



A Bet with a Duchess (The Gambling Dukes #1)

Author: *Emily E K Murdoch*

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Description: Georgiana, Dowager Duchess of Cartice, is not a woman to underestimate.

And that's exactly what he's done. Fynn Monroe, investigative journalist, has decided that the gambling club I've founded with my three friends has to be stealing money from someone.

So what do I do? Hide away, pretend scandal won't destroy us?

No. I've invited him to our country estate, where there are no secrets to find and just an irritatingly handsome journalist to entertain.

Precisely why I allowed him to make a bet—that he won't find any scandal—I couldn't say...

Only one person can win a bet with a duchess: and it's got to be me. If I lose this bet, I'll lose myself to Fynn Monroe...

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ONE

Georgiana

I probably should never have entered into a bet with the most curious man in England. Trouble was, I hadn't met him yet.

London was too hot. That was why we had retreated to the manor house for the week; the lake was beckoning, its translucent aquamarine color dancing elegantly across the chairs that had been placed there by one of the footmen.

I sipped at my wine in the shade. "I still think I made the right decision."

Someone snorted to my left. Markham, I was sure. Technically the Duke of Markham—the name so rarely went by his first name, Peregrine, that at times I forgot it. My friend was always ready to critique anything I did; that was what made him my friend, I suppose.

"You're a fool, Georgiana," he said, a dark eyebrow raised as one of the footmen handed him a glass of white wine, crisp from the cellar underneath the Tudor manor my friends and I had bought just months ago.

"I am not a fool."

"You may consider yourself an expert in the law?—"

"The expert in the law," I interrupted crisply.

Well, I wasn't about to permit him to speak like that to me, was I? Six and twenty, widowed after my husband—chosen by my parents and fifty years older than me—had died last year, and appointed the official legal expert for the Gambling Dukes, the club I'd helped co-found.

And of course, I'd demanded duchesses be permitted to joined to. The very idea that ladies would not be able to join!

I wasn't going to ever show my friends—any of them—just how desperate I was to prove myself.

Not just a part of The Gambling Dukes because I was the Dowager Duchess of Cartice.

Because I had earned it.

Markham rolled his eyes. “My point is, you should have ignored those letters. Damned journalists always disappear after a while.”

“He's right, you know.”

I glanced over to my left, shifting slightly to examine Kineallen. The official head of the Gambling Dukes club; at least, that's what he wanted us to believe.

Kineallen. More properly Alfred, Duke of Kineallen, and all-round killjoy.

“Don't you start,” I said calmly.

That was the benefit of taking charge of the legal side of things in our club, I supposed. No matter what my idiot friends did, even if my friend Lilah sided with them, I was the one who had studied the law in the privacy of my late husband's

library far more than the rest of them combined.

I was the one they had to listen to. Mostly.

“—and if you simply had ignored?—”

“I have the matter under control,” I said succinctly, pushing my golden hair out of my eyes. It was too hot to have this conversation; had we not retreated from the city to avoid such drama? “The journalist is looking for dirt, and as there is none to be found, it’s all quite simple.”

“What’s simple?” said a cool, liquid voice with the self-assurance of a queen.

Markham and Kineallen rose in delight to welcome Lilah, looking absolutely stunning as always in a floor length emerald gown that would have looked more at home at Almack’s than at the country estate we all co-owned.

Really. I was fortunate, I knew as I rose with a smile, that I actually liked my friend. Devastating beautiful, elegant at all times, and frustratingly intelligent, it would have been far too easy to push her in the lake and watch her perfect dark hair unravel.

Delilah, Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick. My oldest friend.

“Lilah!”

“Georgiana, you darling,” said Lilah with a grin. “Thank you.”

Without even asking, she took the mostly undrunk wine from my hands and placed the glass between her perfect lips.

After a long sip, she beamed. “My favorite.”

I had to laugh. There was only one Lilah, thank God.

“That was actually Georgiana’s drink,” said Kineallen, nodding at one of the footmen, who immediately turned to retrieve another.

Lilah’s eyes opened wide. “Why didn’t you say?—”

“She’s too busy saving the club from disaster,” said Markham with a laugh, stepping out of the saloon with a glass of wine in each hand. “Hullo, Lilah, you witch.”

“Hullo you bastard,” said Lilah without missing a beat as I settled myself back onto my chair and watched the two youngest members bicker happily. “I hear you’re alone again, that young Miss Edgars stopped accepting your advances? Finally saw sense?”

“I think we need to focus on what is important here,” interrupted Kineallen, pulling a pocketbook out of his waistcoat. “The fact our club is about to be dropped into the?—”

“Kineallen!”

“Well, you know what I mean,” he said darkly.

I sighed heavily. My friends were always so dramatic; anyone who said women were the emotional ones had never met these two.

Kineallen, the eldest. Far too handsome for his own good, wound up so tight I had never seen him relax for more than a minute.

Markham, the baby of the gang. Always seeking to prove himself, and never managing it.

“We are not in anything,” I said with a dry laugh. “I have the entire situation in hand. The Investigator ?—”

“The rag?” Lilah finished my wine. “Didn’t they write, asking for?—”

“They are certain they have dirt on us, on the Gambling Dukes,” I said wearily. It was past six o’clock and I had spent the entire day pouring over letters from ‘the rag’, as my friend called it, and I was tired. A nice drink, a nice dinner from the cook we’d brought with us from London, then sleep. The resplendent bedchambers upstairs were already beckoning. “They’re fishing, they cannot possibly know anything—there isn’t anything to know!”

“But with the club so recently launched, the merest hint of scandal would be the end of the Gambling Dukes,” said Lilah, her beautiful face creased in a frown.

I smiled calmly. I may not have the perfect olive complexion and liquid amber eyes of my friend, but I still had golden silky sweeping hair and fierce stare. I would not permit my friend to intimidate me.

“I know that,” I said quietly. “And that is why I have invited this journalist, this F. Monroe...here.”

I should have known their reactions; they were all so predictable.

Lilah’s mouth fell open. Kineallen swore under his breath. Markham merely looked as though he had misheard me.

“You cannot be serious,” spat Kineallen.

“Never more so,” I said sweetly, privately luxuriating in their astonishment.

What, did they think making me in charge of any legal mishaps that the club fell into meant I would never make a decision of my own? True, none of us had ever thought, when we'd founded the thing less than a year ago that it would actually happen, but there it was.

I raised a hand and gestured at the manor. "We've plenty of room, and she?—"

"You have lost all grasp on reason," said Kineallen with a frown. "Damnnit, Georgiana, the damned journalist has been hounding us for?—"

"And that's precisely why I have invited them," I interrupted. Couldn't they see what a brilliant idea it was? "Here, under my thumb—I'll give them free rein of the library?—"

"Full rein?"

"—she'll swiftly see there is nothing to find, no scandal to uncover, no dirt to smear," I continued smoothly, ignoring Markham's look of horror. "And to make sure they are thorough, and can leave here and go back to their editor with their tail between their legs, I've made a bet."

Lilah snorted, her second wine going up her nose, as Markham rolled his eyes.

"Georgiana, you haven't?—"

"It's what we do," I said fiercely.

What we'd always done. We'd gambled, bet on ourselves, fought against the snobbery of Society, and where were we now?

Rich, that's what. Markham had saved his estate from financial ruin, Kineallen now

had a very pleasant chateaux in France that I longed to visit as soon as Napoleon had ceased his nonsense, and Lilah—why, the only reason she had been granted admittance was because she had met against her late husband and secured his hand.

“I’ve made a bet that they won’t find anything, and they won’t,” I said steadily, though my heart had most irritatingly increased a little.

Well, it was not surprising. This was the biggest decision I had ever made for the club; perhaps would ever make.

But I was willing to gamble on this. I knew my friends, knew the ethics we shared. Yes, we gambled, yes, we made wild bets and enjoyed doing so. But there was no scandal here. There was nothing to find.

This idiot journalist would come here, sip the champagne, rootle about trying to find something that wasn’t there, then leave.

It was as simple as that.

“You’re only doing this because you’re bored,” quipped Markham with a sly look as he settled on a deck chair of his own. “You miss Paul.”

Strange; the pain of hearing his name had lessened since I heard it last. How long had it been now? Six months?

I could have had a much worse husband, and in my own way, I missed him. Not that I missed the betrayal that he had attempted.

“Paul is in the past,” I said sharply. I had to make them see, had to make them respect me. My fingers twisted around the pearl bracelet around my wrist. “I’m as happy to gamble as any of you, and I hold all the cards.”

“True,” said Markham with a grin, “but we’ll have to hope there’s no jester in the pack.”

I probably would have responded with a clever quip—or at least, something I would have hoped would have been clever.

But a figure appeared by the French windows in the saloon, one of our footmen stepping over to open the door.

“Ah,” I said pleasantly. “There she is.”

The door opened—and the most painfully handsome man I had ever seen stepped onto the deck.

Fynn

I breathed out slowly as I stepped down from the carriage onto the gravel drive before the manor.

The damned place wasn’t even on maps. That was how rich this club was—and I would prove it had been gained illegally, I was sure. I could smell the scandal in the air, though that could have been the lazy heat pouring onto the luxurious grounds.

My jaw tightened. I had to concentrate, had to take everything in. All my usual tricks were out—at least, that’s what Mr. Jordan had said.

“Get the scoop, get the story, uncover whatever lies they’re telling Society, and I don’t care how,” my editor had said with a fierce look just that morning before I had left the stifling office in London.

“Any means necessary?” I had quipped, raising a golden eyebrow and slinging my

satchel over my shoulder.

My feet crunched on the gravel as I strode toward the impressive double doors of the manor. Dalhurst Manor.

God, to think one club had all this money—it was disgusting.

The Gambling Dukes.

No one had expected them. No one had predicted it.

A gambling club...founded by two dukes, and two duchesses.

All widowed. All in need of funds. All confident beyond belief, and winning money left right and center—it all felt too good to be true, if you asked me.

And so here I was: trying to investigate four members of nobility who all outranked me by miles.

The doorbell jangled. No one appeared.

I had foolishly dressed in my best suit, something to impress this Chief Legal Counsel of the Gambling Club who had issued the rather intriguing invitation. A bet; a bet that I couldn't find anything even after staying a week with them.

Well, that was a bet I could not refuse; and I had the upper hand, for I knew I would find something. A week? A day, that was all I needed.

All I needed to prove this club who suddenly appeared in Society just a few months ago certainly had more nefarious dealings than anyone suspected.

When the door finally opened, I was hot, irritated, and ready to head to my guest bedchamber and take a long, hot bath. All I wanted was warm water on my tired muscles, but the butler, or whoever he was, merely smiled thinly.

“They are waiting for you,” he said quietly, then turned without saying another word.

I shifted my satchel and pulled my trunk through the...

It couldn't be called a hallway. That would make it sound small, domestic, while this space...

If I hadn't known I had left the heat and riot of London behind, I would have said I was standing in one of the majestic alcoves of St. James's Palace, or one of the consulates. Sunlight drifted lazily from the glass dome in the center of the ceiling, while a crystal chandelier simply coated in diamonds floated above me. I couldn't precisely see how it was hanging there.

The room was at least as large as the meager lodgings I had taken when appointed as a journalist for *The Investigator*— all I could afford after that rather unfortunate scandal.

I swallowed, pushing all thoughts of last year aside. I had come here to restore my reputation, not dwell on its loss.

“Come on,” said the butler ahead of me without turning around.

Lengthening my strides, I easily caught up with the man, but it was another few minutes of walking through room after room. How big was this place? How much space did one club of only four members need—though even I had to admit, the opulence and yet elegant décor of each room we strode through was impressive.

Drawing room, dining room, glimpses of rooms flashing past so quickly I couldn't exactly see them; library, some sort of study, a billiards room?—

“They are by the lake,” said the butler, suddenly halting at a pair of French doors. “Good luck.”

“Good—what?” I turned but he had already disappeared.

For some reason my throat was dry. Which was ridiculous, I told myself. I wasn't about to be cowed by some old lawyer, even if he was the Chief Legal Counsel of a club for dukes and duchesses.

I had the brains, the intellect, and the ability to sniff out lies. I'd learnt my lessons. It wouldn't be long before I was back on the road to London, I thought to myself with a dry smile, whatever scandal it was this Gambling Dukes club was hiding in his notebook, and within days I would have broken the biggest financial story in London.

All I had to do was step forward and win this ridiculous bet.

I grasped the handle before me and pushed open the French doors. Leaving my trunk and satchel behind—no point taking those near a lake, sod's law said I would drop them in—I strode forward, trying hard not to blink in the blinding light.

A gaggle of people sat and stood on one side of the magnificent aquamarine pool. Two men, clearly close friends, were laughing together, glasses of wine in hand. I swallowed. I was not going to think about how thirsty I was.

There was a dark haired woman in the most outrageous gown lounging with a half-finished drink in her hand. Her smile disappeared as soon as she saw me.

My jaw tightened. No need to get distracted. I was here for the scoop, nothing more.

Now, all I had to do was figure out which of these tall men was the one who had been so foolish as to offer such a ridiculous bet. None of them looked old enough.

“Fynn Monroe,” I said firmly, halting before them and meeting each of their eyes in turn. None of the men looked away. “I believe you invited me?”

“So I did,” said a voice behind me that sounded almost amused. “My goodness. Now that is a surprise.”

I turned slowly on my heels and my heart most disoblingly skipped a painful beat as a woman stepped out from behind a tree. A woman I had not noticed.

Which felt impossible now. What, not notice this blonde beauty, a woman who absolutely radiated beauty and sensuality? Curves hardly hidden in the tightly fitted silk gown the same dark blue as her eyes, eyes that fixed on me most pleasantly?

My stomach lurched.

Well. Not my stomach. Something a little lower than my stomach.

Dear God, she was beautiful. I hadn’t known much about the ladies who had formed this club, and no wonder. They probably had to keep them here, far from London, to prevent any future members getting the wrong idea.

Like just how easy it would be to tear off that silk dress with my teeth, for example.

