriage turned sharply onto the streets of Covent Garden. To avoid an accident, Grace was forced to pull her horse to the side sharply. The animal reared back in surprise, whinnying loudly into the air.

Grace fought to take charge of the animal and barely did so, narrowly avoiding falling off the saddle. As she reined in the mare's temper, the door of the carriage that had come to a hasty halt at her side was flung open.

Inside, she saw two faces she knew well. It was a married couple in the ton. She had seen them many times at events though the lady never deigned to talk to Grace, clearly thinking she was beneath her notice.

Mr. and Mrs. Robertson looked at her in alarm, eyes wide.

"Your Grace?" Mr. Robertson said in alarm. He looked around, those eyes growing impossibly wider. "You are riding alone?"

Grace's stomach knotted tightly as she turned the horse around, refusing to answer him.

She wasn't sure what was worse: the fact she had nearly lost control of the horse in front of busy Covent Garden and two of the busiest gossipers of the ton or that all Mr. Robertson cared about was that she was a woman riding alone.

Why must a woman always have her husband on her arm?

Grace turned her back on Covent Garden and rode fast away, urging the mare to gallop as quickly as possible. She was grateful the horse put up no further fuss.

By the time she returned to the house, the rain had started to fall faster. She left the mare in the stable and darted back to the main building, taking the back door into the house to avoid being out in the rain for much longer.

She had barely stepped in through the door when she heard a loud thud that startled her. She froze, her damp riding boots skidding on the floor.

The thud followed again. Or was it more of a smack? Like skin against leather.

Grace turned her head toward the nearest door, abrupt fear simmering in her gut.

When the sound came faster, repeating itself, she couldn't hold back her curiosity. She hastened forward and opened the door dividing her from the sound.

The door opened onto a room she had not been in before though she realized at once what it was. Philip had referred to this room once but only once. He had also made it clear that he didn't want her in this part of the house — for it was his part. The place where he liked to be alone.

The sports room was long, as if it had been stretched by some giant, the great tall windows flooding the space with grey light. The white tiled floor had been mopped to a gleaming shine, somehow still looking bright in the grey and rainy day.

Along one wall was boxing equipment: punching bags, linen straps, and even something that looked like leather gloves.



In the middle of the room, one of these bags hung from the ceiling. It quivered as something struck it repeatedly.

Grace swallowed around the panic in her throat, urging herself that there was nothing to be scared of here, for it had to be Philip.

She walked into the room, dragging the sodden hem of her gown with her. She streaked the gleaming floor with dirty spots, marring the clean perfection.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:57 am*

As she rounded the bag, Philip came into view though he was Philip as she had never seen him before.

He hadn't yet noticed her appearance and just continued to punch the bag, relentlessly. He wasn't wearing a shirt. Bare chested, the toned muscles of his chest gleamed in his own sweat. His shoulders looked stronger than ever as slightly hunched, he kept lashing out, his fists curled up into tight fists.

That hair, so often messy, was truly wild now. There was a drip of sweat hanging down from one dark tendril across his forehead.

Philip had shed all semblance of the perfectly ironed and pressed appearance he so often wore. It reminded Grace of when he was alone with her, making love to her. He had that same unbidden image then, only this time there was no passion in his being. There was only fury.

It was the eyes that absorbed her focus the most. They were fixed on the punching bag, never once darting toward her.

The striking grew faster. It was as if the anger was about to explode out of him as some ugly monster if he did not deliver repeated punches to that bag. The volume of his hits grew worse to the point that Grace had to say something.

"Philip?" she whispered, but he didn't hear her. "Philip!" she cried, much louder this time.

He jerked his head toward her, looked away, then turned back again in alarm, missing

the bag completely with his latest strike.

“Why are you here?”

## CHAPTER 25

Philip froze, his feet solid in the ground as he faced Grace.

This was a part of himself he kept hidden, even from her, but everything was out in the open now.

His eyes raked over her. She was completely sodden, her hair damp and stuck to her cheeks and neck. The riding habit she wore stuck to her too in all the right places. It made his lower gut stir, wanting her as he seemed to always want her.

Behind her, she had dragged in muddy water. The sight of it angered him so much that he turned away, unable to say anything more.

“Why am I here?” she asked, forcing a scoffing laugh. “I do live here, Philip. We are married.”

“This is my room in the house.”

“It sounds like you were destroying it.”

“It’s my prerogative if I wish to do so.” He didn’t mean to sound so defensive or angry, but it just exploded out of him.

He had not forgotten the scandal sheet that morning, as much as he had attempted to do so. It had somehow seeped under his skin to the point he wasn’t sure which part upset him more. Was it the fact that one of the scandal sheet writers was clearly

targeting Grace? Or that she was always, always in those pages?

“Philip, please,” Grace called to him.

He walked to the edge of the room and grabbed a towel, mopping the sweat from his brow and face before he turned back toward her.

She seemed to gasp at something, her eyes traveling down and back up him again. The mere sight of her looking at him in such a way was his undoing. He tossed the towel over his shoulder and marched back toward her.

In one swift motion he wrapped his hand around her damp waist and pulled her toward him. Their kiss was heated, full of the anger he had been able to contain that morning. To his relief, she kissed him back with equal feeling, her hands gripping his chest, exploring him then reaching for his shoulders.

He was imagining taking her against the wall of his sports room and forgetting that scandal sheet and replacing all thoughts with their passion instead. He could imagine the way she would cry out his name, perhaps splay her fingers across the racks on the wall as he entered her from behind.

“What is it?” she whispered, pulling back from their kiss. “Why are you so angry?”

“I didn’t say I was,” he murmured, trying to kiss her again though she avoided him, pulling back her head though her hands still gripped to his shoulders in the most tempting way.

“You can’t forget that scandal sheet, can you?”

He stiffened, no longer trying to capture her lips.

“Can you?” he asked eventually.

“I used to be able to,” she murmured. “Philip, the scandal sheet writers don’t like me. They never have. I’m not their idea of a lady.”

Bloody ridiculous.

A protective feeling swelled up inside of him. He wished to shout from the rooftops of London town that it didn't matter if she was not the ton's idea of a lady. She was a lady and deserved more respect than she was getting.

The overwhelming power of the feeling startled him.

He backed up from her, releasing her and turning to face the punching bag again, though he didn't hit it yet. He wiped his hands on the towel instead, deep in thought.

I vowed to myself never to get in so deep with a woman. I will not repeat the lives of my mother and father.

He purposefully avoided looking at Grace as the thought burned in the back of his mind.

"Can't you ignore them?" Grace pleaded. She seemed to know he was avoiding looking at her. For she walked around the bag and purposefully put herself in his eyeline again. "I do."

"How can you?" he hissed. "When they say such things. How does it not haunt you?"

"Why does it haunt you? Why does a reputation matter so much?"

"That's not it." He shook his head, tearing his gaze away from her.

He had no desire to tell her this wasn't really about reputation. Every pain that was inside of him was because he wanted to protect her, to keep her safe, but to admit to that felt wrong.

He had promised a marriage of convenience, yet what was it becoming? Wasn't he falling in too deep?

"Just ignore them, please." She rounded the bag and came toward him, planting her hands on his chest again and looking up at him.

His eyes fell shut as he bent his head down toward her. He wanted to kiss her, to make love to her again, but this time, he would make it slow. It would be far more sensual than before.

He narrowly stopped himself from kissing her.

I will not repeat the lives of my mother and father.

He pulled back from her.

"Philip?" she whispered, clearly hurt by his movements.

I need to put distance between us. Now. If we care this much about each other already, what will happen next? Any wrong step and we'll be tossed in turmoil.

He could only think of his mother and the heartache she had suffered over the years. He would not deliver the same pain to Grace. Neither did he wish to suffer it.

"What is it you're not telling me?" Grace pleaded. "Why do reputations matter so much to you?"

Philip sighed. "My mother and father..." he began slowly as he laid the towel over the racking at the edge of the room. He was unsure how to tell her what he was feeling or even whether to do so at all. Before he could stop them though, the words escaped him. "He wasn't faithful to her. Did you know that?"

He jerked his head toward her to see Grace's shock. She stepped back, her lips parted, before she shook her head.

"His affairs, all of it was plastered across the scandal sheets."

"Oh." She hung her head down.

He wanted her to understand that he knew the pain of what a scandal sheet could cause. He had been just a small boy when he had seen that ache for the first time.

He'd come across his mother in the garden room, crying her eyes out as she read the sheet. He'd been too young to understand what the scandal sheet was talking about, but he could remember sitting by his mother's feet, playing with the toy horses she had bought for him, and doing his best to make her smile again.

The task of making her smile was one he had returned to for many years since. He was never as successful at it as he wished to be.

"It's not about reputation," he said slowly. "It's about the pain these scandal sheets cause."

She was blinking madly, perhaps on the verge of tears.



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He moved away from the racking and came close to her.

“Do you understand now?” he pleaded. “Do you understand why it angers me so much?”

“You fear pain?” she whispered.

For you.

He didn’t say these words aloud though. To admit to them was a weakness. It would be giving his heart to her much more than he had planned to.

Instead, he leaned toward her and kissed her on the forehead. It was the softest of kisses, butterfly like, gentle.

“Please,” she murmured. “Don’t stop.”

“Don’t plead with me,” he urged, moving his lips down her face. “I will give you what you want again.”

Her hands were on his chest again. Despite the fact he knew he should pull back, that if he didn’t want to get in too deep with Grace, he should step away now and not make love to her again, suddenly, it was happening.

He was kissing her, capturing her lips with his own. The kiss was fierce, yet slow. Her arms rose and wrapped themselves around his neck, pulling him closer toward her.

He molded his body to hers, hardly caring that her dress was wet. He just needed to be closer to her. When his hands brushed her hips, and she gasped into his kiss, he lost all self-control.

He pulled back sharply.

“Philip?” she whispered, nearly losing her balance as he backed away from her. “You’re leaving?” she asked in surprise as he marched back toward the door.

“No chance,” he said sharply. He kicked the door shut. There was no lock on his door, so he settled himself with grabbing a chair and stuffing it under the door handle to make sure none of his staff could enter the room, then he moved back toward Grace. “Dress, off.”

She reached for the laces of the gown, doing as he asked, but he was impatient, desperate to feel her skin against his own again. He went to help her, their fingers fumbling together.

They kept kissing each other, unable to stay away. Each kiss practically burned him. In fact, he felt as if he was burning up from the inside out. Grace had this effect on him, something he had hardly ever expected the first night he had ever met her, but that was what Grace had always done.

From that night when she had fallen in his pond, she had continued to surprise him. This heat was no different.

He pulled the gown off her, hearing tearing sounds, for he pulled at the riding habit with such vigor though to his relief, she didn’t complain. When she was free of the dress, he turned her around, desperate to touch her. The corset accented her curves perfectly, and he fantasized about keeping it on her today. He chose to live out that fantasy, gripping her waist as he urged her toward the wall of the sports room.

“Hold onto the racks,” he pleaded with her.

She did, her fingers curling around the racks as he raised her chemise about her hips, bundling it across her waist. The moment her rear was exposed, he started exploring her, his fingers gripping her bare hips then reaching down, teasing between her legs.

She gasped, pushing back toward him, tempting him toward her.

He forgot all thought of pain from those scandal sheets. He didn’t even think about how deep he was falling for Grace. All he thought of now was this moment, this heat, Grace’s touch.

When his fingers found her center, she was already wet for him. He slid in easily, watching as her back arched and her head threw back. His other hand reached forward, and he gripped the back of her hair, toying with those honey tendrils. She rocked into his hand, clearly desperate for more pleasure. He rocked his fingers into her, watching as her body shuddered around his touch.

If I had known it could be like this...

He was wondering what could have happened if he and Grace had started exploring such things years ago. How well would they know one another’s bodies by now if they had been exploring for years?

He rocked into her faster, watching as her back arched all the more.

“Please,” she started to beg him again. “Please, Philip.”

“Tell me,” he ordered quietly. “Tell me what you want.” He released her hair, trailing his fingers down the back of her neck, between her shoulder blades, and then to that perfect arch of her back.

“You,” she whispered, gasping as he curled his fingers inside of her.

That breathy word was his undoing.

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He pulled his hand free of her and unfastened his trousers, determined to give her what she wanted and take what he needed to. When his length was free, he moved to her entrance, sliding slowly inside of her.

As he moved, he kept his eyes on her back, watching her reaction. She arched a little more, her head throwing back as sounds escaped her. Her fingers curled tighter around the racks in front of her too. To see the power he had over her made him move faster, rocking their bodies quickly.

“Philip,” she moaned his name, repeating it constantly.

The pleasure was so overwhelming, he couldn’t think of pulling out of her. He just had to keep going, to drive them both to that perfect climax of pleasure.

He moved quicker and quicker, gripping her waist, so he could anchor himself to her, drive into her more easily. She kept moaning, such sounds now that he felt like he was living out every secret fantasy he had ever had of Grace.

She tipped her head toward the racking, her sounds suddenly growing deeper.

“You’re close, aren’t you?” he whispered, needing to know it, to know that he was the one driving her there. “Tell me, Grace. Please, tell me.”

“I... I’m so close,” she whispered, then gasped again. She moved her hips against his, joining him in this desperate and urgent need to be completely absorbed in one another.

Then it happened, as he drove into her faster, she tipped over the edge. She cried out his name as he pleased her, her head thrashing one way and then the next.

To see he was the one doing this to her sent him over the edge.

“Grace,” he moaned her name as he thrust himself inside of her, feeling his own release tingle through his abdomen then stretch through his entire being. He couldn’t stop but rode out both of their waves until they were completely done.

Unlike last time, he didn’t stay inside of her. His legs felt weak, and he had to pull out fast. The two of them both capitulated to the ground, falling together and leaning against the racking.

She leaned into his side, her back still toward him as he looped an arm loosely across her hip.

Neither of them said anything. They both just panted, gasping in an attempt to catch their breaths.

The next thing she did was simple, yet it had an overpowering effect on him. She rested her head on his shoulder.

He closed his eyes and bent toward her, kissing the top of her head.

What is this feeling?

He knew it though he didn’t want to give it a name. He wanted to keep Grace beside him, to nuzzle into her side, to burn every scandal sheet in London, and think only of the two of them.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

Fear spiked inside of him, and he loosened his arm from her hip.

“Philip?” she murmured, clearly noting the fact he pulled back from her.

“I need to...” Yet he didn’t finish the sentence. He couldn’t even come up with an excuse. He just grabbed his clothes and stood, pulling them on again.

I need to escape this feeling.

“Philip, where are you going?”

He didn’t answer her as he left the room.

## CHAPTER 26

Grace stood in the doorway of the house looking out at the rain.

“Your Grace?” Mrs. Williamson had appeared at her side. “Are you going riding again?”

Grace took a minute before she answered. She glanced in the direction of the dining room behind her though she knew it remained empty. Philip had not come to dinner the night before, nor had he come to breakfast that morning.

I need to get out of here.

“Yes, I think I will.”

Mrs. Williamson reached for a thick shawl from a nearby hook.

“Please, take this,” Mrs. Williamson said kindly. “If I cannot persuade you to take an escort, at least stay warm.”

Grace thanked her for the kindness and took the shawl. She pulled a bonnet tight around her cheeks then stepped out into the rain.

As she hastened toward the stable, she thought constantly of the last moments she had seen Philip.

She had thought they had made some sort of breakthrough in his boxing room, making love again in a way that had felt both thrillingly exciting and yet deeply intimate. She had been about to turn to him, to embrace him and tell him that she would never intentionally cause him pain and that if it was within her power, she would never appear in the scandal sheets again, but he had pulled away.

His lack of an explanation and the fact that he had escaped her so fast and not come to see her since cut deeply. She needed to run, to feel like the Grace she used to know before she had married Philip.

She took her horse and rode out of the estate with no hesitation today. There was one place in particular she wished to go, someone she wished to see.

She had not yet returned home for she feared what her mother would say when she



saw her. She didn't doubt Althea would love to go on at length about how shameful it was for a duchess to appear in the scandal sheets so much, but risking running into Althea and her anger was worth it if it meant seeing her father again.

When Grace reached the house, she left the horse in the stable. Rather than approach the house by one of the doors, as she would no doubt alert the butler and thereby her mother as well to her presence, Grace approached the window of her father's study instead.

She peered through the gap in the half-closed curtains, seeing her father reclining in his large armchair by the fire. He was wrapped up in a banyan with a blanket loose across his knees. His hair was unkempt as though it had not seen a comb that day though she rather suspected from the way he stared into the fire that he hardly cared about such things.

Seeing he was alone, Grace tapped on the window.

He looked toward the window, mildly interested. When he saw her there waving at him, he jumped to his feet in alarm.

"Oh, please be careful," she mouthed through the window.

He discarded his blanket and hastened toward her, clearly fighting the fatigue that so often overtook his body. He pushed back the curtains and thrust the window up.

"Grace? Well, you always did find unique ways into a room," he said with a low chuckle.

"I wanted to see you." She left out the part about not wanting to see her mother though from the smile her father gave, he clearly knew this was her thought.

“Come, I’ll help you in.” He offered her a hand though she didn’t want to lean on him when he was already weak. She climbed in through the window, struggling a little with the weight of her damp riding habit but managing to land successfully in the room. He closed the window behind her then drew her toward the fire. “I have missed you, Grace. This house is not the same without you.”

“I have missed you too.” She sat down on a footstool in front of the fire as her father returned to his chair.

Seeing that he had a tea tray set up beside him, she retrieved a spare cup from a drinks cupboard nearby and poured a fresh cup for herself as well as topping up her father’s drink.

“Here, stay warm,” she pleaded, pushing the cup into his hand. He smiled his thanks and took a sip.

“How are you?” he asked softly. “How is marriage treating you?”

She blinked, uncertain how to answer him. She couldn’t tell him that she was unfortunately falling in love with her husband, and the only problem was, he didn’t love her back. He thought more of the pain of seeing her name in the scandal sheets. Maybe he said it was not about ‘reputations,’ but it clearly was. Why else would those scandal sheets upset him so much?

“Ah, the pause says all.” John sighed deeply. He slumped in his chair and rubbed his brow. “I’m so sorry, Grace.”

“Sorry? Whatever for? This is all my doing, Father.”

If I hadn’t tried to complete that ridiculous bet!

“I should have taken better care of you.”

“You have always taken care of me.” She leaned toward him, impassioned with her words. “You are the best of fathers.” She held his hand, and he held tightly to hers too.

It was a sadness to her to see the paleness of his skin and the sunken sockets of his eyes. He was sickly indeed.

He needs a new physician.

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“Does he treat you well?” John asked, a tinge of desperation in his voice. “I could perhaps bear this if I knew that.”

“He treats me... fine.” She wasn’t sure what more to say. Her father winced, evidently knowing what ‘fine’ truly meant.

“There is something you must know, Grace.” He leaned toward her, out of his seat. “Has your husband mentioned to you his father’s gambling?”

“No.” She thought of the day before and the very casual statement Philip had made about his father’s affairs appearing in scandal sheets. She couldn’t remember reading any such stories but presumed they must have been some time ago. He hadn’t mentioned any gambling.

“I imagine the gambling is a closely guarded secret. A man who protects his reputation so fiercely would find it abhorrent to read it in the papers. To my shame...” Her father paused, sighing. “...it was my doing.”

“Yourdoing? What do you mean?”

“The Duke’s father and I were friends, once.” He looked away into the fire and the flames that spat. “It was a long time ago. To my shame, I introduced him to the gambling table. It has served neither of us well, has it?”

Grace gripped her father’s hand tighter.

“We do not need fortunes to be happy, Father,” she urged him to understand. “All I

ever needed was you, not money.”

“You have the best of hearts, Grace. You always did.” He patted her hand. “It was my doing, though, the Duke’s penury. If he does not treat you well...” He eyed her cautiously. “There are stories I could give you about his father’s gambling ways. If they were in the scandal sheets, it would cause him greater shame, I’m sure. It may persuade him to be kinder to you.”

“Father!” She leaned back in shock.

“I’m only trying to protect you,” he said with desperation, his eyes growing wide. “You deserve kindness, my love.”

“And I will not get it by threatening my husband. Father, I would never do that to him.” She shook her head firmly.

“I thought you would say that.” He sank back into his chair, a sad sort of smile on his lips. “Your kindness does you credit. I just know you deserve that kindness in return.”

“Don’t you worry about me.” Grace topped up his drink again. Strangely, her problems with Philip didn’t seem important when she was looking at her father and seeing for herself just how sick he was. The most important thing in her life was this. “Have you tried a new physician yet?”

“I’ll look into it.”

“Father, please —” Before she could say anymore, voices were heard in the corridor.

“There was a horse. I’m sure I saw one.” It was Tabitha’s voice first.

“I would know if my daughter was in my house, Tabitha,” Althea declared.

Grace didn’t even have time to jump to her feet or consider a hiding place. It was inevitable having to see her mother again so soon.