“Fynn Monroe,” said the woman with a teasing smile that made a dimple appear in her left cheek. She handed another glass to the other woman, then sipped one of her own.

I tried not to look at the way her lips pursed around the glass. What else could those

warm lips be persuaded to?—

No.

Damnit, man, wasn't this precisely the trouble you'd got into last time? Wasn't it time to think with your head, not your manhood?

“Yes, I'm Fynn Monroe,” I said, rather foolishly it felt but in that moment I could hardly think of anything to say. “I've come on the invitation of your friend—though I'll admit, I know not which friend...”

I turned and looked back at the two men. Peregrine, the Duke of Markham. Alfred, the Duke of Kineallen.

But neither of them had names beginning with E.

E. Cartice.

“Oh, don't tell me you didn't give your name, Georgiana,” said the Duke of Markham with a laugh. “And neither did he! How delicious.”

I glanced at him, then back at the woman who pushed a strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

“Georgiana?” I repeated slowly.

My brain was slow and I knew precisely why. This woman, this elegantly refined woman, peering up at me through dark luscious lashes, a teasing smile now growing on those lips I had only just been fantasizing about...

Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice. E. Cartice. The hard-hearted, forceful,

arrogant, infuriating Chief Legal Counsel I've been corresponding with for over a month?

"I...ah." I forced a smile. "Would you consider me a cad if I said I thought you were a man?"

There was a snort from the other woman but I ignored it, all my focus on the woman before me.

Well, hell. There I'd been, certain I could cajole, outdrink, then outsmart the gentleman I had come all this way to see, duke or no...only to discover she was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

Damn.

"You really did it," said the other man. There was a look of unrestrained anger in his eyes, and it was not only directed at me, but at Georgiana. "You really invited the journalist."

"Kineallen," said the Duke of Markham warningly.

"Aren't we due a little peace after the hounding he's already subjected us to?" the Duke of Kineallen continued with a snort, shaking his head. "Parasites."

My jaw tightened. I knew full well what the rich and noble born thought of journalists like me; hacks was perhaps the most polite term I was given.

Parasites was a new one.

But I was not here to be complimented. I was not even here, I told himself firmly, to seduce and bed the most delectable woman I had ever seen. Even if the hackles on the

back of my neck were rising at the mere suggestion of her gaze on me.

No. I was here to uncover what lies and mischief this gaggle of friends had done to gamble and almost always win, then return to London with the details before I ran the story.

And that was all.

I forced a smile. “What a wonderful week we are going to have.”

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TWO

Georgiana

I tapped my fork on the mahogany table. It echoed around the breakfast room as my eye slowly moved along the table absolutely laden with the components for a cooked English breakfast: bacon, eggs, sausages, fried potatoes, herring...and a bottle of red wine.

Markham always said it was the best thing to have for breakfast. I had never known whether to believe him, or consign it as one of the things he said to draw a rise out of me.

And thinking of drawing a rise out of me...

I tapped her fork again, the rhythm increasing as my irritation grew. All my friends had risen, breakfasted, and left. A luncheon that I had been invited to, but had been forced to decline—with regrets, of course, I wasn't an animal—because I had to babysit the damned journalist.

The journalist who was male.

Very male.

I swallowed as I thought back to the previous evening, the third glass of wine I had almost swallowed in one, my nervousness at seeing such a person arrive in the stead of the quiet journalist I had presumed I had invited.

“Eight o’clock, sharp,” I had told Mr. Fynn Monroe last night as tipsiness threatened to overwhelm my mind. Safer indoors, in my own bedchamber. “I’ll see you in the breakfast room.”

I turned slightly and glanced at the longcase clock slowly ticking the day away.

A quarter past nine.

Over an hour late. What on earth did the man?—

“Good morning, my lady.”

Every inch of my body tautened. Blast, why did I have to respond to the man’s mere voice?

Slowly, I turned to glare at the man who had just stepped into the breakfast room, mouth open to dress him down for his rudeness and tardiness.

My mouth stayed open, but no words came out.

Well, who could blame me? The stiff and suited man who had appeared yesterday had been handsome, yes, if you liked that rather obvious chiseled jaw, stubble carefully groomed down the neck, and tall stature.

But here he was, Mr. Fynn Monroe, in a light blue suit which was just a little tighter around his shoulders than I would have predicted, a crisp cravat tied elegantly, and a smile.

Dear God, how had he even managed to get into it? Was the thing painted on?

“My lady?”

I swallowed. I was not going to lose all self-control merely because the man was handsome. The man who was attempting to ruin my club, and my friends.

There it was; the calm, rational, precise reasoning that I was for renowned in the Gambling Dukes. All hints of lust—and that was all it was, appreciation of the male form—were pushed decidedly away, and in its place rose irritation and calm.

“I suppose you want to get started right away,” said Mr. Monroe with a lazily smile, picking up a piece of toast, taking a mouthful, and leaning against the table.

I would not give him the satisfaction of knowing how irritated I had been. “There’s no hurry,” I said airily, leaning back in my chair and crossing my legs.

Just for a second, my ankles were visible under the light green linen dress I had chosen for this continued heatwave.

A flash of something—a spark of something I had not expected to see in the hack’s face.

Desire.

I swallowed, though forced myself to remain entirely impassive.

So, that was interesting. He thought me beautiful; or at least, his subconscious did. Interesting.

Well, far be it not to use any weapons in my arsenal. Not that it would come to that.

There was nothing to find here at Dalhurst Manor. The blasted man would discover that in a week, and disappear back to London with his tail between his legs.

A wry smile teased across Mr. Monroe's face as he swallowed the last of the toast. "You're angry at me, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not," I lied stiffly.

Was it hotter in this room? It certainly felt hotter.

"Well in any case, I must apologize for my tardiness," said Mr. Monroe with a laugh. "Turns out I was far more exhausted from the journey than I thought."

I blinked. There was a crumb just below his bottom lip. It sat there, teasingly, as though it was waiting for me to?—

Absolutely not, I told herself firmly. This was business—the business of the Gambling Club, and nothing was more vital. What else did I have in my life? No child, poor Paul was not up to such things. My parents gone, taken swiftly from influenza, one after the other.

No, the Gambling Club was all I had. All I needed.

And if this Monroe character was attempting to sniff out scandal to ruin it, to take the only joy in my life away from me...

Not that there was anything to find. But still.

That did not matter when it came to London's elite. Just the suggestion of humiliation was enough to scare Society away.

"Just so tired," Mr. Monroe explained, licking his lips and discovering the crumb.

My stomach tightened. I absolutely should not be thinking of the man like this, I

thought darkly. And I wouldn't. Not from this moment onwards.

"I shall ensure one of the footmen awakens you next time," I said coldly. "Now, shall we make a start?"

Mr. Monroe nodded, looking the absolute picture of calm. It was infuriating. "Definitely—I want to win that bet."

"The bet I will win."

"I wouldn't be so sure," he said with a laugh as I rose to my feet. "I'll get my scoop, win some sort of prize I dare say?"

"You do?"

"—and win this bet from you," Mr. Monroe finished with a grin.

I tried not to glare at the blaggard.

Well! The cheek of it; coming here as my guest, when I could easily have just sent one of the club's lawyers—and I had a whole stableful of them—to frighten him off the scent of a trail that did not even exist.

Mr. Monroe stepped toward me and I was overcome in an instant by an entirely different scent.

And this one was very real.

I breathed in the man's cologne, one that had drifted on the warm air by the lake last night, but now freshly applied was absolutely heavenly. A dark mixture of musk and jasmine, a fragrance few men would consider but I was drinking in as though I had

never breathed before.

“Lady Cartice?”

I stiffened. The irritating man was only a foot away, he must have stepped forward when I did not do anything, lost in...

Oh, damn. Lost in heady images of being pulled into Mr. Monroe’s arms, that strength I could see now felt across my skin as he tilted my head back and kissed my neck, the warmth of his lips?—

“Lady Cartice, are you quite well?”

I cleared her throat. This was because I was lonely, that was all. I had been a widow for months but not taken a lover as I could because...well, I did not know why.

“Perfectly well, thank you,” I said coldly.

The last thing I needed was the damned fool thinking he had any genuine influence.

“What were you thinking for the terms of the bet?” asked Mr. Monroe, gesturing that I should step before him.

I was flattered at first, then reminded myself the idiot had no idea where I would be taking him. He was no gentleman, he was nothing but a weasel, a weasel trying to ferret out a secret that did not exist.

And that was all.

Confidence rushed through me as I thought of the bet. Perhaps a foolish thing to do in most circumstances, I thought as they stepped into a sunlit corridor that ran the full

length of the west side of Dalhurst Manor, and I knew my friends thought me reckless to engage in such a thing.

But what was the harm in a little flutter when I held all the cards?

Mr. Monroe appeared beside me as we walked, and I found myself saying, “What terms would you like?”

I tried not to glance at him, focusing entirely on the route before us. After all, it was not as though I wanted another look at the man; a closer look, standing as we were only a few inches apart.

His shrug grazed my shoulder, shooting teasing sparks of something I did my best to ignore down my arm. “If I find something?—”

“Which you won’t.”

“—which I will, then I publish,” finished Mr. Monroe as we turned a corner.

I prevented myself from smiling. That was hardly a bet; he would have done that anyway, if he could find something. If there was something to find. Which there wasn’t.

“And if you don’t?”

We stopped outside a door and I did what I had already promised myself I would not do, and turned to look at Mr. Monroe. He was looking at me, his eyes shrewd, and only then did I realize just how close he was.

Close enough to?—

“If I don’t?” Mr. Monroe repeated, a teasing smile on his lips. “Why, Lady Cartice, then you can do whatever you want with me.”

Heat seared my cheeks, despite my best efforts. Whatever I wanted? What I wanted right now was to kiss the man silly then pack him off back to London so I would never have to see him again.

I forced a smile. “Well, as I will be winning this bet, I will have to think about it.”

Fynn

She was doing this on purpose.

It was the only thought in my mind, though that was hardly impressive. Not with Lady Cartice droning on and on about the club’s history in the library of their own manor house.

“...that, of course, made that obsolete, leading to the creation of a commission to investigate the regulations impending on the betting in England since 1651...”

I blinked, but my concentration did not return. We had been here for over an hour—at least, it felt like it. Without a clock I had no way of telling. It was strange, the fact that there was not one within the library—but I supposed one of them disliked the tick.

“...regrouped to discuss the commission’s findings,” Lady Cartice said smoothly, smiling banally at me from the armchair upon which she sat. “And naturally, when the recommendations were duly considered...”

She is doing it, I thought again more fiercely than before, on purpose. Leaning like that.

Perhaps she had designed this whole conversation to make me forget what I was here for. I swallowed as the Chief Legal Counsel of the Gambling Dukes leaned even more forward, her breasts dipping down. They may be restricted by that heavenly fitted green gown, but I could see every curve, almost feel the weight of them in my palms.

All I had to do was rise, push back my chair, lean forward and pull the tantalizing woman into my arms. Or across the breakfast table from earlier.

The blasted thing looked about the right size too, more's the pity.

“Mr. Monroe? Mr. Monroe, are you concentrating?”

I smiled weakly. “Yes.”

Just not on what you think.

Lady Cartice nodded and continued on with her monologue. “When the regulations were confirmed, there were some discreet conversations undertaken with dukes and duchesses of the highest ranks ...”

Though irritation prickled at the corners of my heart, I had to admit I was impressed.

Well. It was not everyone who could drone on for this long about the legal repercussions of gambling and betting and almost entirely keep my attention.

Though admittedly it wasn't her speech that had me so transfixed.

Time to do something, or the stiffness in my breeches was going to be painfully obvious when I stood up.

“—outdated examples of?—”

“Lady Cartice,” I interrupted, leaning forward myself. “I know you are hiding something.”

There. Just a flicker, nothing more, and it was quashed the instant it arrived.

But I had seen it; just a hint of panic in her eyes. Her dark blue eyes. Eyes that captivated him in a most pleasant way.

I shook my head as though ridding my ears of water. Concentrate, man!

“I have absolutely no idea what you mean, Mr. Monroe,” said Lady Cartice sweetly, tilting her head.

The stirrings I had absolutely been denying sharpened. I cursed silently, hoping to goodness she did not see just how swiftly I was influenced by the merest hint of sensuality in her frame.

The woman could conquer the world, become noble merely by marrying a duke, I thought feverishly, and then...what, studied every book on the law she could find?

“Of course you do not,” I said smoothly—far more smoothly than I felt. “You don’t know because you don’t want to know. Because as the Chief Legal Counsel of The Gambling Dukes, knowing the secret that the club is hiding would make you liable.”

The teasing flirtatious look immediately disappeared from the woman’s face. “I beg your pardon?”

“Which is why I have no doubt that your friends have kept this, whatever it is, from you,” I pressed on, sure I was getting close now. Why else would she prickle so at my

words? “You cannot be blamed for such shortcomings, Georgiana, when?—”

“Lady Cartice.”

She did not precisely snap, but the clipped tones were sharp and I felt cut by them.

So, she wanted to play it that way, did she?

I smiled, leaning back in my chair and stretching out my arms. “You’re not to blame, Lady Cartice. I would be furious too, if I knew my friends were keeping something from me that I would want to?—”

“My friends do not keep anything from me,” Lady Cartice bit back, a temper I had not expected rising to the fore. “How dare you?”

“I dare because I have to know,” I said, excitement stirring in his stomach. I was on to something, I knew it. Why else would she respond this way? “A secret in such a respectable and yet new club such as this, you must know how it will affect?—”

“You speak of what you do not understand, and I pity your lack of understanding, for I have just spent the better part of twenty minutes explaining it to you,” Lady Cartice said with a wry smile.

I blinked. Twenty minutes?

“You think that because I am young, because I am a woman, I cannot possibly know what is going on in my own club,” Lady Cartice said sweetly.

There was something dangerous under that sweetness. The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and I immediately attempted to backtrack.

“That is not what I?—”

“And I have met men like you, arrogant men, wealthy men sometimes, intelligent men at times, men who believe anyone who is worth knowing should be someone like them, arrogant and intelligent,” said Lady Cartice firmly, rising slowly to her feet.