The door opened, and in the doorway stood Althea and Tabitha, together. Tabitha smiled warmly as she laid eyes on Grace, but Althea was so shocked that she jumped backward and was in danger of knocking poor Tabitha over.

“Grace!” Althea exclaimed in alarm. “What are you doing here?”

“She is our daughter. Where else would she be?” John said with no amount of hidden resentment. He took Grace’s hand for she had moved to stand, and he urged her back onto the footstool. She knew that look — he was asking her to stay with him a little longer yet. She smiled, silently assuring him that she was going nowhere.

“There was no knock at the door. Duchesses do not call unannounced.” Althea looked at the window, clearly surmising quite easily just how Grace had entered the house.

“I came to talk to father,” Grace explained. “To tell him about our outings.”

“Oh, yes,” Althea scoffed with no small part of derision in her tone. “We know all about your outings.” She flicked her fingers at Tabitha who disappeared back into the hallway to retrieve something.

“Yes,” Grace whispered, looking down at her teacup. She had a feeling she knew what was coming. The night they had attended the Almack’s Assembly Rooms, Althea had been there. “I imagine you were no fan of my gown that night at the assembly, Mother, but I liked it. It was a nice change to wear such a dress.”

John smiled at her.

Philip seemed to like it.

The way Philip had ripped that burgundy dress off her in his study had spoken volumes. She tried not to shudder as she remembered the pleasure of him pulling that gown off her and entering her, exploring her with the passion he had done that night.

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“I am not talking about that dress though that gown is another conversation to have entirely.” Althea blushed the color of a beetroot as she spoke though Grace wasn’t sure if it was fury or embarrassment that drove her to it. “Tabitha? Have you found them?”

“What is she looking for?” Grace asked her father.

John rubbed his brow tiredly and shook his head, intimating that she didn’t really want to know the answer to such a question.

Tabitha returned and in her hand was a bundle of scandal sheets.

“Not those again.” Grace returned her teacup to the nearest table with a loud clink. “Mother, I’m well aware that I am the scandal sheets’ favorite topic of conversation. I have read them enough these last few days. I do not need them read out to me again now.”

Althea shook out one of the scandal sheets, clearly intending to read it aloud despite Grace’s words.

“Listen to this — the Duchess of Berkley —”

“Althea!” The sudden sound from John made them all jump. Grace leaned back in alarm as her father leaned forward in his armchair, just enough so he could look over the back of the chair, shooting daggers with his gaze at his wife. “She has said she doesn’t wish to hear it. Do you take pleasure in embarrassing our daughter?”



Althea looked as if she had been struck. She lowered the sheet in her grasp and closed her lips. She looked down at the floor too. The sudden change in her countenance was so abrupt that Grace didn't know what to make of it. She could have sworn that her mother blinked rather rapidly.

Wait... is she holding back tears?

"I am sorry I am such an embarrassment to you," Grace said to her mother. "It was not my intention to humiliate you or anyone else for that matter."

The guilt raged inside her once again. She wondered if Philip had left her side so fast the day before because he could not forget these scandal sheets either. Despite the fact he'd tried to, losing himself in their passion, perhaps he was haunted by the words so much he had been determined to escape her at once.

She felt her heart crack in her chest. She breathed deeply, trying her best to ignore the feeling.

"Grace," Tabitha murmured, still clutching to one of the scandal sheets in her hands. "You should see this one. It only came this morning." She walked forward, bearing a sheet that looked very familiar to Grace.

"I have seen it. I read the article yesterday."

"No, Grace. This is a reprint. Look," Tabitha urged the sheet into her clutches.

Grace unfurled the sheet and looked down at a section her cousin was pointing toward. There, printed in black and white beneath the previous day's article, was another awful accusation.

'The Duchess of Berkley — seen out in public. There was shock and incredulity

yesterday in Covent Garden when the Duchess of Berkley was seen to nearly cause an accident with an unsuspecting carriage. With her lack of skill, it's said the Duchess was seen to lose control of her horse. By the Grace of God himself, it is fortunate that no one was hurt in the incident. What's more, it's now known that the Duchess was riding unaccompanied. It's being whispered she rode like a lunatic on her own, so desirous she was to escape her new home and husband. What a humiliation for the poor Duke of Berkley!'

Grace stood slowly from her seat, her hand shaking around the paper.

"This is absurd," she muttered, anger tightening her gut at the way the incident from the day before had been twisted into something it was not. "For God's sake, why do they always look for a story where there is none?"

"You are a duchess," Tabitha whispered in a very gentle voice. "I'm so sorry. They have high expectations of you now."

"Pah! They had the same expectations when I wasn't a duchess. And as for being a duchess, shouldn't that make me separate from their expectations?" Grace countered, turning and tossing the sheet into the flames. Her mother flinched as her father started to smile. "I am free to do as I like, and they should not be able to do this to me anymore."

As she turned, intending to flee the room and head home at once, she barely caught sight of her parents' expressions, but what she did see there startled her. Her father was still smiling, clearly proud of her words, but in Althea's face too, there was also a small smile.

Wait... is she proud of me too?

CHAPTER27

Philip looked up from the business accounts he had been reading in his study. His steward had not long left, and together they had made a plan of where to move his money next in the farms at his country estate to ensure the tenants were well taken care of, but there would also be enough investment to ensure profits.

In his concentration, he had not noticed the arrival of a carriage though the sudden voices in the corridor alerted him to the presence of someone. He turned in his seat and looked out of the window, craning his neck to look at the drive.

There was a carriage there on the gravel. Judging by the way the stable boy looked rather flustered as he took control of the horses, the carriage had arrived very quickly indeed.

“Where is he?” the unmistakable voice of Eleanor raged down the corridor. The butler muttered some reply which was drowned out.

“Eleanor, please be careful,” Dorian said, his loud steps intimating that he was running after her.

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“Oh, for goodness’ sake, Dorian. I am not made of porcelain. This child is quite safe.”

Philip closed up his accounts book as the door of his study was flung open with such vigor that the door bounced off the wall.

“Good day to you, sister,” Philip said coolly and calmly as his eyes landed on Eleanor.

Her face was red, hair wild, hands on her hips in fury. Her posture would have been one full of intimidation had it not been for her rounded stomach making her walk rather ungainly as she marched into the room.

“Good Lord, Eleanor. You’re making me worried. Please calm yourself.” The words burst from Philip, his worry for her and the child escalating by the second.

The butler had vanished from behind them, leaving Dorian to follow Eleanor into the room with a rather amused smile on his face.

Damn his amusement.

“What did you do to my friend?” Eleanor cried out as she stopped on the other side of the desk.

Stunned by the words, Philip sat back.

“Well?” Eleanor barked. “What did you do to her? Grace is one of the kindest souls I

know. She deserves so much better than you.”

“A low blow, sister.”

“She does,” Eleanor said with feeling. “I think the world of you, Philip, and I always have, but it must be admitted that you challenge that feeling often. Why do you deserve her when you have driven her from the house?”

“Driven her from the house? What the hell are you talking about?” He stood hurriedly, startled by the words. He caught sight of Dorian’s smile as his brother-in-law hung back behind Eleanor. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” Philip asked him sharply. “Enjoying seeing us at odds? Shouldn’t you be insisting she stays at home and rests?”

“Oi!” Eleanor cut in. “I am not a dog to obey any man’s order.”

“She’s carrying my child; I cannot refuse her anything,” Dorian said with a smile. “Although I will say, Eleanor, you are in such a fury; if you could at least sit down and still be angry, it would give me some comfort.”

She flashed angry eyes at him. Despite her insistence not to obey an order, Dorian’s request clearly had more of an effect on her than she wanted to admit. She sat down heavily in the nearest chair though she only managed the very edge, holding onto her stomach as she glowered at Philip.

“Now, what’s all this about my wife being driven from the house?” Philip asked.

“Show him,” Eleanor said, waving her hand at Dorian.

He reached a hand into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a sheet of paper. He passed it slowly to Philip.

“I think you’d be best off not reading it at all,” Dorian added in a hushed murmur to Philip.

“Dorian, you are not helping,” Eleanor said with a sigh.

“I was trying to help your brother, Eleanor.” Dorian shrugged and moved to stand behind her.

Philip didn’t read the paper straight away. His eyes rested on Dorian for a few seconds first, realizing that if Dorian thought it best that he didn’t read what was in this, then it had to be bad indeed. Yet his curiosity burnt through him, and Philip opened the paper.

It was a scandal sheet which talked of an accident Grace had nearly caused in Covent Garden the night before. The article went on to hint that as Grace was riding out aloud, perhaps she was running away from her husband.

“What did you do?” Eleanor countered again.

Philip looked away from the paper and out of the window. It was raining again.

She is determined to either be outdoors or far away from me, isn’t she? She’s always out riding in the rain!

He crumpled the paper in the palm of his hand until it was nothing but a tiny ball.

“I didn’t do anything,” Philip argued though he knew it was a lie. He had been the one to drive her out with his anger. What’s worse, he had left her alone after they had made love.

She’ll hate me soon. At least, there is safety in hatred. Her heart will not be hurt by

me.

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“No?” Eleanor scoffed. “Maybe you married my friend just to save your and her reputations, but you are now a married couple, Philip. You should be fighting thetonttogether, not alone.”

His eyes shot toward her. There was something curious in this statement considering all the trouble she’d had with a fallen reputation. Dorian seemed to sense the irony even if Eleanor didn’t, for he winced.

“Do you believe every word you read in a scandal sheet now, Eleanor? You think I have upset her so much that she has run away from me?” Philip countered loudly.

“I have done what?” Another voice suddenly joined them.

Eleanor nearly fell out of her chair as she spun around to face the door and narrowly managed to avoid doing so because Dorian reached out to grab her hand. Philip scarcely noticed the two of them out of the corner of his eye, for his eyes were on the open doorway.

Grace stood there. As was usual across the last few days, she had returned to the house in a sodden riding habit. She was looking between them all, droplets running off her bonnet.

“I have not run anywhere, thank you,” Grace said tightly.

“Thank God for that.” Eleanor flung herself back in the armchair, looking relaxed at last.



Philip tried to catch Grace's eye. He longed for some of the intimacy and warmth that had been between them the day before in that sports room, but she seemed intent on avoiding looking at him at all.

"You shouldn't believe everything you read, Eleanor," Grace seconded. "I went for a ride yesterday, yes, and Mr. and Mrs. Robertson's carriage nearly ran into me. I managed to stop my horse before she could run too wild. All was well. These writers like to spin things; you know that."

"Where have you been this morning?" Eleanor asked.

"To see my father."

"You went alone?" Philip asked.

At last, Grace looked at him. There was something vacant in that stare, completely empty.

"Must I remind you of my freedom? You agreed to it, Your Grace. As your duchess, you gave me that freedom."

Philip leaned forward, resting his hands on the desk between them. She did have freedom. It didn't mean he had to like it when she rode so far alone. He worried about her.

"Well, at least we know now the scandal sheets are telling lies again." Eleanor spoke nonchalantly as she stood. "On second thought, you're right, Dorian. I should go home and get some rest." He offered her a hand and the two walked toward the door. Eleanor briefly laid a hand on Grace's shoulder. "I'll come see you soon, yes?"

"Yes, that would be lovely."

“You do not know how relieved I am they printed only lies.” Eleanor sighed. “I thought you two had found heartbreak already.”

Heartbreak.

Philip felt the word most keenly. He sat down in his chair and opened up his ledgers again. Such things were exactly what he wanted to avoid.

As Eleanor and Dorian parted, Grace turned to leave too.

“Grace?” Philip called to her. “How was your father?”

“Not well.” She didn’t look him in the eye. “It’s high time he found a new physician.”

“I have one I can recommend.”

“Thank you.”

Their conversation was wooden and stiff. What they had shared in his boxing room was almost untouchable now.

“I’m going to retire to my chamber.”

“Already?” Philip said in surprise. “It’s midafternoon.”

“I have a headache. I’ll dine in there tonight.” She still didn’t look at him as she turned and left the room.

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Philip stared after her into the empty hallway, having quite forgotten all the ledgers in front of him on his desk. Even as he fought it, he had a longing to follow her. In the end, he won that fight and stayed where he was.

\* \* \*

Grace came down the stairs the next morning to find the house eerily empty. The dining room was set up for breakfast, but there was no sign at all that Philip had used it or even that it was being staffed. The teapot on the table was still lukewarm to the touch, but it was as if a footman had deposited it there and darted from the room quickly.

Grace sat down, waiting for a minute in the strange silence for someone, anyone to appear. Even Mrs. Williamson didn't appear to greet her that morning with cheery 'good mornings' as she so often did.

Eventually, Grace poured her tea and reached for some toast which had been laid on the table. She was halfway through the slice of toast, staring around the room in the silence, when something caught her attention.

Beside the chair at the head of the table, she could see something yellow beside the leg, as if it had been dropped there. She reached down, finding it trapped beneath the chair leg. She had to stand and shift the chair then reached down and picked up the scrap of paper that had been discarded.

She turned it over, feeling her heartbeat picking up in pace when she saw it was another scandal sheet. Fearing she knew why the breakfast room was so empty and

perhaps why the staff had run for cover, to hide from Philip's fury, she slowly unfurled the sheet to read the story.

The headline that met her eyes made her gasp in alarm.

"The only reason the Duke of Berkley married his less than graceful Duchess is revealed..."

She turned the page, eager to read what secret the scandal sheet writer purported to know.

"So many secrets the Duke and Duchess of Berkley must be fighting to hide though this is the greatest yet. All of us who thought the Duke of Berkley one of the most affluent in the land were clearly sorely mistaken. This writer can now reveal to you that the Duke of Berkley is actually nearly penniless.

His father, a man who has sometimes made the crowds whisper about supposed affairs, turns out to have committed even more disgraces. He gambled away the dukedom's fortune, a significant sum indeed considering the dukedom owns much land and has many tenants in the country. All are surviving on minimal sums and are on their last legs as the Duke of Berkley fights to keep them within his care.

Yet, the Duke of Berkley's misfortune is not just that of his father's gambling secrets. It seems that his wife, the daughter of the Marquess of Garton, is further punishment. The Marquess of Garton, a man who knew about the late Duke's gambling, blackmailed the new Duke into marrying Lady Grace under the threat of his father's dark secret being revealed to all.

How awful! An unhappy man must the Duke of Berkley be, not only for the secret he guarded so carefully to be revealed at last but to be forced to be bound until his dying day to the daughter of his blackmailer, a woman so disgraceful that scarcely a day

goes by without her name appearing in these pages.”

Grace broke off. She had read the meat of the article, and as far as she could see, the rest of the page just wallowed in her and Philip’s misery.

With her hands shaking, Grace darted from the room. She didn’t release the sheet but carried it with her, running all the way down the corridor as she searched for Philip. She thrust open every door she could find and even went to the back of the house, opening the door to his boxing room.

Instead, she found one of his punching bags on the floor, but there was no sign of Philip.

She headed back into the main body of the house where she heard muffled voices. She hastened toward them, opening Philip’s study door without knocking to find the source of those voices.

Philip was in his study, but he was not alone. His mother, the Dowager Duchess, was seated in a chair beside him. She was crying with one of Philip’s handkerchiefs pressed tightly in the palm of her hand.

The Duchess didn’t notice Grace’s entrance at first. She was too lost to her tears, great gasping breaths overtaking her body, but Philip noticed.

He stood straight from where he was beside his mother’s chair. Folding his arms, he turned to face Grace. Never had she seen him looking at her before with such a glower. The stare was one full of censure. She felt tiny, as if he wished to squish her like some beetle beneath his boot.

Silently, she held up the scandal sheet, her hand still clutching it and quivering to show what she had found.

“Your poor father,” the Dowager Duchess cried, her words stuttering with her tears.  
“He is ruined.”

“Mother —” Philip tried to interrupt her, probably trying to tell her that Grace was here, but she was too absorbed in her despair to possibly notice.

“He will be the talk of the town forever,” she wailed. “They will enjoy his misery, his ruin. My poor husband. He will be turning in his grave.”

“The reason for it has just walked in.” Philip’s cool voice made Grace stiffen.

## CHAPTER 28

There were tears in Grace’s eyes. Philip was torn between moving toward her and embracing her and demanding she leave the room.

She did this. Who else could have done it? Who else knew? Only her father. And she went to see him yesterday...

“What?” His mother looked up from where she was crying. Philip nodded toward Grace in answer.

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Grace stepped into the room, a tear escaping down her cheek as she looked between the two of them. Her eyes fixed on Philip for longer, an unspoken question lingering in her gaze.

Philip wasn't surprised. He was a mess of a man. He had no idea where his tailcoat was, his shirt sleeves were rolled up, his waistcoat half unbuttoned, and his knuckles were red and raw from where he had been punching that bag so badly in his boxing room.

"Boxing," his mother said by way of explanation, pointing at him.

"Oh." Grace nodded. She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. "I don't understand —"

"Don't you dare." The words snarled out of Philip's lips before he could stop them.

Grace's alarm stole his breath away. The way she jumped back from him hurt. He never wanted to frighten her, but neither could he hold back his anger now.

Everything I have fought to protect now lies in ashes around me.

"Mother." He moved to crouch down beside her. "I am sorry this has all come out. I'll come and see you later, but perhaps it's best you go back to the country now as you wished to. What do you think?"

"Yes. I'd like that." She nodded, drying more tears on her cheeks. "Lord knows I cannot face thetonagain. Not after this."

Philip took his mother's hand and helped her to her feet.

"Stay here," he growled out at Grace. She moved her hands to her hips, looking ready to argue with him again about giving her orders, but he was in no mood for that argument. There was another he was quite determined to have in its place.

He helped his mother out of the room and delivered her into the arms of Mrs. Williamson, who promised to arrange a carriage to have her taken to the country seat. After Philip had waved his mother off, he returned to the study to find Grace re-reading the scandal sheet.

More tears were on her cheeks now. As Philip closed the door behind him, he wanted to believe as they were left alone that she had nothing to do with it, but he couldn't. His sense of logic and reason argued against him.

"How could you do this?" he hissed out.

"What?" She lifted her head from reading the scandal sheet, staring at him, agog.

"Only you knew about my father's gambling."

"I didn't even know about it until yesterday!" She threw the words at him in sudden fury, casting the scandal sheet aside.

"So you admit you knew. Your father told you."

"Yes, he told me yesterday. Before that, I knew nothing."

"How convenient." He snatched up the sheet from the floor. He moved around the desk, needing it as a barrier between them. He laid the paper flat to the desk, planting his hands to the desk and glaring down at the printed words. "The day you discover



my father's shame, it is printed in the paper overnight."

"You don't think..." She didn't finish the words but marched up to the desk on the other side. "You think I would print this? You think I would do this to us all?"

"You already admitted to me you don't care what the scandal sheets print of you. The only people this could hurt are me and my mother. Someone I have worked so hard to protect from pain like this, and what do you do? You publish it in London for all to read." He waved a hand at her in accusation.

"Are you mad!?" She squealed the words in her anger. "I wouldn't do that. I couldn't ever."

"I can only presume you wanted to be free of me. That was it, wasn't it? Why else take this story to a scandal sheet?" His mind was working fast, jumping from one conclusion to the next. The only other time in his life he had ever known such anger was when he had discovered all of his father's betrayals.

When he had been old enough to understand all the gambling, all the affairs, all the pain his father had delivered to his mother, he'd snapped. He'd destroyed a room. It was the first time he had ever gone to see a boxing match in his life. Rather than just watching the boxing, he'd joined the ring and offered himself up as a fighter.

He'd gone home bleeding and bruised that night, but it was worth it. It had been an escape from other pain.

"You think I want to be free of you?" she said, spluttering her words. "That's what you think after everything you and I have done together?" She gestured between them.

"You played your part well."

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you adhered to your agreement so far in that you were willing to give me an heir. Everything else, well, you put on a good act.” He knew it was cruel to say the words, but it was the only conclusion he could make.

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She stumbled away from him. In her usual clumsy way, she tripped on the edge of a chair. She fell into the seat, staring at him in what had to be complete abhorrence.

“That’s what you think?” she seethed quietly. “You think each time I touched you that it was all an act? That I longed for a child? I never even thought of a child before we were married. I am so disliked by the town that I thought I would never marry. I had abandoned all thought of children equally.”

“So you admit that? You admit that you never wanted to be married? That you only wanted to be alone?” he countered, rounding the desk to move near her. She didn’t argue with this. She just stared up at him as another tear slid down her cheek. “It’s some way to be rid of your husband, Grace. Cruel. Cruel indeed. Couldn’t you have just told me you wanted to leave? Instead of destroying mine and my mother’s reputations so much?”

“That’s enough!” Her voice boomed around the room as she stood again. “If you seriously think I am that sort of woman, that I would hurt you or your mother in such a way, then you do not know me at all.”

“There is no one else who could have done this. Only you or your father.” He thrust a finger toward her. “You were the only two people in the world who knew about my father’s gambling, and we both know your father is too ill to leave the house to possibly visit a scandal sheet writer or a print house, don’t we?”