Her gaze did not waver and I was transfixed. She was magnificent. How had I ever doubted her?

“And that’s the rub, of course,” she said with a laugh, “because I am just as intelligent, and just as arrogant. Maybe more. I know my worth, Mr. Monroe, I know my abilities, and they far exceed most of the men I have the misfortune to meet.”

“I-I did not think?—”

“Evidently. So you will have to believe me when I tell you that there is no secret in the Gambling Dukes, save that we truly understand human nature and in doing so, win almost all of our bets,” she said sweetly.

I tried to smile. “That’s a good line.”

For a heart stopping moment, I thought she was going to shout at me. There was certainly enough rage simmering under that beauty, rage I had not believed possible.

And I had underestimated her. Badly.

But not why she thought.

Lady Cartice inclined her head. “One of Lilah’s. Another woman, may I note, who has had an impressive positive force on the club.”

Slowly, far too slowly because I was only now noticing just how much of her curvaceous hips I could see as she stood, Lady Cartice sat.

“You are clever,” I said quietly. “And arrogant, yes, and passionate, and beautiful?—”

“Beautiful?” Lady Cartice’s brow furrowed.

“That’s not what I—the point is,” I said hurriedly, cursing my own ineptitude. What on earth possessed me to say that? “My point is, I never underestimated you because you are a woman.”

It was her turn to lean back in the soft leather chairs. “Yet you did underestimate me.”

Well, it would be churlish not to admit it. “I did.”

A moment of silence. I was half in a mind to rise and state I would pack up my bags now, return to London, the bet off—which would have been a shame. A full week staying in the same location as Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice would have been a welcome respite indeed from the insipid women I’d considered courting these last few years.

Not that we were courting?—

Stick to the plan, I told myself sternly. You’ve done everything possible to uncover the Gambling Dukes’ secrets. You’re not going to leave now.

Lady Cartice smiled, slowly, her dimple appearing. “Not just a pretty face.”

I swallowed. Not only a pretty face, either. My mind slipped naturally to the rest of her, the curves of her, the power of her, the arrogance of her—yes, that word was

well chosen.

She knew how beautiful she was, knew that trapping me in a room with her for hours on end—I didn't believe for a moment it was only twenty minutes—was a surefire way of distracting my mind from the task at hand.

I grasped onto that thought tightly. The task at hand.

“You were saying,” I managed.

Lady Cartice raised an eyebrow. “I was?”

I nodded. If this was how she wanted to play the game, who was I to deny her? I was not entirely sure I could deny Lady Cartice anything. “Outdated examples of...?”

The look she gave me was pure suspicion, but I held it. Held it for longer than I had thought possible.

“Indeed,” Lady Cartice said softly. “Outdated examples of clubs limiting membership to only gentlemen, a shocking example of...”

I settled back in my armchair. Though this was perhaps not something I would admit, at least not aloud, I could listen to her talk for hours.

As long as I could look at her while she spoke.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:30 am

THREE

Georgiana

I took a deep breath as I walked onto the terrace the next morning.

Well, I had survived it. An entire morning in the company of Mr. Fynn Monroe, alone, and I hadn't succumbed to the desire to kiss him senseless, so really I ought to be congratulated.

If only the rest of the week was going to be that simple.

The lake was quiet, as it always was overnight, and the sunshine peeked through the trees that surrounded the garden, over an acre, covered in plants absolutely blooming in the hot weather.

I breathed out slowly. None of my friends ever got up this early, and even if they did, they knew better than to disturb me on the terrace at this time.

This was my time.

Time to reflect. Time to consider the thousand and one problems that I was faced with. Time to?—

“Ah, there you are.”

I stiffened. I had heard no footsteps, but that may have been because I had not been

listening for them. No one ever came out when I was here.

No one, except?—

“Mr. Monroe,” I said icily.

I had not intended to be so direct, and saw with a mixture of pleasure and disappointment that the gentleman stopped in his tracks at least ten feet away. He was dressed in the same suit as yesterday, but a different cravat this time. Once again, the suit seemed to be stretching against the muscles of his arms.

I swallowed. My gown, embroidered with daisies around the hem, felt almost childlike in the presence of such potent masculinity.

“Your friends not here?”

“Sadly not,” I said with feeling. They would have made a welcome buffer to the investigative journalist, and with Lilah here, the gentleman’s attention would certainly have been distracted...

And a feeling so unexpected I almost gasped rushed through her heart.

Jealousy.

Every man looked at Lilah; it had been the problem with every man I had ever considered as a potential lover.

“That’s a shame, I would have liked to speak with them,” said Mr. Monroe easily, sitting on a chair a little way from me.

“I am sure you would, but none of them know of any secret within the club

because?—”

“There isn’t one,” the journalist chimed in, a cheeky smile on his face. “I know. I must say, impressive that you are keeping to the line this early.”

“Early?” I laughed, then forced down my amusement. I was not here to be entertained by a man trying to ruin my friend’s and mine’s club. “It is early, I suppose. I like the early hour. Most mornings I rise for the dawn.”

Mr. Monroe’s eyebrow rose. “Even in the summer?”

“Especially in the summer. The best time to think, the early hours of the summer. Everything fresh, everything new...”

My voice melted away as my gaze caught his. How did he do it, this vaguely irritating gentleman who always seemed to be...looking at me.

Which was ridiculous. We were out here alone, conversing, what else was he supposed to look at?

But it did not explain the almost predatory look he was giving me now, as though I owed him something. As though anyone else who touched me, even thought about it, would soon find himself punched in the gut.

I swallowed. The way no gentleman had ever looked at me before.

A tingling anticipation washed across my skin, making me feel alive as I had not done since...well, it was hard to recall. There was something so powerfully masculine about Mr. Fynn Monroe, something I had not yet managed to inoculate myself against.

And I would have to. This was only the second full day he was here, and with my friends deciding to stay at old Ben's for another few days of a house party...

Well. That left me here alone.

Or rather, not alone.

"You were saying?" murmured Mr. Monroe.

I swallowed. "I think we should return to the library, there was still many records we have not exam?—"

"I do not want to see any more paperwork," groaned Mr. Monroe, his head dropping.

It was all I could do not to laugh. Well, I wanted to say, you were so determined to dig out secrets about us, but I called your bluff, did I not?

Surprised, are you, Mr. Fynn Monroe, that there's nothing to find?

"I suppose I should offer you somewhere to work," I said likely. "Take the Blue Drawing Room."

"Oh, I couldn't," he said automatically, I could tell by how quickly he spoke. "I would not wish to deprive you and your friends of a drawing room?—"

"It doesn't matter," I said nonchalantly. "We'll just use another one."

Mr. Monroe stared at me for a moment, then laughed, that lopsided smile I hated that I noticed returning. "Right. Of course."

"And you can take your dinners there too, I wouldn't wish you to be bored by my

chatter,” I added.

Or winkle something out of us that we may forget we’re saying before you, I thought darkly. This Mr. Fynn Monroe was clever, you could sense that after being in his presence for more than five minutes.

But there was something about the way he held his head. Something vulnerable that seared my heart in a way I did not expect, and before I could stop herself, words I had not intended to say had tripped off my tongue.

“Well, I suppose I could show you what we actually get paid for.”

Mr. Monroe’s head jerked up. “What, see the?—”

“We have several packs of cards in the house,” I said, inclining a hand back to the manor. “If you were interested...”

My voice once again faded away as Mr. Monroe rose to his feet and approached me. He only looked that tall, I told herself, because he was standing and I was seated.

It was nothing to do with the fact that he was at least three inches taller than me. And broader. And wearing that delicious cologne again, damn it!

“I am very interested.”

I tried not to flush as I rose. He did not mean it like that, he was interested in the club—in destroying it!

It was therefore most unfortunate that Mr. Monroe was standing quite so close to me as I rose. I brushed up against his chest, most unwillingly, but then immediately wished I had paid more attention as the sensation of my breasts against his muscular

chest sparked something rather akin to desire in my stomach.

Not that it was desire. Just lust, I told herself, just a physical need never satisfied.

I would have to be foolish not to notice just how handsome that irritatingly charming gentleman was, even if he was here to end my pet passion.

“In that case,” I said as lightly as I could manage, “come with me.”

The Orangery had been added onto the manor house when the Gambling Dukes had bought it, I explained to Mr. Monroe as we moved around to the East Wing of the house.

“None of the magnificent rooms magnificent enough?”

I smiled as I led him into a corridor lined with terracotta pots on plinths. “Not quite.”

It wasn’t worth explaining, not yet. Just seeing the place would blow my words out of the water, anyway. It was Lilah who had the way with words, and there was nothing like seeing it.

“Here we are,” I said quietly as they reached a door much like the others in the house, but the glass here was opaque. “The Orangery.”

It was rather spectacular.

Glass; sheets and sheets of it, spiraling upwards so high, you could barely see the top. Oranges, the trees not only the fruit, growing in lines within terracotta pots, the soil and the fruit lending a fragrance to the air that was intoxicating. The warmth of the place, the sultriness...

There was nothing like it.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Mr. Monroe as he turned to me, brow furrowed, as I closed the door behind us. “This was only build a few months ago?”

“Finished but a fortnight ago,” I said with a laugh, brushing my fingertips across a small orange tree. “Lilah gambled on something rather large, and decided she wished to spend her winnings on this.”

“It’s...it’s spectacular.”

Yes, it was. Oh, there were plenty of noblemen’s homes which had Orangeries, but none were as large as this.

“Walk with me, Fynn.”

I bit my lip, wishing I had not slipped into calling him by his first name, but it was all too easy to meander into familiarity with this man.

And in this place. It was where I came to think, where I thought not only on my past but my future. About what I wanted it to be. What it could be, now that I was rich, and with friends, and a widow not a silent wife.

Frowning slightly, Fynn—blast, Mr. Monroe slipped in step beside me. “But this?—”

“I know,” I said with a laugh. “It is truly splendid, is it not?”

“I admit myself impressed,” Mr. Monroe said with a wry smile. “And it is here that you play cards?”

“One of the places.” I stepped over to a console table as the path upon which we had

been meandering opened up into a table and several chairs, a small fountain just to the left. I pulled a set of playing cards out of the drawer. “We’re really rather good, you know.”

The skill had had earned us thousands.

“Rather good?”

I indicated the chairs. “Why don’t you find out?”

Mr. Monroe looked highly suspicious. Good, I could not help but think. You are finally treating me like the opponent I am. “What are we playing for?”

I shrugged as I slid as elegantly as I could muster onto a chair. “What do you have worth gambling?”

Not much, that much I would hazard a guess. There was little to shout wealth from the man, though his manners were relatively refined and he spoke well. But there was no pin in his cravat, and the carriage upon which he had arrived had departed. This was not a man of independent means.

Of course he wasn’t. the man worked for a living, did he not?

Mr. Monroe sat down opposite me, leaning back with the air of suspicion still tight in his eyes. “What shall we play?”

“Poker, I think,” I said lightly, shuffling the cards rapidly in a way that I knew would impress.

There. There it was. The man could not help but be impressed.

“You...you are rather good at that,” Mr. Monroe said weakly.

He sounded incredulous. Damn straight, I thought. I had worked hard, and so had Lilah. So had I. We had poured ourselves into this club, nothing handed to us.

We’d earned it.

“I am rather, aren’t I?” I said with a smile. God, it was pleasant to shine before this man, after he so desperately wished to ruin me. “That is one of the things that people underestimate in us. No one expects a lady to understand probabilities, or psychology.”

“Psychology?”

I probably shouldn’t be telling him this—but hell, I couldn’t help myself. I was proud of what we’d done, proud of what we’d achieved.

“My husband, when he died, left me nothing,” I said lightly, as though it did not matter. “I was left with a title but nothing else. I had to earn my way.”

There—a flicker of admiration. “But?—”

“But a lady cannot earn her own income, can she?” I interrupted with what I hoped was a winning smile. “Thankfully my three friends understood my dilemma.” They shared it. “And so we created the club.”

“The Gambling Dukes.”

“Lilah wanted it to be the Gambling Duchesses,” I said, unable to hide my smile. “But with Kineallen as our de facto leader, he got the final say.”

“And you are the only four members.”

This was not a topic I should be talking about—but Fynn Monroe was so...so warm. So charming. “To date. I do not think we would forbid future members—in fact, it will soon be necessary.”

His eyebrow rose as his gaze followed my shuffling cards. “Necessary?”

I shrugged, and tried not to notice how he watched my breasts. “We cannot win money from each other, not if we wish to continue to draw incomes from the club. We need others.”

“Other members?”

“Other members, other competitors,” I said with a nod. “And I can tell you that when playing with our most discreet competitors?—”

“More discreet than me? More discreet than dukes?” Mr. Monroe looked astonished.

I rather liked seeing him like this. “Yes. For the discreet competitors. Royalty, for example.”

He turned away from me then, looking around at the perfectly exquisite Orangery of Dalhurst Manor. His head shook as he tried to take it all in. “This is...this is wild. To think you have built up all this, the four of you friends...and you do not consider matrimony?”

The cards slipped from my hands. “I beg your pardon?”

“Forgive me, Lady Cartice, I appear to have startled you,” Mr. Monroe said, that irritatingly charming smile returning. “I meant—well, the four of you. Two

gentleman and two ladies?—”

“Oh! Oh, no!” I wrinkled my nose in immediate discussion. “Oh, the very thought—it would be like wedding my own friend!”

“And yet many in Society would expect it.” Mr. Monroe appeared far more intrigued by this denial than I would have thought. “Keep the money within the family, as it were.”

“Yes, well, I have known Lilah all my life. Our mothers were close friends,” I said, fumbling for the cards which had scattered across the table.

Mr. Monroe’s eyes were far too knowing. “It was not the Lady Rotherwick of whom I spoke.”

Blast the man, he truly was the most irritating thing I had ever met. “Kineallen married my best friend.”

There. That had shown him.

Mr. Monroe’s eyes widened in apparent horror. “Oh—oh, I did not?—”

“She died in childbed two years ago. The child too.” If I did not speak on it too long, perhaps it would not hurt.