She reacted as if he had hit her with the words. She stepped back, her lips parted, her hand raising to cover her face.

“If you think me so capable of something like this, then I see you are not the man I thought you were at all.”

What does that mean?

Yet he was too lost to rage to think sensibly, to even think about what it was she was exactly saying. Absorbed by his fury, he had to be rid of her. He needed time to think.

“Well, you did all of this to be free of me. To no longer have a husband, so you will have your wish.” He stepped back, distancing himself from her completely. “You were to go to the Dowager’s House on the estate anyway at the end of the month. You can go there now, today, and you won’t have to see me again.”

“What? You’re sending me out of the house?”

“You said you wanted your freedom. I am giving you exactly what you wanted,” he reminded her, putting himself behind the desk, so it was a barrier to her.

Never had he known this pain. It was as if Grace had crushed him, turned him completely to ash.

“You have your freedom from me, from this life; you will be independent. If enough times passes and we find you are not carrying my heir, then we can revisit this discussion again.”

“You must be joking —” she spat at him.

“It was our agreement when we married. We shall return to the rules we agreed on that day. Anything else, the riding, the picnicking together, all of it can be forgotten. Is that understood?”

She suddenly stood tall. For someone so much shorter than him, Grace appeared to dominate the room. That regalness was back in her figure, even as a tear slid down her cheek.

“Well, I made a vow, did I not?” she said in a cool and distanced voice he had never known she was capable of. “I vowed toobeyyou.” The scoff was plain. She delivered the most perfect curtsy, not quivering or looking as if she was about to trip for single second. When she stood straight, she wiped away her final tear. “You have your wish, your Grace.”

She turned and walked away from the room. Her last words, she tossed over her shoulder. “You will not be bothered by me again.”

\* \* \*

Grace didn't stop crying as she packed her bags. Two maids helped her. They were kind, solicitous, overly helpful, and she was grateful for their sweetness, just as she was grateful that they did not ask her too many questions. They did not ask why she cried or why they were moving her.

She expected they already knew. Someone in the staff must have known how to read and had probably spread the gossip of what was in that scandal sheet to the rest of the household by now.

As Grace packed up the last of her things, she halted, finding on her bedside table the small gift which Philip had given her the day they had shared their picnic. With careful fingers, she picked up the botanical notebook and flicked through the pages.

It was a beautiful thing. She had believed the man who had given her such a gift was a kind man, but would a kind man really jump to this conclusion so firmly? If Philip was every inch the man she had fallen in love with, why would he not even listen to

her? Why was he so convinced she was behind this story in the scandal sheets?

“Would you like to take it with you, Your Grace?” one of the maids asked gently, clearly afraid to startle her.

“No, thank you.” Grace returned the book to the table. “Would you have it returned to the Duke please? He can have his money back for it. I’m sure that’s what he wants.”

She sniffed and stopped further tears from falling. She pulled a shawl up around her shoulders and left the room. The maids followed behind her, carrying her bags.

In the hallway, Mrs. Williamson had come to say goodbye. She took Grace’s hand with affection. The red eyes suggested that Mrs. Williamson too had been crying though she tried her best not to show it.

“I have sent some good staff to the Dowager’s house,” she said with eagerness. “You will be well looked after there, Your Grace. And with your permission, I’d like to come and visit you?”

“You have been very kind, thank you. I’d like that very much.”

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As they released hands, Grace thought she saw a shadow out of the corner of her eye, much further down the corridor. She turned to look at it, wondering if Philip was watching her from the doorway of his study, but if he had been there, he had vanished into the shadows too fast for her to see him.

He is simply glad I am leaving.

She followed the maids out of the house to the small carriage which had been prepared to take her to the edge of the estate. She pulled her shawl up over her head to hide her face from the falling rain and mask future tears that threatened to fall.

Determinedly, she didn't look back at the house as the carriage pulled away. She was afraid to see Philip's silhouette in one of the windows, watching as she parted.

Instead, she stared across the carriage in the darkness. Night was coming in thick and fast now as summer turned to autumn. There was a chilly breeze too, making her wrap her arms tighter around her.

As the carriage carried her away, a thought occurred to her.

Philip had accused her of wanting out of the marriage, claiming this was why she had given such a story to the scandal sheets, but what if it was the other way around? What if when Philip saw the story, he saw it as an opportunity to be free of her? To be free of the wife he had never wanted in the first place?

She closed her eyes as the carriage came to a stop, thinking of the first night she and Philip had kissed which had led to this whole mess.

“It seems so long ago now,” she whispered.

The carriage door was opened. Turning to climb down out of the carriage, she set her eyes on the Dowager House.

She had seen it at a distance before when she was riding but never so close before.

There was a time in her life when she would have thought it a perfect life. The house, though smaller than the main one, was still grand. Red brick, stretching over two floors, it had a beautiful appearance. In the lantern lights that had been lit, it glowed orange and golden, warm and welcoming.

Yes, before she had married Philip, to be offered a life alone in this home where she had her freedom to operate far away from a husband’s orders, it would have been a pleasant life indeed, but not anymore. As she walked toward the house, she felt a longing to be back in the main house, to be beside Philip again.

Only, she wanted to be beside the Philip who had made love to her, the one who had gone riding with her, racing her, the one who had shared that picnic with her, the one who had kissed her that first night and urged in whispered voices that she was his.

She wanted nothing to do with the Philip who had cast her out of his house and accused her of such malice.

“Do you like it, Your Grace?” the maid asked as she carried one of Grace’s bags up to the house.

“It’s a very fine place,” Grace said woodenly. “Yes, I shall find a way to be happy here.”

With this resolution in mind, she strode up the front stoop and into the house. When



she tripped on the top step, she actually managed to laugh through her tears.

At least now, there was no Philip, no mother, and no one else in the world to grimace and despair of her when she made a fool of herself.

Alas, I truly am free.

## CHAPTER 29

"I can't believe it," Diana gushed as she sank down into the settee beside Grace.

They had talked at length into the night about what had happened the day before. To Grace's relief, Diana had come to stay with her for a few days, to fight the loneliness. They had frequently tried to discuss their books and what they were reading at the moment, but inevitably, conversation turned back to the same topic.

Diana clutched a glass of port in her hand as she passed Grace another.

"To think Eleanor's brother could treat you so. To think he could throw you out of his house."

"Strange," Grace whispered. "I had stopped thinking of Philip as just Eleanor's brother. He was my husband." She smiled rather sadly, wishing she could claw back the feeling, but it was gone. "It was my home too, not just his. That's all gone now."

She took a rather large gulp of the port.

"I'm so sorry it's come to this, Grace." Diana laid a hand on her shoulder comfortingly. "I suppose it's little comfort to say you have a beautiful home here, that you could be happy here?"

“Oh, I know.” Grace nodded, looking around the house. “I have freedom now, don’t I? A lovely home of my own.” Her eyes darted around the warm golden room, the great fireplace bearing hot flames this evening, and the vast landscape portraits on the walls that told tales from distant lands. “Yet at what cost, I wonder?”

“You and the Duke...” Diana spoke slowly, that shyness creeping into her character that always did appear, even when she was with her dearest friends. “Did you love him?”

Grace nodded fast.

“There’s no past tense involved, Diana,” she whispered. “I love him. I do.” She sniffed. “At least, I love the idea of him. I love the man I thought him to be but not the man who he was yesterday.” She shook her head firmly. “He was a different man.”

“Oh, Grace. I’m so sorry.” Diana put down her port glass and wrapped an arm around her, embracing her tightly.

Grace buried her head in her friend’s shoulder, wishing she could hide there for a long time and forget the world. When she eventually pulled away, there were tears in Diana’s eyes too. They clutched hands as they drank their port.

“Is there any way you can make sense of his behavior yesterday? Is there a reason behind why he would be so quick to accuse you of selling such a story?”

Grace sighed, trying to remember everything Philip had said. Most of the reasoned arguments had been lost in anger. It was like trying to dig for something valuable in sludge, very difficult indeed to find.

“He said that only my father knew about the gambling. As my father had told me, there were just the two of us. It had to be one of us,” Grace whispered. “He was right in one thing — my father could not have left the house to sell such a story, and he also wouldn’t give a story like that away.”

“Of course not,” Diana said, shaking his head. “The article accuses your father of

being a blackmailer.”

“Exactly. So, Philip felt the logical conclusion was me.” In sudden anger, she leaned forward, nearly spilling her port. She would have done too if Diana hadn’t snatched it from her and rescued it in time. “But how could he think that? How could he not trust me after all that has passed between us? He didn’t even trust me enough to listen to my protests?”

“Eleanor says he’s a man with a temper. Is there any chance when he’s calmed down that he would listen to reason and come around?”

“Pff, I doubt it.” Oddly, Grace was upset at the mention of Eleanor. It seemed no matter what, all of her friends would always think of Philip as Eleanor’s brother and not Grace’s husband. “There was something he said a couple of days ago. Something curious.”

“What’s that?” Diana urged her on, passing her the port back as Grace sat still again.

“He talked of pain when scandal sheets were published about his father’s affairs. Gossip. Whispers. He spoke of pain and not wanting to relive it. It suggested to me that it wasn’t just a matter of reputation but of heart too.”

“Could that be the reason for his anger, Grace?” Diana asked softly. “A desperate man. He wasn’t just angry at the story but having to suffer the pain of seeing his family’s name in the scandal sheets all over again.”

“Oh, Diana, why do you have to sound so wise?” Grace slumped back in her seat. “Yes, that makes sense.”

It all made a lot of sense. It explained why Philip was so fixed on his mother, about persuading her to retreat to the country seat. He thought of his family, of putting them

first, and couldn't bear the pain to be relived all over again.

"God, he must hate me," Grace whispered. "I understand something now. Whether he truly thinks I'm behind leaking that story or not, he sees me as the reason his family is back in the scandal sheets. Since he married me, we're always in those pages. He regrets marrying me because of it."

"I'm sure he doesn't regret it," Diana said, but even she couldn't utter the words with any degree of conviction. "Oh, Grace, I'm so sorry it has come to this. I wish I could say something to make it all better."

"You are kind, but there is nothing anyone can say or do." She sat straight, discarding her port glass. "I read in a book once that heartbreak is a little like a broken glass. You can put things back together, so they look right, but you'll always bear the breakage. You might just have to look hard sometimes to see it."

She sighed deeply. "Well, that is what I must hope for. I must try to put the pieces of my heart back together again and find a way to live now." She looked around the room, taking comfort in the warmth of her new home. "What shall we do tomorrow? I believe there is a new exhibition at Somerset House. Shall we go and see that?"