“I—I—I am sorry, I was unaware?—”

“And Lilah’s older best friend married Markham. She died of a fever two months later.” I affixed the man with a stern glare. That would surely distract me from the tears. “My husband died six months ago, and Lilah’s husband a week before my own. You see, Mr. Monroe, we have all lost spouses, and we have chosen a life of frivolity

and joy. Matrimony has brought naught but pain.”

Pain which had receded a little in the last few days. Why?

Mr. Monroe looked most discomforted. “I should not have—I apologize.”

“Yes, well. I am sure you can understand that I am a little unsettled at present, when there’s a man trying to ruin my friends and me,” I said tightly.

And I had to remember that, didn’t I? Remember I should not be sitting so close to the man who was determined to find something to punish them with, something to take back to London and publish for the world to see.

“I had not realized that was what brought you together,” said the interloper quietly. “Loss.”

“And a love of a wager, of course,” I said with a laugh that was absolutely not brittle. “Markham is certainly never a man to give up on a risk?—”

“Gamble, in short,” Fynn said lightly.

I shrugged. “Some may see it that way. I see it more as the way the world works. Is not every action we take a risk? Do we not take decisions each day without truly knowing the potential outcome?”

I was shuffling the cards again, spinning them and flicking them between my fingers as I had done to amuse Paul.

“Well, I must admit I am impressed.”

“Of course you are.”

“Oh, not with this—well, with this,” admitted Mr. Monroe as he raised a hand around the Orangery that the Gambling Dukes had created. “But that wasn’t what I meant. I meant you.”

My heart skipped a beat and my hands inexplicably went cold as they froze. “Me?”

He nodded, leaning close to me. “You. You truly believe there is nothing for me to find, do you? You’re invested in this club and not just because it’s your friends, because you believe it in.”

“I see no harm in a little pleasure,” I breathed, rising to my feet and swallowing hard at the man who now stood directly before me.

Because I could do nothing else but breathe. How could I, with such a man standing there, painfully out of reach?

For a moment I could almost believe we were still standing on the terrace, as though we had never come in here. Perhaps we had laughed, talked a little about something that was nothing to do with the tension between us. The bet. The deck I had stacked against him, even though he did not know it.

And then my heart almost stopped. Mr. Monroe had stepped not away from me but around me, and his presence in the Orangery seemed less somehow, without him close to me—until he spoke again.

“A little pleasure, yes,” murmured Mr. Monroe from behind me—directly behind me.

His breath danced across my skin, the back of my neck, and I tried not to moan, to lean back into his arms, and give myself up to the dream of what could be if he was a different man.

“I-It’s important to us at the Gambling Dukes that we?—”

“I don’t want to hear about the Gambling Dukes,” Mr. Monroe said darkly in a low voice, just out of sight but I could feel his every syllable. “I want to hear about you. About why you are so desperate to get rid of me.”

My eyelashes fluttered. Get rid of him? Dear God, the thought of him leaving now without taking me, without showing me just what those hands could?—

“Lady Cartice,” Mr. Monroe murmured, his lips barely an inch from my shoulder. “Are you listening?”

My eyes snapped open.

“I am sure you wish to return to the library and look through more of our records,” I said, turning and forcing myself to step forward—step away from the damned alluring man.

I blinked in the blank emptiness of the desolate place. Mr. Monroe’s eyes had pooled with desire, desire I knew he felt but would not act on.

And neither would I. We were not animals, after all; we were attracted to each other, yes.

But that did not mean we were going to act on it.

Besides, he was the enemy. I could not trust him, just as he evidently had no desire to trust me. And that was fine. Completely fine.

“Shall I see you at luncheon?” I said brightly.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:30 am

FOUR

Fynn

I shook my head wryly as I stepped down the sweeping velvet carpeted staircase. It was hard to believe it had been just over a day since I had managed—just about—to prevent myself from kissing Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice.

A long, painful day yesterday, and a long day today.

I should not have done it. I should not have leaned so close to her, breathed in that heady scent she was always coated with, seen how she shivered as I stood so close to her.

No, I had been lucky Georgiana—the Lady Cartice had come to her senses even as I lost my own.

“I am sure you wish to return to the library and look through more of our records.”

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked around. I was only now starting to get a handle on the layout of this monstrous place—though that was a little harsh. In truth, I had expected gaudy opulence but instead only seen elegant refinement in every room.

Except the study, of course, where I had spent the rest of yesterday and all today.

“All of it?” I had said with some surprise as Georgiana had let me into the study.

“All of it,” she had said with a fixed smile. “I have instructed our servants to permit you access to every document on our records—save for those detailing the names of some of those we have played again, of course.”

I had blinked at the time. I could never have predicted it; I would have greater access to the Gambling Dukes’ records than anyone had ever done.

In truth, I had never been given so much leeway with anyone I had investigated, more’s the pity.

“Wait—you’re leaving?” I had said rather in alarm as Lady Cartice moved to leave.

Which hadn’t been my primary concern. The very thought of her leaving, of being stripped of Lady Cartice’s presence so soon that morning, had been painful. I had rather expected her to stay by my side.

Yet she had arched an eyebrow. “You don’t need babysitting, Mr. Monroe, and I am sure if I stayed you would think I was worried that you would find something.”

It had been difficult not to smile. “And you’re not.”

Lady Cartice smiled, her face radiant as ever. “Not in the slightest.”

And so it was with a double portion of disappointment that I had returned to my room for a bath after several hours of pouring through dull documents.

Nothing. Nothing!

Not even an old servant who had been let go under mysterious circumstances.

I sighed heavily. It was most irritating; but I was not about to give up that easily. Not

after finding a carefully calligraphed note on my pillow when I had stepped out of the huge bathroom that was attached to my guest bedchamber.

Tonight. Six o'clock. Drinks before dinner.

My manhood had twitched at the very thought of Lady Cartice as I had picked up the short note. Short and sweet.

Well, it turned out the desire I had suspected she felt for me was more than just a suspicion. The question was, I wondered as I pulled at the cuffs of my shirt to ensure they were properly aligned to my suit, just how far was she interested?

There had to be a reason, after all, that Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice wished to see him alone this evening, rather than taking their evening meals separately.

Hope, or something darker, twisted in my chest as I strode over to the room Lady Cartice had pointed out as the family drawing room just that afternoon.

Well, whatever it was she wanted, it would be churlish indeed not to give it to her.

At least twice this night. Perhaps again in the morning.

"I admit I was not surprised," I said with as best a charming smile as I could manage as I entered the room, "when I received your...your...hello."

Several heads turned. Laughter which had filled the room halted abruptly.

Lady Cartice looked up from the sofa where she sat with one of her friends—the Duke of Markham, I was almost sure. She was dressed in the most sumptuous black gown I had ever seen, velvet, despite the heat, though it was cool enough in here. The

neckline skimmed over somewhere I most definitely touch, and fell over curves that I most definitely hadn't dreamed about.

"Ah, there you are."

I smiled weakly. Oh, I had been a damned fool. Of course she had not invited me for a seductive and scandalous drink alone.

"You're still here, then?" The friend I was almost certain was Markham shook his head. "A glass of brandy?"

"Wine, if you don't mind," I said automatically, still trying to realign my expectations of the evening.

This was not me and Lady Cartice, and a rather lovely time we could have had of it too. No, this was the entire Gambling Duke club.

They were back.

"Oh, did I not mention that the house party was over?" asked Lady Cartice, raising an eyebrow. Her friend the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick stifled a grin. "How remiss of me."

My smile became strained. "Not at all."

"Here you go."

I took the glass of wine offered to me—from a bottle worth more than my entire month's salary, if I was any judge—and stepped over to the others.

"Find anything yet?" quipped one of them.

“Markham,” said Georgiana with a laugh. “There is nothing to find, don’t give our guest the wrong ideas.”

I grinned as I leaned against the arm of a sofa. Perhaps in different circumstances, in a different life, if I had been born into wealth and nobility, we could have been friends. As it was...

“Not yet,” I said smoothly, sipping my red wine. It was delicious, overpoweringly spicy in a way that captured my tongue and ransomed my tastebuds. “Good wine, this.”

“It’s absolutely not smuggled over from France,” said Lady Rotherwick with a smile. “Come on, Kineallen, I need to talk to you.”

The serious looking man’s jaw tightened as he stood unwillingly to follow her. “Can’t I have one evening off, just?—”

But I could not be disappointed that half the people here were moving to the other side of the room. Not now I was left with the Duke of Markham...and Lady Cartice.

“Tell me about yourself,” said the Duke of Markham as he sipped what appeared to be whiskey from a finely cut glass.

“Markham,” Lady Cartice hissed. “He is our guest, the whole point was?—”

“I have nothing to hide,” I interrupted, and caught Lady Cartice’s eye for just a moment. Fire flashed between us, and then it was gone. Gone, but the heat of the look remained.

And something overtook me that certainly had no business operating my senses, because it was senseless what I admitted to.

“You know, I was once not that different to you.”

The Duke of Markham frowned as Lady Cartice stared. “Not that different?”

I sipped my wine. It really was damned good—and what harm would it do, really, to reveal a little about myself? Perhaps it would give them a sense of trust, would perhaps make them reveal something. Let something slip that I could use to his advantage.

“Rich.”

“Rich?” repeated Lady Cartice. Was she looking at me in a different light? “You?”

I raised my hands in mock surrender. “I know, it doesn’t look like it, does it?”

“It certainly does not,” muttered the Duke of Markham, before being shot another look of irritation by his friend. “What?”

“I was born into this life,” I said, looking around at the elegant drawing room, feeling the softness of the carpet beneath my shoes, the way that a footman appeared periodically, subtly, to remove any glasses and top up drinks. “Money, wealth, fortune, whatever you want to call it. A roll of the dice, and we could have been very different.”

“We are very different.”

I turned back to my conversational companions. Lady Cartice was frowning.

“We did not simply step into inheritance, you know,” she said quietly. “We had nothing, none of us. All our parents had squandered their wealth—we had nothing but we made something of ourselves.”

I stared. Now that wasn't what he had read in the gossip sheets. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, it's no scandalous secret, you won't be able to make anything of it in that rag of yours," said Lady Cartice with a dry smile. "We earned our way here, Mr. Monroe. We had nothing, and we created something. And you were born into wealth, you say?"

Swallowing hard, regret pouring through my veins that I had been so foolish as to admit it to these people—people who viewed him as the enemy, I knew—I took another sip of wine.

Perhaps that in itself was a bad idea. I didn't want to lose my head, forget myself—forget what I was here for.

"Born into wealth, yes," I admitted, wishing to goodness I had the sense to keep my mouth shut...but it was too late now. "It was stolen out from under me. My inheritance."

There was something sharper in her eyes now, and I had to remind myself we were not alone. Me and Lady Cartice.

Much as I might wish it.

"You were?"

"A forged document here, a falsified record here..." I gave a jagged laugh. "I was too young at the time, too green to know what was happening. By the time it was done, it was over. I could do nothing about it, despite unearthing the lies. I lost my home, my credibility...everything."

My chest tightened, lungs fighting against the air I needed. I had promised himself,

after my mother had died, that I would never speak of it.

Never speak of how I'd seen everything I knew crumble around me. How the position in our small village which I thought I'd loved had disappeared, my reputation gained slowly, starting from the bottom again.

So why did this feel so right?

"You could have done something," said Lady Cartice quietly. "Declaimed them."

I shrugged. "My word against theirs, I am good at rooting out lies but proving it? Against my stepfather, who I won't mention by name because I imagine he's probably one of the people you've gambled with..."

Damn. I should have thought of that.

"You know, I never had you for someone who had to build themselves back up again," Lady Cartice said softly.

Why did a spark of pleasure rush through my heart? Why did I find it impossible to look away from those languid blue eyes, eyes darkening as though she was outraged on my behalf?

And she wasn't. I knew that. I would not allow myself to be fooled again.

"I need another drink," said Markham unexpectedly. "Georgiana?"

"No thank you," she said quietly without taking her eyes from me.

I smiled, nervously, at the only remaining person standing beside me. "Surprised?"

“Very,” Lady Cartice said lightly. “Though I see now why you were so surprised that I would gamble the safety of our club on your visit here.”

“It is indeed a gamble.”

“I have nothing to hide,” she said simply, sipping her drink, her lips pursed once more around the glass in a manner that I was most definitely going to ignore. Probably. “You could argue the deck is stacked against you, Mr. Monroe, when it comes to a bet with a duchess.”

A twist, a twitch in my loins as I heard her say my name.

Something I had to ignore, I told myself.

The trouble was, ignoring Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice was almost impossible—not just who she was, what she was, but what she was saying.

Because she was right. I had been here three days now, spent two of them diving into the depths of their paperwork, and found nothing. Perhaps she was right; perhaps she had stacked the deck against me.

If there was nothing to find, I was going to lose the bet with a duchess. Badly.

“Why, Lady Cartice, then you can do whatever you want with me.”

A slow smile crept across my lips as my manhood stiffened. Well, it looked like I was going to a winner after all.

“You have a marvelous...bluff, you know.”

I blinked, my gaze suddenly hazy.

Lady Cartice tilted her head slightly and sipped again at her drink.

My voice croaked. “Oh, I'm always happy to call.”

Georgiana

“Oh, I'm always happy to call.”

I strode away hastily, almost spilling the remnants of my drink as I did so. “I have to?—”

I did not even bother to complete my sentence. I couldn't; I had to get as far away from Mr. Fynn Monroe as possible.

How did he do it? Say those things, those words, so innocent in the mouth of any other but from his lips...

I managed to reach the drinks cabinet and paused before it, looking as though for a particular drink I had not yet found.

This was intolerable; just as I was starting to relax around him, discover a little more about this Mr. Fynn Monroe, I remembered he was the enemy.

Here to ruin us.

The last thing I should be doing is thinking just what I wanted to call out as he kissed my?—

“Georgiana?”

I smiled weakly as I looked up at Markham. “Markham.”

“You look all flushed,” my friend said, reaching past my for the whiskey. “Trouble with our journalist friend?”

I sighed. “Yes—no.”

Markham raised an eyebrow. “Which is it?”

I glanced, despite myself, across the room. Kineallen had returned to our guest and the two of them were speaking quite animatedly...almost as though they could have been friends.

“A forged document here, a falsified record here...I was too young at the time, too green to know what was happening. By the time it was done, it was over. I could do nothing about it, despite unearthing the lies.”

“You know, I feel sorry for him,” I said abruptly.

Markham raised an eyebrow. “Kineallen? I'm sure she'll call return his notes, they always do.”

“What?”

Too late, I realized I had not only spoken aloud about my feelings about Mr. Monroe, but discovered I...had feelings for Mr. Monroe.

Feelings that were totally natural, I told herself sternly. Why, anyone whose inheritance had essentially been stolen out from them was bound to spark pity in anyone. Anyone with a heart, anyway.

And that was all I had meant. Wasn't it?

“Well, you know,” I said awkwardly, pressing my fingers against my glass so my hands had something to do. “Losing his family’s fortune.”

“We didn’t have one to lose,” Markham pointed out, pulling down a glass, pouring a large portion of rum into it, and handing it to me. “Drink.”

I did as I always did when given a kind-hearted, though probably misplaced suggestion from one of my friends.

I frowned. Then I drank.

“I just mean,” I said, the fire of the drink sparking through my throat, “that if we’d had something to lose?—”

“You’re not feeling sorry for this cad, are you?” interrupted Markham with a frown. “Georgiana, he’s here to bring the Gambling Dukes down. This is our lives—we have little else.”

I bit her lip and then drained my glass. The rum soared through me, flickering heat amongst the panic. “I know that.”

“Do you?” Markham said, lowering his voice as he glanced over at Mr. Monroe, who was now laughing with Lilah. “Because whatever we have to hide, if he finds it?—”

“We don’t—Markham, we don’t have anything to hide,” I said firmly, placing my glass on the bar.

And there was something in the silence that met this pronouncement, something in the way my friend would not meet my eye, that made me hesitate.

“You...” I swallowed. “Markham, you don’t have anything to?—”

“Are you the one serving drinks now?”

Mr. Monroe had approached the bar, wine glass empty and eyes shining with merriment.

And not at me, I reminded herself. That brightness wasn't because of me, even if I wished it was, which I didn't. After all, I didn't know the man's tastes. For all I knew, it was Lilah he was interested in, not me.

Not, I told herself firmly, that any of us would fall for his tricks. His investigative journalist tricks.

Perhaps the rum had been a bad idea.

“Just remember what I said,” Markham said quietly before stepping away.

I glanced over at my friends, then back at the man who was still standing before me.

Mr. Monroe. There was a slight tint of red on one corner of his lips where the wine had stained, and all I wanted to do was kiss those lips, taste him, taste the wine he had just finished and see whether he could make me?—

“Am I permitted another drink?”

I blinked. Mr. Monroe was smiling, twisting the crystal wine glass in his hands.

“Wine,” I said. “Yes. We have that.”

Why did my words have to fail me now? Why, now of all times, did I have to lose my quick wittedness that I had depended on for my entire life, when I was standing before such a handsome man?

Such a conniving man, I tried to remind myself. A man who managed to draw out of you an invitation to spend a week, a whole week, at Dalhurst Manor to rifle through their files looking for mistakes that did not exist.

And here you were, drinking with him.

My hand didn't shake as I poured from the bottle. I knew it didn't, because I was concentrating every inch of my hands on keeping it steady.

"Thank you," said Mr. Monroe, taking a sip.

I didn't watch him drink. I knew I didn't, because I was resolutely staring at my fingers on the bar as he did so.

"Your friend's a laugh."

I looked up. "Markham?"

Mr. Monroe nodded. "I rather like him, but don't tell that."

It was all I could do to prevent my heart from sinking. Of course, I had it completely wrong. Mr. Monroe was one of those gentlemen who most appreciated the company of other gentleman—not unheard of—and what would follow would be the typical routine I had heard before.

Yes, Markham was open to all things, and yes, he had no preferences either way, yes, you should talk to him, no, I'm not going to?—

"But you're the member of the club that I am the most interested in."

I blinked. Mr. Monroe's voice was soft, ensuring his words were not heard by anyone

else.

Anyone like my friends, for example.

A shiver of pleasure rushed through me at the mere thought he may...which was ridiculous. I was not going to permit myself to do anything that would risk the Gambling Dukes.

Still. A little flirting wouldn't hurt.

"Your interest in me is neither here nor there," I said lightly, picking up my glass and discovering much to my disquiet that there was no rum in it.

"Here. Let me."

If I had my wits about me, I would have immediately refused the offer but as it was, Mr. Monroe had already poured a healthy measure of rum into my glass.

"Steady as she goes," I said with a dry laugh.

Mr. Monroe raised an eyebrow. "What, don't tell me that you're unable to hold your drink."

The cheek. "No, it's more that you've just poured about a hundred pounds worth of rum into my glass."

"Oh blast," said Mr. Monroe, hastily placing the bottle on the bar as though he had been scalded.

He joined with my laughter, and I felt a connection with the man that was absolutely not right. I shouldn't feel this relaxed around a man who was seeking my doom,

should I?

Perhaps it was the rum. I took a sip and the burning liquid only lowered my defenses further.

“You’re a handsome man, Mr. Monroe.”

If he was surprised by my comment, he didn’t show it. “And I have already, rather foolishly, revealed how beautiful I think you are,” he said ruefully.

I laughed, and only then noticed how close his hand was to mine. When had Mr. Monroe moved? I hadn’t notice him move.

This was a mistake. I needed to step away; at the very least, I should eat something.

But it was impossible to step away from Mr. Fynn Monroe. The worst of it all was that I had no wish to. Something held me here, a magnetic force the like I had never known before, even with Paul.

“You’re nothing like Paul.”

I almost cringed so hard I dropped my glass. Oh dear Lord, I hadn’t said that out loud, had I?”

“Ah,” said Fynn with a wry smile. “A previous flame?”

There was nothing to do now, I was stuck in the conversation. “The only one, really. He, ah...attempted to upgrade.”

Against my better judgement, my gaze flickered over to Lilah. It wasn’t her fault. I knew that. But did she have to be so...so perfect? So pretty, so clever, always

knowing what to say, words just tripping off her tongue that always made people laugh, or nod, or think?

“I don’t understand.”

I looked back at Fynn, and chuckled gently under my breath, the rum loosening my tongue. “Lilah. The Lady Rotherwick.”

“Lilah—your friend, Lady Rotherwick?” He looked absolutely astonished. “She didn’t strike me as someone who would?—”

“Oh, not her,” I added quickly. I couldn’t put my finger on why, but it was important to me that he didn’t have a bad idea of my friend. Or any of my friends, really. “No, I think she was just as horrified as I was when Paul approached her.”

A twinge of pain curled around my heart; at least, I thought it did. Strangely, I felt very little as I spoke of Paul. It was as though the numbness I had desired had finally arrived, and I couldn’t pretend I didn’t know why.

Mr. Monroe pulled a hand through his hair. “Well, damn. Not the best recipe for friendly affection.”

“It didn’t tear us apart, though perhaps it should have done,” I admitted, shifting slightly on my feet and feeling the effects of the alcohol pouring through me. “It was the lies that truly hurt. He lied about approaching her, she lied by omission by not telling me for a week...”

I was speaking out of turn, as Kineallen would put it, but I couldn’t stop myself. There was something about Mr. Monroe, something that made it easy to talk about him.

“The strange thing is, I don’t miss him.”

Mr. Monroe raised an eyebrow. “No?”

I shook my head. “I thought what we had was special, but as it turns out, it wasn’t even interesting. When he died, I...well. I suppose it is not seemly for a duchess to speak so ill of her husband, but there it was. He is dead.”

“You deserve so much more than interesting,” Mr. Monroe said quietly, his voice a low burr under the music that Lilah was now playing on the pianoforte.

I smiled wryly. “Perhaps.”

“You doubt it?”

“I’m too focused on The Gambling Dukes to worry about that,” I said, twisting my glass in my hand.

For a moment, silence descended between us, a silence full of meaning though I did not know what it was. And then?—

“You know,” Mr. Monroe said quietly, his eyes meeting mine, “if we had met any other way...”

His voice trailed off, giving me the perfect opportunity to stare at his lips, his jawline, the way his stubble crept down his neck to those perfectly chiseled collarbones.

What would it be like to carefully drift soft kisses along them?

“If we had met at a dinner, or in Almack’s in London, or in a gambling den,” I said, my stomach twisting painfully, desire pooling between my legs.

Fynn smiled. “Well then. Something might have happened.”

“Something that won’t now.”

He inclined his head. “I prefer to take my women to bed sober.”

A rush of panic, shame, and anger seared through my lungs, far sharper than the rum I had been indulging in. And that was after what, three drinks? Four?

Liquid courage, I had told myself at the time. Liquid idiocy now.

“Dinner, I think,” I said coldly, straightening up and stepping toward my friends. “You can take yours in your room, Mr. Monroe. You’re tired.”

I did not look back as I stepped into the dining room—a room mercifully empty of the tantalizingly delicious Mr. Fynn Monroe.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:30 am

FIVE

Fynn

The room was hot and I was tired.

No, tired wasn't quite right. Exhausted. Frustrated. A little hungover, in that way that tendrils of memory, reminding you just how much you drank last night, kept intruding in my mind, distracting me from the task in hand.

As if the woman in the gorgeous white muslin gown wasn't doing a good enough job.

"You have everything you want, then?" asked Lady Cartice, a smile on her face that threatened to make me forget all my good intentions, my professionalism, all the promises I had made to myself as I had stumbled upstairs last night after drinking far too much and saying even more.

I raised a hand to my chin to stroke it, feeling the stubble, trying to earth myself.

This was Wednesday. I had been at Dalhurst Manor since Saturday, and this coming Saturday my welcome would officially run out. That was all the time I had, a few more days at best.

I had to find something. Not permit myself to be distracted by the soft skin, warmed by the sun, that was tantalizingly close.

"I think so," I said, leaning back in my seat, the chair squeaking.

This was another room, another in the seemingly endless place the Gambling Dukes called home. Bureaus and cabinets ran along one side of the clean light room, a large table opposite set aside, I presumed, for card games. The door was open, not obscuring the view—not that there was anyone to see in the corridor.

This room was right at the end of the wing. There were no casual passersby.

We were completely alone.

“Pretty loyal servants you’ve got in this place,” I said, pulse throbbing in my ears as I tried to think of something else to say.

Lady Cartice. Georgiana. She would leave, I knew, the moment our conversation ended. That was what she had done yesterday and the day before, and a strange desire tugged at my heart to keep her talking.

Another minute, another moment in her presence. Whatever it was that drew me to her, it wasn’t just physical. I had discovered that yesterday in that damned private drawing room of theirs.

I liked her. I liked them.

If things had been different...

“We depend on loyal servants to keep our secrets,” said Lady Cartice with a smile, slipping into the chair beside me. Her knees brushed against mine, a shot of heat rushing through them up my breeches and toward?—

“Because you’re hiding something?”

“Because our information is valuable, Mr. Monroe,” Lady Cartice said with a gentle

laugh. “You’re determined to see shadows and secrets everywhere, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. A habit of the job. “Once you’ve lived my life...”

Only then was I able to stop myself, biting my lip as I did so. Damn. I had already revealed far too much, already given away some of the armor I had protected myself with for the last few years.

Armor I could do with, around this intoxicating woman.

A flicker of something different glimmered across Lady Cartice’s face. Concern. Care. Directed toward me.

My heart skipped a painful beat.

“I was sorry to hear about...well,” she said awkwardly, pushing a stray strand of hair back behind an ear. She only did that when she was nervous. I was noticing far too much about Lady Cartice. “You must tell me his name. Your stepfather. So that I can remove him from our list, if he’s there.”

I laughed dryly. “Please, you don’t have to give me that, I know business is business.”

I was no fool—at least, I wasn’t anymore. I had already tried to have his creditors pull in debts, tried to enlighten his business connections on his bad practices.

No one had cared.

My hand suddenly rushed with heat, blazing, like I had been branded and I gasped, unable to help myself, a low murmur that seemed to echo around the locked room.

Lady Cartice. Georgiana. She had placed her hand on mine, her delicate fingers stroking—no, I was imagining it, I thought wildly, head spinning. She wouldn't—but she was. Her dark blue eyes met mine as her fingers tightened around my own, lying on the desk.

“Business is business, but nothing is more important than what's right,” she said urgently, her voice low.

My throat was dry, mind empty, but I had to speak. “You can't mean that.”

“You know why I studied the law? Something that ladies are not supposed to do?” Lady Cartice spoke quietly, urgently, as though she was imparting something secret to a close friend.

As though we were close. As though this wasn't a mission to save my reputation, reclaim my position in the newspaper, bring down her club to be rewarded with higher wages.

As though we were something to each other. As though the rushing tensions and dark desires I held for her could be tasted, viewed by her blazing eyes, and she liked it. Oh God, if only she liked me.

“No,” I managed to breathe, my voice low. “No, I don't know, Lady Cartice.”

Her smile was far too knowing. “Georgiana, please.”

Dear God, she was perfection. “Then please, call me Fynn.”

Georgiana smiled, a necklace of opal at her throat, and I tried desperately not to look at it.

Big mistake.

My gaze drifted lower, to the high soft peaks of her breasts, hardly encased in the light gown she'd chosen that morning.

A small moan escaped my lips and I jerked my eyes back to hers. Was that a knowing look in those blue pupils?

“Because I know what’s right, and what’s wrong,” Georgiana said quietly. “I believe in truth, and justice, and all that other stuff my friends tease me about. I believe doing business with the right people isn’t everything—that you have to do what’s right.”

I stared. God, she was beautiful; not just her body, which was outstanding as far as I was concerned.

But it was more than that. Far from finding a dull old man in the role of Chief Legal Counsel, or a flighty young whippersnapper only given the job because he happened to have the right name, here was a woman with morals, principles.