Diana didn't look enthused by the idea, but to Grace's relief, Diana nodded.

"Yes. Let's do that. We shall fill our days with fun things to do."

"Yes, we shall." Grace nodded, hoping to some degree that it magically helped.

\* \* \*

"Perhaps you should go slower, Phil." Aaron's face looked a little blurry to Philip as he put the glass down beside him on the table.

Philip sank back in his chair at the gentleman's club, finding that not only was Aaron's face blurry but the entire room was too.

"For God's sake, are you going to drink yourself into a stupor every night?"

"You don't usually tell jokes."

"I'm not joking now," Aaron said sharply. He tapped Philip around the arm, clearly trying to get his attention. "Have you seen anything of your wife in the last four days since you sent her out of the house? And don't think that helped matters. The fact you ousted her was whispered by every tongue in London three days ago."

Philip sighed, wondering how it was that the whole of London now knew all of his business.

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“I haven’t seen her.” Philip shook his head. “Mrs. Williamson tells me that she is making the most of her freedom. She rides and walks every day. She reads her books and is making plans to change the garden. She has bought some new plants. She goes to Somerset House with her friend, Diana.”

“You seem to be keeping track of your wife’s movements.”

Philip fidgeted in his chair, not in a hurry to agree that was exactly what he was doing.

“Enough of this.” Aaron snatched the glass away as Philip tried to take another sip. “You can’t live life like this, Phil.”

“Why not? Seems a jolly good way to do so to me.”

“People will stop talking of your father eventually. They’ll find the next juicy bit of gossip, and then it will be completely forgotten.”

“Hmm.” Philip was not so convinced of this. His mother would always be pitied as the Dowager Duchess whose husband lost their fortunes and played away. He had failed in trying to protect her from such pain.

“As for your wife, it seems to me that Grace —”

“Don’t call her that,” Philip said with sudden possessiveness. He stared at his friend, finding Aaron’s rather sharp expression now coming into focus.

“Your Grace, eh?” Aaron asked, no hint of humor in his face. “Then start acting like it.”

“After what she did, do you expect me —”

“Oh, enough.” Aaron waved a hand at him. “You’ve always had a habit of acting without thinking things through properly. You’re also blinded by anger, frequently.”

“Such compliments from a man who is supposed to be my dearest friend!”

“You are drunk,” Aaron said, quite expertly avoiding Philip’s grabbing hand as he tried to take the whisky glass back. “Think it through, Phil, that’s all I urge you. Why, why in God’s name would Grace not only throw you and your mother into such a dark place but her own father too? Hmm? Or are you so self-absorbed that you did not notice the article accused her father of being a blackmailer?”

Philip stiffened, for he had noticed. It was something that had burned in the back of his mind and was one of the reasons he had turned to drink.

“Grace wouldn’t sell a story that called her father a blackmailer. She loves him too much for that,” Philip whispered.

“There!” Aaron flicked his fingers. “If you in your cups can still agree to that, then why would you accuse her of being the person behind the leak?”

“Because it doesn’t make sense, Aaron. Who else would sell that story?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t believe it was her. I also think that you are in a state without her. Quite frankly, if you’re going to spend your life in such misery just because she lives at the edge of your estate rather than under your roof, then it wasn’t just a marriage of convenience after all.”



Philip managed to successfully get his whisky back. He downed the last of the liquid then stared into the glass.

For the last four days, when he wasn't drinking, he'd felt isolated and cut off from the world. He'd even refused to see Eleanor and Dorian when they had come calling on him. He'd been lonely, missing Grace and wanting her back.

To find she had returned his gift hurt. He'd kept that book at the side of his bed, feeling like it was a piece of her that he still carried with him.

"Are you in love with her?" Aaron asked, his voice managing to cut through the daze.

Philip looked at Aaron. He didn't need to say the words, apparently his expression was enough.

"It was never meant to happen," he said eventually. Aaron's rigid spine slumped. "I made a vow when I married her that I wouldn't be my father. I wouldn't cause her the same misery my father caused my mother."

"You didn't want her to fall in love with you." Aaron didn't need to phrase it as a question. It was obvious enough.

"I was so busy thinking about that. I didn't even notice that I was the one falling..." He trailed off.

I miss her. So much.

"What does it matter?" Philip said quickly. "She happily went to the Dowager's House. She admitted she hadn't wanted the marriage in the first place. She'll be very happy without me."

“Perhaps not as happy as she’d be with you.” These words hung in the air for a minute. Philip ran a hand through his hair, pulling on the tendrils in stress. “Don’t be a coward, Phil.”

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“What did you call me!?” Philip spluttered.

“A coward.” Aaron sat straight, his figure every bit the stiff soldier as he arched his eyebrows in challenge. “Don’t miss out on a chance to be happy with your wife just because you have too much pride to accept you were wrong.”

\* \* \*

Grace trailed her fingers through the lavender flowers she had asked to be planted. With their tiny purple heads, they were a shot of color in a garden that was starting to turn chilly.

“Shall we not go inside?” Diana called from behind her. “This wind is picking up.” As she wrapped a shawl around her shoulders, perching on a bench, Grace barely noticed that wind.

She felt an itch, a longing to have that little botanical book back which she had left in the main house. She wished to draw the lavender flower within those pages, to write about its rich scent, and the comfort it could bring.

“You go inside. I’ll follow shortly,” Grace promised.

At least there is one good thing about this place. I am truly free to do as I like now.

She heard Diana’s steps on the gravel path, but there weren’t many of them.

“Oh,” Diana gasped a second later. “Violet is here.”

“Violet?” Grace jerked her head up from the lavender plant, craning her neck to see what Diana was seeing.

It was true; across the garden, they could see up to the gravel drive in front of the Dowager’s House where a carriage had pulled hastily up.

Violet didn’t even wait for the footman to open the door for her but burst free from it. She had ink stains on the palms of her hands as she waved eagerly at them, running toward them.

“She’s covered in ink again,” Diana said with a giggle.

“Someday, she’ll turn up head to toe covered in the stuff.” Grace’s jest made Diana laugh, but Grace could not summon a smile.

Violet was a writer though for some time she had been published under a pseudonym.

“Grace, Grace!” Violet was shouting, waving some papers in her hand. “You will not believe what I have discovered. Grace, you have to hear this.”

Grace stood from the lavender bushes, not even bothering to wipe down the soil from the skirt of her gown, for what was the point?

“You look as if you have been caught in a whirlwind, Vi,” Diana said in interest as she caught up to them in the garden.

“I feel like I have.” Violet stopped running, red in the face as she leaned forward to catch her breath, still clutching papers. “You will not believe what I have heard this morning. I had to come and see you, Grace. Oh, it changes everything.”

“What on earth is going on?” Grace asked. “Come, sit down. You look ready to

burst.” She and Diana steered Violet back to the bench behind them. She sat but barely managed to perch on the very edge for she looked so excited.

“I was at the print house this morning.” She waved the papers in front of her. “I was talking to my publisher about my latest book when a whole cohort of ladies walked in. As you can imagine, I hardly wanted to be seen by them in there. Lord knows what they’d whisper about me, so I quickly made an excuse to the publisher and hid in his office.”

“Did they see you?” Diana asked with concern.

“No, thank goodness.” Violet shook her head. “But they started talking to the publisher, and from my position, I could listen in. Mrs. Robertson was amongst them. It turns out, they write for one of the scandal sheets. They had come to collect all their stories together for their next print run.”

The name, Mrs. Robertson, made Grace stiffen. It made sense to her now why the incident with the carriage in Covent Garden had appeared so quickly in the scandal sheets, for Mrs. Robertson was there to witness it even though she had twisted the truth in her retelling of it.

“Mrs. Robertson,” she whispered. “Has she been behind all of the stories about me?”

“No.” Violet turned to face her completely on the bench. “That is just it, Grace. One of the other ladies was asking Mrs. Robertson where she got all this information on you from, for you and your husband are the talk of the town because of it. Mrs. Robertson started talking about a good source, how she had someone inside your father’s house who was very ready indeed to tell her all she needed to know.”

“My father’s house?” Grace’s mind worked fast. That day when she and her father had talked of the late Duke of Berkley’s gambling, had there been a maid with their

ear pressed against the door, listening into their conversation? Had there been a gardener who had seen her climb in through the window then stepped closer to hear all that was said. “Who?”

“Surely no one in that house would betray your family so much,” Diana muttered, fear lacing her voice. “The mere thought...” She shuddered. “It’s unthinkable.”

“There is someone.” Violet nodded firmly. “Grace, I am so sorry to be the one to tell you this.” She reached for Grace’s hand and gripped it tightly. “For it is no staff member, no visitor; it is someone much closer to home.”

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“It cannot be,” Grace whispered in horror. She thought of her mother and how much Althea had always despaired of her, yet it seemed unthinkable that a lady so focused on propriety would consider putting her own daughter’s name in the scandal sheets. “Do not tell me it was my mother.”

“No, no, not your mother.” Violet shook her head firmly. “It was your cousin. It was Tabitha.”

### CHAPTER30

Grace thrust the door open of her father’s house, not even bothering to knock as she entered. Behind her, Diana and Violet raced to keep up with her, holding each other's hands.

“She’s quite determined, isn’t she?” Diana whispered, clearly shocked at the transformation in Grace’s character.

“I’ve never seen her like this.”

Grace didn’t look back at her friends as they marveled at her. She marched through the house, suddenly in no danger of tripping at all. She had a feeling there was still mud on her dress from the garden back home, but she didn’t bother wiping off the dirt. Her mind was focused completely on one thing — find Tabitha.

“Tabitha!” Grace shouted the name loudly.

Toward the back of the house, a door opened. It was pushed open by her father. She

smiled momentarily to see he was standing. He looked a little better; there was more color to his cheeks though his expression told all of his concern as he stared at her.

“What’s wrong, Grace?” he asked.

Behind him, just past his shoulder, Grace could glimpse that Althea and Tabitha were in the music room with him. Tabitha must have just broken off from her piano practice, for she had halted with her hands in the air.

Grace walked into the room. She briefly laid a hand of reassurance to her father’s arm then left him and walked straight toward her cousin, aware that Violet and Diana stood in the doorway, their eyes wide as if they were at the theatre.

“How could you?” Grace ranted, rounding on her cousin.

Tabitha looked like she had been frozen into a lady made of ice. Her jaw was slack, her hands still raised as she sat before the piano.

“What is going on? What is the meaning of this?” Althea asked hurriedly. “Grace, a duchess should not shout —”

“The sort of duchess I am means I can do whatever the hell I like, Mother.”