Principles she would stand on to walk away from a potential prize, if she thought it the right thing to do.

“You always know what’s right?” I found myself saying.

Georgiana nodded. Her hand was still on mine and I dared not move a muscle in case she remembered, removed her hand, removed the connection that weighed on me like an anchor.

“You have such a keen moral center, you would only permit yourself to do what was right, am I correct?”

She nodded again, her liquid eyes fixed on me, a small smile tilting her lips. “You are asking these questions for a reason, I have to assume.”

I glanced at the door. Open, but in the almost hour we had already spent here, I’d not seen a single person walk past.

“No one would come in here, right?”

I ached when Georgiana broke our gaze, turning to the door just for a moment before turning to look back at me.

She shook her head, a slight questioning look in her eye.

“So no one is likely to interrupt us?”

A delicate change in her face, a slight line between her eyes as she attempted to understand the reason for my questions. Desire rushed to my manhood, strengthening the longing already surging through it.

God, she’d know in a moment.

“No,” she said softly. “No one can—Fynn!”

I had been quick.

Well, not quite. If I had been as quick as I had wanted, I would have pounced on the woman within five minutes of arriving at this godforsaken manor, but as it was I had bided my time, tried to prevent myself from doing what I knew could ruin the very reason I was here.

But I didn’t care. Not anymore.

Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice was beautiful and passionate and good, and I wanted to know how she tasted.

Placing my hands swiftly on her hips and lifting her out of her chair, ignoring her squeal of surprise, I placed her on the desk and quickly moved myself between her legs.

“Fynn!” Georgiana gasped, looking up at me with wide eyes.

Wide, hungry eyes. I knew that look. She wanted this, perhaps more than I did. That knowledge stirred an even greater response in me, and I quickly crushed my lips on hers.

I almost moaned with sweet relief at tasting what I had known, but could not prove: that Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice was the best kiss I had ever had. Soft yet willing, achingly eager for me, her lips parted almost immediately and a bold tongue met mine.

Shivering, I did only what my instincts told me. Her ankles had already crossed behind my buttocks, keeping me close, and my fingertips met as I placed my hands around her waist.

I could feel her warmth, feel her hunger as I kissed her again, tilting her head back to gain greater access, flickers of pleasure rushing through my lips through my chest to my manhood, everything connected as I wanted?—

“Fynn,” Georgiana said, breaking the kiss and pushing me back.

Well, not entirely back. She kept me trapped between her legs, a place I very much wanted to be, but there was a sharp look on her eyes now as she placed a hand warningly on my chest.

I was panting. Dear God, I was gasping for her. “What?”

“We shouldn’t?—”

“Why?” I interrupted, desire hazing my eyes but my view of her clear. My view of what I wanted, what we both wanted, clear.

Georgiana’s breath was shallow, her breasts moving most distractingly against my chest. “We shouldn’t kiss, it isn’t—it isn’t right.”

“Right? Right?” I repeated, lowering my head.

She didn’t stop me, her hand on my chest splaying out as she gasped, as I kissed Georgiana on the collarbone, a place I had wanted to kiss for far too long.

Her head lolled back, the pleasure I was giving far too much to resist.

“Fynn...”

There it was. She had breathed my name, unable to help it as my hands moved up her back, aching close to her breasts but not quite, and my manhood twitched, she must have felt it.

“This is right,” I murmured as I kissed along her collarbone, allowing my lips to drift temptingly close to the tops of her breasts. “You know this is right, Georgiana, because you always know. Does this feel wrong?”

Georgiana’s breath hitched in her throat, I felt it as well as heard it, and shivered. Dear God, if we were really alone here, never to be disturbed, I could take her right?—

“Fynn, we mustn’t?—”

“Do you want me to stop?”

I had pulled back. I may be a cad, I may take kisses from a beautiful woman like Georgiana because I could see in her eyes that she wanted it, but I wasn’t a rake.

I wasn’t about to make a woman do something she had no desire to do.

Georgiana’s eyes were confused, vague, yet sharpened as they met mine. “I beg your pardon?”

A lopsided grin seared my face. “I’ll stop if you want me to stop, Lady Cartice, or I’ll keep kissing you if you ask me. You’ve got to tell me. Tell me...what you want.”

Georgiana swallowed, a small moan escaping her lips as I leaned closer to her, so close I could feel her breath on mine, but I pulled away as she leaned toward me.

Oh, no. She had to ask me for it now.

“You’re not being fair,” she breathed, her hands moving to the nape of my neck, trying to pull me closer.

“You’re the one who said you’ve stacked the deck.”

“I didn’t know you’d be the dealer.”

My jaw tightened. I didn’t think either of us really expected the other, had we?

And yet here we were, the dowager duchess and the journalist determined to ruin her, and all I wanted to do was rip off this gown and?—

“Kiss me, Fynn.”

I didn't need more invitation. I captured Georgiana's lips with mine, glorified in the soft warm moan of welcome, of recognition that this was what she wanted, and our ardor overtook us.

I pushed her back, back onto the desk, paperwork flying everywhere as I covered her body with mine and she arched into me, the kiss if possible deepening as I gave her everything, everything I had within me, more than I even knew.

God, she was beautiful. I could feel every inch of her through that pathetic gown, and tingles of pleasure were flickering across my skin as my tongue met hers once again, eager and hot and desperate, and I knew if we were left alone for much longer I could remove my breeches with one hand and?—

“Georgiana?”

We leapt apart.

I stared around for Kineallen, the voice I'd heard, as Georgiana lay on the desk panting, unable or unwilling it appeared to move. Her gown was a mess, all pushed up so that I could see just the hint of her thigh.

I groaned. “What the hell?—”

“Georgiana, we have a visitor, please come to the entrance hall,” came Kineallen's voice, echoing down the corridor. “Thank you.”

Glancing at Georgiana, I watched as she pushed herself upright then slipped off the desk. I was pleased to see her legs a little unsteady.

I did that to her. By God, I would do that to her again.

“This was a—a mistake.”

Georgiana’s words didn’t quite register in my mind, and I had to blink a few times before I took them in. “What?”

She brushed her gown with quivering hands and would not meet my gaze. “I got carried away, by—you’re here to ruin us, Fynn.”

The simplicity of her words cut deep into my heart. “I—you don’t?—”

“I think it’s best if we just forget this,” said Georgiana sharply, all control returning as she walked to the door. “I’ll leave the door open. Spend all the—the time you need.”

“Georgiana—”

“This was a mistake,” she breathed, her eyes wide, pain in them I had not expected to see, and then she was gone.

I watched helplessly as she strode down the corridor.

Only then did I speak into the empty, silent study, where I was supposed to find information that would ruin not only her club, but her reputation.

“Well, damn.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:30 am

SIX

Georgiana

When I opened my eyes, it was to see a spattering of daylight across my ceiling, and to feel the regret I had gone to sleep with still settled in my chest.

“It was a mistake,” I told myself in the warming darkness, the curtains around the bay window not quite managing to keep out the glorious early morning sun. “A mistake. People made mistakes. It didn’t mean I was weak.”

But I was. I knew I was, and there were not sufficient words in the world to prove me otherwise.

My actions had done that work for me.

“You’re the one who said you’ve stacked the deck.”

“I didn’t know you’d be the dealer. Kiss me, Fynn.”

I groaned as I closed my eyes, then forced myself to get up. Lying here in bed, feeling guilty about permitting Fynn Monroe to kiss me—kiss me expertly, awakening things in me I had thought long dead, or at the very least dormant—wasn’t going to do me any good.

I needed to get moving. Move away from the assumption I could just fall into bed with the next gentleman who offered me...well. Sensual delights the like I had never

known.

No one had ever kissed me like that.

As I dressed, I tried to push away the memories of just how dominant, how powerful, how certain Fynn had been.

He had wanted me. I had felt his need, not just his manhood pressing against me, hinting at promises he could most definitely keep, but in the way he had kissed me. The reverential way he had kissed my...

I grazed a finger along my collarbone but felt none of the awakening he had inspired. Strange. I had never thought of my collarbone as a particularly sensual part of the body.

He had proved me wrong.

But that was neither here nor there, I told myself firmly as I walked downstairs into the cool early morning air. It was a moment of weakness, yes, but I was stronger than that.

At least, I now knew where my weakness could lie.

And that was why I was going to avoid Mr. Fynn Monroe as best I could for the rest of his visit, which surely wouldn't be long now. I mean, it was Thursday. Today, tomorrow, and he would be gone.

Forever.

And that was why, I told myself, I was just going to...check on him. There could be no harm found, after all, by checking on Fynn. Checking he had everything he

wanted to conclude his investigation, and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Gambling Dukes were absolutely spick and span.

Cleaner than a whistle.

That was why I found myself standing outside the drawing room which I had allotted as his personal study. There could surely be no other reason. Surely.

I cleared my throat but could not open the door. I stood there, like the fool I was.

It was about Paul, I tried to convince myself. I was lonely, yes, and a little heartsore.

But that did not mean I was going to throw myself into the arms of the first man who knew how to kiss without slobbering all over me.

“Ah, there you are,” said Fynn absent-mindedly from the desk in the big bay window as I opened the door and stepped into the drawing room. “I was about to go onto the terrace to look for you.”

My stomach twisted horribly.

No, not horribly. I could try to tell myself that it was a horrible sensation, try to convince myself I had no wish to see him, that my visceral reaction to him was pain, or disgust, but I would be lying to myself.

My breath caught in my throat. Goodness, he was so handsome. Painfully handsome. The way his hair was all ruffled this early in the morning, he clearly hadn't bothered yet to do anything with it. His feet were crossed on the desk, his long legs strong and covered in tight breeches that trailed upwards, leading me to?—

I almost tripped over a side table and cursed my inability to concentrate whenever

Fynn was in the room.

That was why I had allowed it to happen. Yesterday. The kiss—well, many kisses—which certainly should not have happened.

Which would not happen again.

“Are you leaving today?” I asked crisply.

Fynn’s head jerked up from the ledger resting on his knees. “What?”

“Well, as you haven’t found anything,” I said, as airily as I could manage, “I thought you may wish to return to London. Your friends must be missing you after all, and your editor must have plenty of work for you to be getting on with, and then...well. Any lady that you are courting must miss you, I suppose...”

Damn. The words had slipped out of me before I could do anything to stop them, and I could feel my cheeks darkening with heat.

Fynn’s lips curved into a smile that was far too knowing. “I beg your pardon?”

“You heard what I—never mind,” I said swiftly.

My hands, nervous, smoothed the blue gown I had picked out that morning.

“The one that brings out your eyes,” Lilah had called it a few months ago when I had ordered it from my modiste, partly against my wishes, from an up and coming designer from France.

I had to admit, it did. The trouble was, Fynn was now gazing into those eyes, and he seemed to bore into me, deeper and deeper until I found I could keep nothing from

him.

Nothing.

“Did you just ask me if I was courting anyone?” he asked, delight in his tones.

“You have found nothing and I have given you full access to our archives,” I said in a rush, trying to calm my voice, trying to slow the panic within me.

I couldn’t let him see that I...what?

That I liked him?

I almost laughed at the ridiculous thought. I think, after yesterday, Fynn had plenty of evidence I liked him without me needing to ask such ridiculous questions.

“Kiss me, Fynn.”

A shiver rushed through me and as my gaze caught his, I knew somehow he was thinking of the same moment. The same request.

God, he could have had me begging on that desk if Kineallen hadn’t interrupted us.

Fynn carefully placed his notebook on the desk and dropped his feet to the ground. “Let me get this straight. Are you asking me to leave?”

I bit my lip as I stopped right before the desk, the infuriating man only feet away.

No. I couldn’t ask him to leave; that would seem suspicious, as though I, we, had something to hide. As though I was worried if he stayed much longer, he would find it.

As though the Gambling Dukes had ever been anything but completely above board.

The trouble was, every hour Fynn remained here I could feel my self-control ebbing away. More accurately, being kissed away by a man who knew precisely how I wanted to be?—

“I am not asking, but I am suggesting you have come here on a—a wild goose chase,” I said calmly. At least, it felt calm. I wasn’t rushing anymore, but I had somehow placed my hands on the desk.

I looked at my hands. An image flashed through my mind, of my hands on another desk, holding Fynn’s hand. Something I should not have done, or perhaps should have done earlier, for that surely had been the catalyst that had made him kiss me.

Kiss me hard, and fast, taking hold of me and placing me on the desk so swiftly I could hardly tell what was happening, only that I wanted it.

I blinked. I looked at the desk, then raised my gaze to Fynn.

His thoughts were so potent I could almost hear them.

Yes, I could take you on this desk right now, and you’d like that, wouldn’t you?

“We agreed a week.”

Fynn’s voice was calm, slow, but if I wasn’t kidding myself—and there was a very good chance I was—there was also something akin to disappointment in there.

Something I had not expected.

“We did,” I said lightly, “but after not finding anything in five days?—”

“You gave me seven,” he pointed out, his handsome jaw tightening for a moment. “Are you so afraid of losing our bet that you would try to discourage me from staying?”

My stomach twisted painfully, heat soaring through it—and lower. Pooling between my legs.

“Why, Lady Cartice, then you can do whatever you want with me.”

I hadn’t thought much about his offer then. I was now.

“I know what we agreed, and I am not the sort to attempt to escape a debt,” I said, my voice only a murmur. “But I don’t want...complications.”

I could barely meet his eye, but I had to. He had to know, he had to see what his presence here was doing to me. Tying me in knots, making it difficult to sleep, impossible to be in his presence without wanting?—

“Complications,” Fynn said delicately, “like you asking me if I was courting anyone?”

Fynn

I held her eyes as I spoke. “Complications like you asking me if I was courting anyone?”

I was being bold—stupid. I knew that, but I had to point out why this woman had my heart beating so quickly I was sure she could hear it.

Georgiana looked at me, her eyes fierce and lips pressed together in that way I was starting to recognize.

She didn't want to admit someone else was right.

My heart skipped a beat, then quickened again. Oh, this woman. Bold and brash and yet quiet and unsure of herself.