“A lady should not say ‘hell’ —”

“Not now, Mother!” Grace snapped, turning back to face Tabitha again. “How could you do it? How could you give all those stories about me to the scandal sheets? You made them up, didn’t you? The ones about me falling off my horse with my skirts falling up. As for the one about Philip’s father...”

She paused, glancing at her own father who was now gripping to the back of the



nearest armchair to support himself. “You heard us that day talking, didn’t you?” she observed in horror. “And you saw an opportunity to embarrass us all?”

“Wh-what?” Tabitha stammered, speaking for the first time. “No, no, it wasn’t like that, Grace.”

“Then what was it like!?” Grace snapped. “You have ruined my marriage, may well have ruined any chance I had of being happy in love, and I would like to know why you saw fit to treat my life like it was a puppet game of yours to control. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Tabitha’s lips opened and closed, but no sound came out.

“Tabitha?” Althea asked, her voice deep and low as she moved to Grace’s side. “Is this true?”

It was this that seemed to break Tabitha. She had clearly lost the respect of the woman whose affection she had come to take for granted in that house.

Tears sprang into her eyes.

“It was not supposed to happen like this,” Tabitha said in a sudden rush as those tears leaked down her cheeks. She stood, appealing to the two of them. “Grace, I thought you didn’t want to marry him. I thought you wouldn’t care. Aunt, you were so keen for me to marry well. My parents were too.”

“You thought you could marry Philip!?” Grace shouted in shock.

“It was what my parents wanted.” Tabitha shook, holding her hands to her cheeks. “My mother writes to me every week from the country. She’s always asked me about my prospects, about when I’ll marry a rich duke. Look, look, I’ll show you.”

She strode away and dove her hands into a box full of sheet music though she didn't retrieve music. Instead, she pulled out letters from her parents which she had hidden there.

“Read them. You'll see the pressure I'm under.”

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Grace didn't bother to catch them though. Althea did. What she read briefly in those letters clearly horrified her, for she pushed them away fast.

"That is no excuse," Althea said darkly. "You could have written back and told your mother and father you would find a man in due course. You are a fine lady, Tabitha. You could have your pick of the gentlemen. You have so many suitors."

"But none of them is a duke," Tabitha suddenly wailed. "None of them! Yet Grace, Grace has a duke, and she didn't even want him."

"I do want him," Grace confessed. It was like a stone dropping in water. There was sudden silence in the room. "That doesn't matter now. He'll never accept this. Never."

She took a step back from her cousin, feeling tainted by association to a person who would be so willing to condemn them all by putting all of their names in a scandal sheet.

"I'm sorry," Tabitha murmured hurriedly. "Truly, I am. I didn't know he mattered to you this much. I was just..." She paused, looking around the room, clearly trying to find someone who would understand, but no one would. "I was just trying to find a way to make my parents happy."

"Enough, Tabitha. Enough," John said from his chair, rubbing his brow. He looked very sorry indeed.

"Yes, enough." Althea took control of the situation. "Tabitha, clearly you are not

quite the lady I thought. All the formalities and fine manners in the world cannot make up for something so underhanded, so... cruel." Althea's condemnation made Tabitha cry all the more. "I think it best you retreat from London at once to consider what you have done."

Tabitha nodded, her tears stifling her next words.

"Ye-yes, if you like... I'll go-go to my parents?"

"I'll write to them. I'll let my sister know what her insistence on a good match has produced." Althea pointed toward the door. "Go and urge your maid to pack for you, Tabitha. I shall speak with you again before you leave."

Grace watched open mouthed as Althea turned her back on Tabitha. In seconds, Tabitha had gone from being the apple of Althea's eye to nothing better than the apple's pips.

Tabitha fled the room fast, great wails escaping her. Violet and Diana barely stepped out of the way in time to avoid being knocked over by her.

"This is difficult," Althea murmured once a door slammed shut upstairs, muffling Tabitha's cries. "She is not alone to blame though I doubt I will ever forgive her for this betrayal."

"She felt backed into a corner," Grace said, trying to understand her cousin though just like her mother, she was finding it hard. How could she ever forgive Tabitha for such an action?

No matter what pressure Tabitha was under to marry a man of such high position, she had willingly chosen to see Grace's name disgraced in the scandal sheets a number of times. She had even disgraced the name of the man she claimed she wished to marry

as well as the uncle who had been so good as to give her a home for the summer and introduce her to society.

“She has ruined everything,” Grace managed to utter these words eventually, feeling tears prick the backs of her eyes.

Althea stepped toward her, placing her hands on the tops of Grace’s shoulders.

“Moments in time pass much quicker than you think,” Althea said in a softer tone than Grace could remember hearing her mother speak for some time. “There will come a moment when the scandal sheets are forgotten as hard as that is to imagine right now. Especially if we are able to put our own story in the scandal sheets and set the story straight. Things will move on fast.”

Grace nodded though she was not convinced by her mother’s words. Come what may, she had lost something that mattered to her.

I have still lost Philip.

“Do not worry, Grace.” Althea smiled at her. “You will make quite the duchess in your own way.” There was a glimmer of humor in her face. “You have a good heart. That is more important than anything else.” She shot a resentful glare to the ceiling, clearly referring to the fact that a good heart was what Tabitha had been missing after all, deep down.

“Thank you, Mother,” Grace whispered, wanting to say how much her words mattered.

“Why don’t you go home to your husband? You can explain all to him now.”

“That doesn’t matter.” Grace shook her head, knowing the truth. She recalled the

arrangement they had made ahead of the wedding. Clearly, he intended to keep to that deal. “It won’t make a difference. He only wanted me for a month anyway.”

\* \* \*

Tired and aching, Grace stepped down from the horse. She swept the black veil she’d worn to keep her face hidden from the scandal writers, who might be walking the streets back over her updo. In the darkness of the night, she barely saw where she was going. One glittering lantern from the Dowager Hall shone, urging her toward it.

As she stepped up onto the marble front stoop though, another light caught her eye. Turning to her right, she saw an entire line of lanterns, rich orange candles hidden within glass lanterns leading away through the grounds, far from the Dowager Hall. They looked oddly like giant glow worms, hovering in the air, just out of reach, creating a path.

“What is this?” Grace murmured.

Her maid stepped down from the Dowager Hall entrance, bearing the one lantern in her hand that had first drawn Grace forward. The apricot light fell on the maid’s face.

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“You have to follow the light,” the maid said excitedly, scarcely able to hold in her giggles. “He has left a gown for you to wear too.”

“Has he now?” Grace didn’t need to ask who her maid meant. The thought that Philip was leaving new demands for her infuriated her. After everything she had found out that day, the discovery that one of her dearest friends, her family, her kin, had worked so hard to hurt her reputation and her happiness had turned her world upside down. “I’m in no mood to see him.”

Grace stepped past the maid and climbed up into the house, but the maid scurried after her, still bearing that lantern forward.

“Please, Your Grace. He’s most eager to see you.”

“I doubt that.” Grace scoffed at the idea. “He made it perfectly plain he had no wish to see me for this next month.”

Unless he wishes to try again for an heir. Only then will he call me to him.

The mere thought of Philip making love to her whilst he disliked her so was gut-wrenching. She longed to hold him in her arms, to tell him that she had never sought to embarrass him, that she loved him, but how could she? How could she do such a thing when he had only ever married her to save his own reputation?

“I have no wish to see him.”

“Your Grace —” The maid said no more though.

Grace had stumbled to a stop as she looked across the entrance hall. Hanging at the bottom of the staircase was a golden hued gown. It was made of dark golden silk, that material accented in the lantern light. It was the same cut as the burgundy gown Grace had worn before. It would accent her curves and her cleavage — she didn't doubt that.

“He wants me to wear that?” Grace asked in disbelief, staring at it.

Why? What game is he playing?

“Yes.” The maid nodded at her side. “Will you go, your Grace?”

Grace couldn't deny she longed to see him. She blinked, thinking about the tears she had shed earlier that day when she thought of him. Yet she had another reason to see him too.

I'll play his games. I must.

“Very well. Would you help me change, please?”

## CHAPTER 31

“There she is,” Philip whispered to himself as he stood from the steps of the Palladian summer house of his grounds.

Slowly, through the soft glow of orange light from the lanterns, she had appeared. She was walking slowly toward him with no eagerness in her step at all. Her head was turned toward him though the light was too dim for him to possibly discern her expression at this distance.

The thing he noticed first was the dress. He wouldn't have been surprised if she had



refused to wear the dress he had purchased for her. He had meant it as a gift though after he thought about what he had done, he realized that his asking for her to wear it may have been seen as yet another demand.

It suited her even better than he had imagined. It accented the perfect curve of her hips, the swell of her breasts, down to that narrow waist. She had not bothered with gloves but walked with her hands loose at her sides. Her hair too she had taken out of its updo. Far from what was expected at any event of the ton, it was loose and wild about her shoulders, and he loved it.

He imagined trailing his fingers through those tresses, though it was the wind that got that blessing, tangling it in the air before it laid flat again on her shoulders.

She was now so near that he could see her face. There was no trace of a smile, only fury in her furrowed brow.

He stepped toward her as she grew near, but she halted by the final lantern, maintaining distance between them. He wasn't even sure if she was close enough to see what he had set up in the summerhouse. Beyond the white pillar columns was the same blanket they had taken on their picnic to the top of the hill. There was champagne, too, and a feast for a late-night picnic.

Her eyes didn't even glance toward the preparations he had made.

"Wife," he whispered, wanting to call her that, for it was what she was, wasn't she? She was his. Even if he was too mad and foolish to realize half the time. "It was one of our happiest days, wasn't it? That picnic. I thought we could have another of those," he began, his words sounding foolish to his own ears. "I thought we could share in that happiness again."

"Did you now?" she scoffed. He flinched at the sound. He was hardly expecting her

to run into his arms after the way he had ousted her from the house, but he longed for it all the same. “I see,” she murmured. She blinked heavily and looked away. “So, Eleanor told you of what Tabitha did, and now, you can suddenly stand to be in my presence again?”

“What?” Philip said sharply.

Tabitha? Why are we talking of her?

“You’ve decided you can trust me again, can you?” She shook her head and turned around, clearly intending to leave.

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“No, Grace. Wait.” He hastened after her, cutting off her path by the next lantern. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Eleanor hasn’t come to see me in days. What has Tabitha done? What is it I don’t know?”

She wouldn’t look him in the eye. Instead, she stared blankly into his chest. She seemed so regal yet distanced at that moment. She was every inch the duchess, yet he wanted his duchess back. He wanted wild Grace. He wanted Grace running with her gown lifted about her knees, laughing loudly, and falling in a heap with him on that blanket.