Sure of herself until she gave someone something of herself, her kisses, her truth, and then she crumpled like someone who had been hurt so badly, my hands curled into fists at the mere thought of whoever had done that to her.

Breathing out slowly, I forced my hands to relax. That wouldn't help. Georgiana didn't need to see my anger here, my protective nature soaring out of me against my will.

No, she needed reassurance. I couldn't tell whether it was reassurance that I wouldn't touch her again, or that I would.

Damn it.

"I...I-I didn't mean?—"

"I know you didn't," I said, putting the beautiful woman out of her misery. "Forget it."

Besides, I didn't know how to answer the question.

On the one hand, it was simple. Was I courting anyone? No. I was a bachelor, had been for years.

A few scattered nights with willing widows did not count.

But the moment I admitted that to her, I knew what would happen. I would start to

daydream that she and I, Georgiana and I were...

Well. More than we could be. More than was appropriate.

More than her friends would certainly ever allow.

“You’re the one who said you’ve stacked the deck.”

“I didn’t know you’d be the dealer. Kiss me, Fynn.”

My jaw tightened. The odds were stacked against us, the deck designed to play us both poor hands.

We couldn’t win here. The desire we felt for each other, palpable in this room as I sat looking up at her, had to be ignored.

I would continue my investigation, be gone in two days, and Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice would continue as part of one of the most exclusive and intriguing clubs in the world.

“I am...damn, Georgiana, I will not leave before my time, but I promise you, I'm only looking for what I think is in the public interest to know,” I said, more defiantly than I had intended. “I'm not here to ruin you, or your family. There’s no cruelty in me. No matter what you might think.”

My stomach dropped as Georgiana slid onto the desk, her buttocks painfully close to my ledger. My eyes flickered to my notebook, then just to the left and took in the warm swell of her ass.

Concentrate, man.

“You are looking for something scandalous, something that will end our reputations in Society,” Georgiana pointed out quietly.

My gaze flickered to the door. This wasn’t a locked room, a place where no one was going to come—but then, Georgiana had given it to me to work, hadn’t they? I wasn’t likely to see one of the dukes wander in.

I had her to myself. For now.

“You make it sound personal.”

Georgiana laughed gently. “How can I not see it as personal? Fynn, you come here after months of letters demanding?—”

“Oh, I wouldn’t call it demanding,” I said with a smile of my own.

She raised a flirtatious eye. “Wouldn’t you? ‘If I do not receive full access to your paperwork within the week, I will be forced to publish’—”

“You memorized my letters?” I said incredulously.

It was the wrong thing to say. Color flushed Georgiana’s cheeks, a delicate pink that only made her complexion even more lovely.

Something I knew stirred in my loins and I tried to concentrate on the conversation at hand.

“I am the Chief Legal Counsel of this club, and it is my duty to protect the club from threats,” she reminded me.

I raised an eyebrow. “And am I a threat, Georgiana?”

God, I loved saying her name. There was nothing like it, nothing like twisting my tongue around the three syllables.

Except twisting it around her own tongue, of course.

Damn it, Fynn, concentrate!

“I think so.”

My heart sank faster than I thought possible. Her voice was curious, calm, but matter-of-fact. I was a threat; not just to the club, but to her.

Threatening to distract her. God, I wanted to distract her right now. Why did we keep having these conversations with all-too convenient desks by us?

“And I think you would probably be right,” I managed to say with the same light air. “After all, I am here to find dirt on your club, find underhand dealings in the books, something that explains why you have flourished so quickly.”

“It cannot just be because we are good? That we are lucky?”

I swallowed. Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice did not kiss like a good girl. “No.”

Georgiana smiled slowly. “You know, I think you were right. That night, in the drawing room.”

My mind rushed back to that night, when I had drunk too much and said too much. “What?” I asked warily.

Oh, I should never have thought it a good idea to drink with them. Markham could

have had me under the table, he put away whiskey like it was water. What had I said that I could not remember—what was Georgiana going to hold me to now?

“You said that perhaps, if we had met under different circumstances...” Georgiana’s eyes drifted to my lips, then returned resolutely to my eyes. “Just a thought.”

My jaw tightened, my fingers itching to pull her closer. But she had said, hadn’t she, that it must not happen again.

I was not one to force a woman. But never before had I been faced with a woman so intoxicating, it physically hurt to hold to that line.

“I want to win that bet,” I said quietly.

Noises, somewhere in the manor. That wasn’t surprising, there were four members of the club here, and goodness knew how many servants. Everywhere I went was clean, tidy, food prepared, drinks made, beds prepared—there must be near twenty of them, at least.

But the noise distracted me, just for a moment, and so the moment passed. The moment I had with Georgiana.

When my gaze returned to her, there was a look of strained disappointment clouding those blue eyes. Disappointment I wanted to kiss away, but knew I could not.

Georgiana slipped off the desk, smoothed her gown, and fixed her eyes on me. “How important is this bet to you?”

I swallowed. Restore my reputation as one of the best investigative journalists in the world? Prove to my editor that they was wrong to keep some of the best stories from me? Have the respect of Society in London? Prove to my idiot of a stepfather that he

had been wrong to discount me, wrong to deal me out of the game when it came to my inheritance?

Gain all that...but lose Georgiana?

I pushed aside the thought, but it forced its way back, unrelenting, forbidding me from ignoring it. I didn't have Georgiana, but by God, I wanted her.

Wanted not just her body, but her. Every conversation with her was like swimming underwater; everything was lighter, brighter, I felt held somehow in a way I never had before.

And whatever it was between us, whatever those kisses had meant, whatever warmth I had stirred in Georgiana, it would all be gone once I found whatever it was they were hiding. Once I published.

Georgiana tilted her head as she waited for my reply and my heart contracted. God, I wanted her.

"The bet?" I said quietly. "You know, I'm not sure anymore."

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:30 am

SEVEN

Georgiana

I sank heavily into the soft velvet of the armchair. “You cannot be serious.”

Lilah, as I knew she would, rolled her eyes. “You’re just overreacting, Georgiana.”

“Overreacting?”

“I knew she’d take it like this,” Markham said with a sigh as he adjusted his cufflinks. “We shouldn’t have told her.”

My heart froze. “What, like last time?”

He had the good grace to look a little uncomfortable as he rose to look in the mirror over the fireplace. “I didn’t mean it like—blast, Georgiana, you know what I mean.”

My fingertips had somehow tightened on the end of the arms of the chair I was sitting in, my nails deep into the velvet.

They hadn’t told me last time. Well, a week, but a week was a long time when your husband was trying to bed your best friend. Your prettier, more majestic, more put together best friend.

Lilah played with the diamond bracelet she had borrowed from me a year ago and never returned. “It’s just dinner, Georgiana.”

“And I am starving,” said Kineallen as he strode into the West Drawing Room, looking as calm and collected as he always did.

As I often wished I did.

I tried to take a deep breath. It was just dinner. Just dinner with Paul’s son, my stepson who had never liked me and who had always made sure that I knew it.

“I just cannot believe you are going to see him,” I said petulantly. The silk gown was pinched tightly around my breasts, flaring out to the floor in a rush of ruching. But I may as well clamber upstairs into my nightgown and get Cook to send me a tray to my bedchamber, if all my friends were leaving.

“Are you ready?” Markham said, looking slightly harassed. “Georgiana, is that predator still here?”

“Which one?” I said dryly, accepting the wine Lilah handed me wordlessly. “Oh, the journalist trying to ruin our family?”

“I just don’t like him lurking about,” Kineallen said with gritted teeth.

Markham shrugged. “It’s not like we don’t know what he’s doing here.”

“I wish you hadn’t invited him, Georgiana.”

I shrugged. “What’s done is done, Kineallen, and besides, he’ll be gone soon. Just a few days.”

A few days. My stomach tightened painfully at the thought. Why had I so easily become accustomed to Fynn’s presence in our country estate? Why was I expectant to see him every breakfast, trying to think up excuses to stay with him during the day,

wishing I had not made such a point of him dining alone, aching for his touch as I went to bed...

“Well, we had better leave if we’re going to make it on time,” said Lilah, sighing heavily as she made a great deal of standing up. “If you can bear to let us go.”

I smiled ruefully.

The invitation was a slight, I knew it. That was, the lack of invitation.

Lilah had showed it to me as I had entered, gasping for a glass of wine and hoping to goodness I could keep my thoughts away from Fynn Monroe for more than a few minutes.

His Grace the Duke of Kineallen, His Grace the Duke of Markham, and Her Grace, the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick are invited to dinner at Kenning Place .

My throat had closed up as I had read it. My name was prominent only in its absence.

The bastard.

“You’ll be all right, won’t you, Georgiana?” There was such a look of concern on Lilah’s face I knew she hadn’t entirely forgiven herself for what was in no way her fault.

I tried to smile. “All the food I want and none of you to judge me as I sing badly as I accompany myself on the pianoforte? Try and stop me.”

Kineallen kissed my forehead. “That’s the Georgiana we know. Don’t stay up.”

I watched them leave, the friends I depended on, the only people I could trust in the

world. The door closed behind Markham, and I was left alone.

Sighing heavily didn't make the situation any better.

Well, it was not as though I was surprised. There was a cruel streak in Paul's son I had glimpsed when we had first wed, though I had attempted to persuade myself wasn't there.

But then, the apple did not fall far from the tree. Paul had given me more than enough reasons to delight at his passing when he made those sickly overtures to my best friend.

But appearances had to be kept up, and his family had been loyal to The Gambling Dukes from the early days. Not that I liked it.

"Georgiana?"

I started, almost dropping my barely touched glass of wine.

Fynn was standing in the door. I hadn't even heard it open.

"Hello," I said like a complete fool, wishing to goodness I had any sense.

He was just a gentleman, I told myself. Just a gentleman who had the chiseled good looks of a Greek god and the heart and soul of a man who desired justice. Just a gentleman with broad shoulders which had pinned me down to a desk as his mouth worshipped me.

Just a gentleman.

"Alone?" Fynn said, leaning against the doorway. "That isn't like you and your club."

I tried to rally. “You hardly know us, Fynn.”

“I know you better than you think, Georgiana,” he said evenly.

He wasn’t dressed for dinner; at least, not in the way that I was. A crisp white shirt under a silk waistcoat gave him the perfect elegance of the evening with none of the fuss of what I was wearing.

For the first time in a long time, I felt overdressed.

“My friends are visiting a...an acquaintance,” I said quietly, fingering my jade pendant earbobs. Why did the man have to make me so...nervous?

I should never have permitted myself to ask about any romantic connections that he had left behind in London. Of course he was courting someone, just look at the man. He would have half of London eating out of his hand, I was sure.

“Without you?”

I smiled as best I could. “I don’t dine with stepsons—especially when I am pointedly not invited.”

“Ah.” Fynn nodded sagely, as though he was routinely betrayed on an annual basis. “I see. Well in that case, why don’t you dine with me? The study’s not so bad a place to eat.”

He met my gaze steadily, as though he wasn’t already tempting me with the sheer masculinity he exuded with every passing breath.

“Dine with you?” I repeated uncertainly.

It wasn't a ridiculous suggestion. Really, it made sense. We were the only two left in the manor, save the servants who would eat in their own dining hall.

And it was Thursday. Just one more day, one full day, and Fynn would be gone—and his temptation with him. I wouldn't have to endure the sensation that I was at any moment going to melt into him and lose all control.

Why not indulge, just a little?

"I have a better idea," I said, more boldly than I felt. "Why don't you dine with me?"

I saw with pleasure I had surprised him.

"What, in the fancy dining room?"

Rising, my silk gown settled into folds and I saw Fynn's eyes widen, his pupils dilate, a muscle in his jaw tighten.

Power rushed through me. God, it was glorious to be desired again. To know that what I offered wasn't as impressive as Lilah, no, I wasn't blind, but was still something.

"Come on," I said lightly.

There was something indulgently authoritative about turning my back on the most handsome man I had ever met—and best kisser too—and walking away from him.

I entered our dining room and heard, rather than saw, Fynn's gasp.

"Heavens."

It was rather impressive, though I thought so myself. Kineallen wanted something more elegant, true, but I and Lilah argued that there was nothing more refined than a soft blue

And so we had given our architect and decorator carte blanche, and they had delivered. A sweeping table that curved through the room lying on the marbled floor, sections of black and white marble laid out in an intricate geometric pattern that was matched by the inlaid wood on the ceiling. Elegant silver painted lines ran down the length of the walls with gorgeous classical sculptures along the sides, the cutlery on the table gold gilt. Ostentatious.

“You eat here? Every night?” Fynn said as he closed the door behind him.

I turned and gave him what I hoped was a smile without any of the concern of his presence showing. “It’s just a dining room.”

He laughed. “You’ve been rich too long.”

“And you were born into money,” I pointed out, taking a seat at the head of the table. Well, why not?

Fynn sat beside me, his presence far too close for my liking but it would be churlish to ask him to move. Besides, his hand rested gently on the smooth wood. Close to mine.

My heart quickened. Would I be so foolish, or clever, I did not know, to take it again?

“Georgiana, I?—”

“Food,” I said hurriedly, rising from my seat and rang the bell near the fireplace.

That was close. Fynn had leaned toward me, as though he could no longer prevent himself from taking the kiss I was silently forbidding him, and I knew that if he did...well.

I would not be responsible for my actions.

We ate in silence. The food was good, I suppose; Cook was always marvelous, there was a reason we had brought her with us from London.

But the four courses disappeared far faster than I could imagine, faster than ever I had remembered. I knew I ate, the plates disappeared before me—our staff were wonderful, sometimes you could almost forget they were there—and Fynn and I said not a word.

His continued presence so close to me, however, was starting to become torture. Sweet torture, a pressure I needed to release, an itch I had to scratch.

“Anything else, Lady Cartice?”

I smiled. “That will be all, thank you. No need to clear the plates, I’ll ring when we’re done.”

Our butler Harris nodded and slipped out of the room.

Fynn looked at his plate, currently empty, and the plethora of cheeses, grapes, figs, pretzels along the board between us. “I don’t think I can eat another bite.”