“Grace?” he asked again, his voice softening as it grew deeper. He took a step toward her. “What is it I do not know?”

“Tabitha has been giving stories about me to the scandal sheets,” she said in a sudden rush. “She was the one who fed them lies.”

“What? Whatever for? She’s your cousin!”

“It hardly matters why. Are you pretending now Eleanor has not told you?”

“She’s told me nothing!” he hissed and stepped toward her. He reached for her hand, but she snatched it away, stumbling back. She tripped on the hem of the gown he’d had made for her, and he reached up, grabbing her around the waist before she could fall. They hobbled together for a second then found their balance.

His hands rested on her waist as she held her hands outward, not daring to touch him. Her eyes were wet with unshed tears. Now they were so close together, he could see

it all though she still wouldn't look him in the eye.

“Then why have you asked me to come out here? Why would you want to see me at all after how much I have embarrassed you? We both know you cannot stand the sight of me at this moment —”

“Stand the sight of you? Do you have any idea how wrong you are!?”

“You do not want me. You regret the marriage. You only did it to save your own reputation.”

“For Christ's sake, Grace.” He lifted one of his hands to her face, taking her chin and lifting her face, so she had to look him in the eye at last. “I asked you here because I am going mad from missing you.”

The wetness of her eyes was all the more obvious now. In the lantern light, they shone like golden orbs.

“Philip,” she whispered, her breath hitching. He shifted his hand, moving his thumb to wipe away one tear that escaped down her cheek.

“Don't cry, Grace. Please. I have clearly been wrong about so many things, denying many things to myself too, but I am here now, and there is so much I need to say to you.”

“You were right about one thing.” She swallowed, uneasily, sniffing and clearly trying to stop any more of those tears from falling. “When you said I wanted to get away from you.”

Philip's gut tightened. She didn't love him then as he loved her. She wanted to be free, to run away from him.

“I did because I cannot handle just one month.” Her words made his hand turn on her cheek, the thumb caressing the edge down to her bottom lip. “It’s all or nothing, Philip. I cannot bear just one month with you, only for your presence to be snatched away from me completely. I think I wanted to get away to stop further heartbreak. You caused enough as it is.”

She pushed into his chest, begging for release, but he wouldn’t let her go. He threaded his arm further across her waist, drawing her in even closer. She no longer made an effort to escape him though more tears fell, much quicker now as her breath hitched.

“I want forever with you,” she whispered between her hiccupping breath. “Because I am madly in love with you, hopelessly so, and if you can’t offer me forever then a picnic,” she waved a hand toward the display he had made in the summerhouse, “is a very bad idea.”

“Oh God, Grace.” He ran his thumb across her bottom lip, so overwhelmed that all he wanted to do was kiss her after her confession, but he knew she wouldn’t let him. Not yet. He turned her chin up, so she would look at him again. “I was the one supposed to be making a confession tonight.”

“Confession?” she whispered. “What do you mean?”

“I mean simply this.” He bent toward her, a smile now lifting his features. “That if you didn’t turn nearly every conversation we ever had into a fight then I would have told you that I love you by now.”

He brushed his lips against her own. It started soft, a mere brush, a tantalizing excitement of everything they had shared in the past and could yet experience again. He felt her sink into the kiss, one of her hands tightening around the edge of his waistcoat, but he couldn’t give in completely yet, for there was something more he

had to say first.

He pulled back, just enough so that he could place both hands on her cheeks and wipe away all signs of her tears.

“I am not here to offer one picnic for one night,” he said hurriedly, desperate to tell her everything now. “I’m here to tell you that when I thought you didn’t want me, it broke me. That’s why I drove you away — because I couldn’t bear the pain of it. I don’t want to lose you, Grace. I’m offering more than one night. I’m offering that forever. If you will have me.”

He waited with bated breath for her answer. Hearing she loved him too was everything, but this was what he was truly after — her commitment to him, the knowledge that they were both in this now for good.

“Stay with me, wife?” he pleaded. “Stay.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

EPILOGUE

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:57 am*

Grace felt Philip press his lips to hers in a heated kiss. Her promise to not go anywhere seemed to have broken something in him. Whereas before he had kissed her slowly, sensually, now it was full of need and passion. Grace reached up, clinging to his waistcoat as her hands took hold of her hips.

She didn't want this moment to end, didn't want to be free of this feeling that Philip loved her, that he didn't want to lose her.

"Stay," he whispered between their kisses. "Out here with me tonight."

"To picnic?" she said with a smile. "Is that not a little improper?" she teased him, leaning far enough back, so she could look him in the eye. "A duke and duchess picnicking under the stars when they should be tucked up in bed?"

"I was not just thinking of a picnic." With his words, his fingers splayed even more, reaching up to her waist, and the tops of his fingers brushed the undersides of her breasts. "I was thinking of something much more improper."

"Oh?" she gasped, excitement shooting through her core at the mere thought.

"Haven't you noticed by now, Grace?" He bent down toward her again. "You make me quite powerless at night."

"Me?" Her voice said a little shakily.

"I can't stay away," he whispered, his lips pressing to hers.

Grace wrapped her arms around his neck as he bent toward her. She suddenly understood something that had passed her by before. All the times they had made love, she thought it was him just trying to have an heir, but she was wrong.

All this talk of possessing her, of her belonging to him, was about this need, about love.

I can't believe it. He has been as entranced with me as I am with him!

He pulled back from the kiss a little and drew her by the hand toward the picnic blanket. She was breathless as she followed him, not just because she wanted this feeling again, this excitement, but because this time, it would be different. They would be completely making love, knowing how much they each wanted it.

As they reached the blanket, Philip turned to her and started to unthread the laces of her gown.

"I thought you liked the dress," she teased him, watching as his gaze grew hungry.

"I love it," he murmured. "Wear more dresses like this. Stop hiding in frumpy dresses that don't show off this figure of yours."

"Show it off?" she repeated in amazement.

As he pushed the gown down firmly, he turned her around, reaching for the corset. He pulled at those laces too, his movement growing quicker now.

"You don't have any real idea, do you?" he said with a laugh. "Dear God, Grace." He turned her back around as he threw the corset off her, bending back down. "I think the first night I ever wondered what it would be like to have you in my arms was the night you fell into me, and I had to catch you."



“That was the first night we ever met!” she reminded him.

“It was.” He laughed. “I kept trying to push thoughts of you away, these curves of yours...” His voice deepened as she shivered with excitement. “But that night when you tried to kiss another man, it made me snap. I don’t want you kissing any other man but me.”

“Then kiss me already,” she pleaded.

He did, bending down toward her with such heat that she started pulling at his clothes too, determined to shed them and be completely bare with him. When he had nothing but his trousers left on, they fell to the blanket together.

The food he had arranged was tipped to the side of the blanket as he laid over her, exploring her. Her legs raised, wrapping themselves around his hips as he kissed her, exploring her with his tongue.

She shivered though it had nothing to do with the chilly air of that autumnal night. He seemed to sense the cold though, for rather than pulling that chemise off her completely, he raised it around her hips, opening her hips to him.

This time, there was nothing preemptive. He didn’t explore her with his tongue or fingers but released his length from his trousers. Her breathing quickened, just as her heartbeat did, and she wrapped her arms around his biceps, holding him close.

“Say you’re mine, Grace,” he pleaded, not quite kissing her but hovering his lips just above hers. “Say it,” he pleaded again.

“I am yours,” she moaned as he nudged her entrance, teasing her with his hardness, but not yet taking her. “I always was, Philip.”

With this confession, he pushed inside of her.

Her hands tightened around his arms as he entered her, and she moaned his name loudly.

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Out here, in the elements, with the wind brushing their skin, she thought they were safe. She could scream his name aloud and prayed the staff tucked away in the houses wouldn't hear her. It was invigorating, just how free she felt making love to Philip outside.

He kept rocking their hips together. There was nothing gentle about his movements. It was firm and fast so that he hit every pleasurable spot inside of her as he moved.

She raised her legs as high as she possibly could, giving him complete access to her, then he took hold of her hands, placing them over her head and pinning them there in one of his.

To feel so dominated by him was such a thrill that her moans grew louder again. She could no longer form his name, and only managed sounds as her body was rocked with such pleasure.

"Mine," Philip started to whisper in her ear. "God, I love you, Grace. I cannot imagine you married to any other man."

The words alone were enough to heighten her pleasure. She threw her head back, feeling how strong he was as he shifted their position. He tucked his arms under her legs and lifted them higher, so he was practically bending her in half as he entered her, maintaining the connection of their gazes the whole time.

To be so penetrated by him yet at the same time, hear such words, created such a pleasure that she had never felt before.

Her end was coming fast. She could feel it rippling through her, overtaking her so strongly that her hands couldn't stay still. As he had released his grip on her wrists, she let her fingers explore across his shoulders, down his torso, to his strong stomach, then she let them fall back to the picnic blanket as well, creasing it beneath her fingers.

She had no idea her body was capable of feeling such pleasure. That final moment hit her like a great wave from the ocean. She was taken over that edge and into a complete oblivion of pleasure.

"Philip," she moaned his name as he entered her again and again, never once hesitating or slowing his pace.

She was still moaning, her body sensitive and struggling to come down from that height when she noticed his own sounds changing. He was no longer just breathing heavily but moaning himself, short growling sounds which were possessive and full of pleasure.

Then he thrust into her one more time. He craned his head back as he did so, one final guttural sound escaping him. The sight of him in all that lantern light, the sweat on his chest beading like drips of gold, Grace was sure she would never forget.

She reached her hands up toward him, pulling him back down to her. Panting, he collapsed over the top of her, bearing his weight on one forearm as their lips collided in a heated kiss.

"God, I love you, Grace," he managed to murmur between his kisses. "Always so afraid of this feeling, so scared of it."

"Why?" she said, kissing him back. "Why be scared of love, Philip?"

"I never wanted to hurt you." He raised himself just enough to look into her eyes.

“Never.”

She felt the irony of the statement. In an effort not to hurt her, he had ended up causing them both pain, but that was over now.

“No more being afraid?” she pleaded, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him back down toward her.

“No more,” he promised.

“Good. Because if all of our picnics are going to be like this one, I think it might be a very happy marriage indeed.”

He chuckled lightly, the vibrations emanating through their connection as he bent toward her, ready for another of their heated kisses. One of his hands trailed his fingers through her hair, pulling at it until it had fallen out of its updo. Clearly, he had no intention of their picnic ending just yet.

“You took the words right out of my mouth, My Duchess.”

The End?