“Oh, really?” I said boldly.

Hardly knowing what had possessed me to do it, I reached forward and plucked a grape from the vine, slipping it between my lips far slower than I would normally do.

I watched with a growing sense of power and pleasure as Fynn's eyes rested on my lips, now slick with the grape juice. He swallowed, his hands flexing as though he wished to move forward and take mine.

Take me.

"Oh, I want to eat," he said lightly. "I just don't want this."

My stomach twisted painfully. And there I was, thinking that I was being seductive. "Oh. Well, there are plenty of other things in the kitchens, I suppose. What do you want to eat?"

Fynn lifted his gaze, sharp and possessive. "You."

I had reached for another grape while I spoke but dropped it as he replied.

"You."

The grape bounced off the table and rolled onto the floor but I ignored it. How could I not, when all my attention was enwrapt on the man beside me?

"You, Georgiana, you," Fynn said quietly, but in a voice full of danger and desire. "You. God, you're tantalizingly close, like the apple in the garden, and as much as I want to reach out and pluck you, taste you?—"

I moaned slightly. I couldn't help it.

"—damn, and you want it too, that's the worst of it," Fynn groaned, pushing his plate away. "How long do we have to pretend we don't want each other?"

I swallowed. "Just a few more days, I think."

His gaze was fiery as it met mine and every inch of my skin tingled with anticipation.

We couldn't. We shouldn't.

“There would be nothing as sweet as tasting you, Georgiana,” Fynn said in a low voice, and heat pooled between my legs at the very thought. “I would bet on that.”

“We already have a bet,” I said, voice hoarse, trying not to think of all the ways this man could pleasure me. “A bet you’re about to lose.”

“The deck was stacked against me the moment before I knew it.”

My heart was thundering, my lips tingling in the ache for him, and I knew if he asked for me, or more, if he just took me, I wouldn't stop him.

I wanted to be taken by Fynn Monroe.

“Stacked against you?” I repeated, mind only half thinking of the conversation at hand as the other half pictured his hands on me, his mouth on my lips, my neck, my collarbone, lower—“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Fynn, “the moment I saw you. Sitting there, in a gown that matched your eyes, you knew to stack the deck, knew to tease me and tempt me, always?—”

“I'm the one in charge here,” I said with a teasing smile. “I have to?—”

“Do you?” He interrupted me not with rudeness but with a moan. “Do you have to, Georgiana? Have to tempt me, have to taste so sweet then forbid me another taste?”

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:30 am

EIGHT

Fynn

God, she was going to tip me over the edge and she didn't even know it.

I watched her eyes flicker, a quiet moan leaving her throat as she heard my words.

“Do you have to, Georgiana? Have to tempt me, have to taste so sweet then forbid me another taste?”

I had her now; or at least, I soon would. The woman who had been teasing me the moment I had stepped into this place, the woman who had haunted all my dreams the nights since.

The woman who had writhed under me in pleasure as I had kissed her merely days ago in the study.

“You can't say things like that to me,” Georgiana breathed.

But I could see the desire in her eyes; she wanted it, wanted more. Had anyone ever told her, I wondered, just how beautiful she was?

“I can and I will,” I said softly. “Damn, Georgiana, you are the most beautiful?—”

“No more words.”

I blinked. Had I misheard? I had always thought women wanted to hear how desired they were, how beautiful, how damned gorgeous they would be under my hands.

Rake, no, but I'd had my fair share of experience.

Georgiana was looking at me, though, with a very strange look. She had never looked at me like that; like all inhibitions were about to be thrown off, thrown away, forever.

A surge of hunger rocked my body, and I didn't want food.

"No more words?" I repeated softly.

Georgiana shook her head, her silky golden hair shifting under the candlelight around the dining room. "Don't tell me. Show me."

I swallowed. "Stack the deck, I thought, coming here. Make a bet with a duchess. Prove to them, the world, that you're a journalist to be reckoned w?—"

"Stack the deck?" Georgiana laughed gently under her breath. "Oh, Fynn. You have so much to learn about the Gambling Dukes way of things. Stack the deck? Throw out the deck. Create your own deck. Take what you want, no apologies."

And she was leaning forward, rising from her seat, and my heart was thumping so wildly I could barely take in that Georgiana was no longer standing but sitting, sitting on the table before me, that long silk gown covering the luscious legs I knew were underneath.

"You said you were hungry, Fynn," she breathed, pushing aside the cheeses, the fruits, the biscuits, the pretzels, and lowering herself onto the table, a veritable feast. "Eat."

I needed no further invitation.

My chair fell back behind me as I rose hurriedly, manhood hard, knowing what she wanted, knowing I could give her something no other man could.

“Eat.”

I moaned as I slowly pushed the hem of her silk dress up, past her ankles, past her calves, past knees I had seen before and had never touched, higher, and higher, until?—

“God in his Heaven, Georgiana,” I breathed.

The minx wasn’t even wearing undergarments.

Georgiana looked up at me, her eyes heavy with lust. “I knew, somehow, I just knew?—”

“Of course you did,” I said hurriedly, breath jagged in my throat as my manhood hardened in my breeches.

And so had I. The French letters I took everywhere with me—well, one never knew—had been slipped into my pocket before I had come down.

I had known, somehow, that this would be a meal I would never forget.

“Eat me,” Georgiana whispered, a slight flush on her cheeks as she asked, commanded, begged to be taken. “Fynn—Fynn!”

Her cry of my name pushed me beyond what I thought I could endure but I couldn’t take my pleasure now, not yet.

I had to obey first.

Parting her knees, settling myself between them, I tried not to moan aloud as I looked at her, legs splayed, welcoming me in. Delicate hairs pointed down to her warmth, her throbbing clit which wetted my thumb as I slowly drew it over.

God, if I wasn't careful, I was going to lose all control.

My initial kiss was on her thigh, just to the left of her center, and Georgiana moaned, her back arching against the table, and a fork or knife, I couldn't tell you which, fell to the floor.

"Aren't you hungry?" she whimpered. "I said eat me, Fynn, don't tease me!"

But tease her I would. My hands shook only slightly as they grasped her hips, holding her still, my tongue slowly licking, kissing, nibbling up her thigh as I grew closer and closer to the heart of her, the warmth of her, and I made sure she was absolutely gasping for it before I slowly placed a kiss over her folds.

"Fynn," Georgiana moaned.

I almost moaned in return. Oh God, if I thought her lips tasted sweet, it was nothing to how these lips tasted. A heady musk of desire and heat and need, and I could taste it all.

My manhood throbbed. Soon .

Her hands grasped my hair, her fingers entwining within it as I slowly started to work her. Slowly, slowly, I told myself, trying to hold myself back from the heady delight I was feasting on.

Slowly, my kiss deepened, my tongue slipped past my lips and into her.

“Oh, yes,” moaned Georgiana, driving me to distraction by the mere enjoyment I was giving her. “Deeper.”

How could I deny her?

I built a rhythm, slow at first, my hands keeping her hips still as they bucked, trying to draw more of me in, but I knew what I was doing.

Knew I would give her far more pleasure if she just behaved.

“Oh, Fynn, God, no one has ever?—”

I moaned. Of course no one had ever made her feel like this, no one had known her as I did, no one wanted her as I did.

No one knew how to pleasure her as I did.

“Fynn, please, please?—”

I could feel her tightening pleasure growing, taste it in her, and I increased my rhythm, turning the tip of my tongue in a circle against her clit and she twisted under me, her moans growing in pitch and volume, and I knew someone could hear at any moment but God I didn't care?—

“Please!” Georgiana cried, her fingers tight in my hair.

And I knew what she wanted, knew what would push her over the edge. One of my hands left her hips and reached up to her breast, capturing it without needing to see.

My thumb and finger tightened around her nipple, twisting, the same rhythm that I gave her with my tongue as I lapped at her sweetness and?—

“Fynn!”

Georgiana’s whole body rocked as her peak overwhelmed her, and it was all I could do to hold on, her bucking frame thrusting into my mouth and I welcomed it as she utterly lost herself, lost herself as I consumed her, giving her the pleasure she deserved.

When I finally lifted my head, Georgiana was looking at me with wide, pleasure-filled eyes.

“Fynn...Fynn, that was?—”

I didn’t let her finish. How could I? I hadn’t yet, and my manhood was straining against my breeches, begging to be allowed to do what it wanted. What it needed.

“You are magnificent,” I said darkly, lifting my head and body only to rip off my waistcoat and shirt, buttons pinging everywhere, but what did I care? “Georgiana, you are perfect.”

“And you are skilled,” she breathed with a laugh, hands placed on each side of her now as though she was about to rise from the table. “I never knew it could?—”

“I didn’t say my hunger was gone.”

Georgiana’s eyes widened as she watched me unbutton and unzip my breeches. “Fynn, I?—”

My breeches fell to the floor and her gaze shifted from my bare chest to the place

between my thighs. “You were saying?”

I watched her swallow as I stood there entirely naked. Naked before her.

But then, hadn't I been naked before her already? Hadn't I opened myself to her, made myself far more vulnerable to Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice than I ever had before, with anyone?

Wasn't this just the natural culmination of what we started less than a week ago?

Georgiana swallowed again. Then she laid back on the table. “Take me.”

I didn't need more of an invitation. After hastily retrieving a French letter from my breeches and slowly moving the thing onto my manhood—a part of me now aching for the same promise of pleasure I had already given the woman of my dreams lying on the table before me, a meal I never thought I'd ever get to eat—I moved back between her legs.

“I wanted to do this the moment I met you,” I said in a jagged voice as I slowly slid myself into her folds.

Christ, she was warm, and wet, and ready for me.

Georgiana met my eye. “I wanted you to do the moment I saw you.”

I groaned, leaning to kiss her, trying not to come right into her this very moment. “You wanted to bet.”

“I always gamble,” she whispered, her hands clutching my shoulders, her fingertips digging into the muscles as she clung to me. “I knew you were a safe bet.”

“I always play to win,” I said, gritting my teeth as I moved almost out of her then thrust back in, groaning at the tension of pleasure that rocked my body.

God, I was going to lose myself in her, and not just her body. Her soul, her mind, everything.

Georgiana tilted her head slightly then arched her breasts into my chest, nipples erect through her silk gown, grazing my chest, making me moan with longing. “Then win, Fynn.”

My hands found hers, swiftly pinning her against the table as she arched her back once more, and I build a rhythm within her, faster this time, now I had already brought her to ecstasy, and it took all my self-control as sensual delights scattered across my skin, every part of me aching for her, feeling the well of pleasure building, building as she moaned, as I brought her closer to her own peak, and?—

“Fynn!”

Thank God—I didn’t think I could hold on much longer. As Georgiana shook under me, her body rearing against mine, her hands struggling to be free as I held her down, down where I wanted her, where I needed her, my own orgasm overwhelmed me.

“Georgiana!”

I poured myself into her, everything I was, everything I could be, the man I wanted to be when I saw myself in her eyes, the joy exquisite, so potent I could weep?—

And then I collapsed into her arms.

Georgiana

There was something different in the air. I knew it, even if I couldn't explain it.

But there was. And I knew why.

Fynn.

"I always gamble. I knew you were a safe bet."

"I always play to win."

I couldn't help the flush pouring across my cheeks as I stepped boldly this time, without hesitation, over to the drawing room I was already unconsciously considering Fynn's.

Fynn's room.

I had my own townhouse in London, from my dower, and there was a large room on the second floor I hadn't really known what to do with. Everything I needed in the place was already set out; my study, sitting room, dining room, a kitchen I barely stepped in. Four bedchambers—one for me, the others for guests—a large drawing room, and a terrace that looked out onto Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament.

And then this room. Empty. Unfulfilled.

A study for Fynn, perhaps?

The moment the thought ran through my mind my gaze caught Fynn's, seated by the big bay window in the East Drawing Room. He smiled, and I absolutely melted. I was almost a puddle on the floor, it was a miracle I was able to keep walking toward him.

The man I?—

I caught myself just in time. No. This was ridiculous! I didn't even know the man a week ago; at least, I had exchanged several angry letters with him, a formal letter, and even tried to meet him at his newspaper's printers once to shout at him but hadn't managed it.

And now I was considering...

"You look happy this morning," Fynn observed wryly as I settled on the arm of his chair.

I kissed him briefly before I replied. "Yes."

He grinned, that twinkle in his eye I knew so well returning, and it was all I could do not to slip into his lap and ask him to take me again.

I mean, now I knew how skilled he was...

"I thought you'd be working."

"I am," said Fynn, tapping his temple. "In here."

I rolled my eyes. For an investigative reporter, he was daft sometimes. "I mean, I thought you'd be hounding me to ask for access to our archives again. Look through our records. Find this mysterious scandal you're so sure is in there."

He didn't answer. At least, not with words. His strong arm came around me, pulling me into his arms just as I had imagined.

Damned man could even read my mind.

"Well, I would need a key to do that," Fynn said cheerfully. "One of those fancy

keys. You don't, I suppose, want to make me one?"

I laughed, heart soaring. "What, and give you unlimited access to Dalhurst Manor? No thanks."

God, it was fortunate in a way that he was leaving tomorrow. I wouldn't be able to hold out for long if his stay was indefinite, I thought wildly, heart racing, stomach twisting in that glorious way I now knew could only be created by his presence.

"I suppose you're right," he said with a heavy mock sigh. "I's also need your mind to know the layout of the house, wouldn't I?"

As though I was the mind reader now, I raised my fingertips up and he kissed them. "You would."

"Do I get to keep the rest of you too?"

"I'm a bargain, I'll tell you that."

I had resisted kissing him for so long, I almost sighed with relief as I leaned and found his lips as eager as my own.

There was nothing like kissing Fynn. Paul had been...quite adequate, I suppose. I had kind of assumed he was as good as it got; someone handsome, yes, but with nothing much going on between the ears, and a strange way of getting slobbery when he got excited. Of course, he had been in his early seventies when we married.

Fynn could not be more different. As tingles of pleasure started to ripple through my body, my lungs tight in my chest as I thought about what pleasure we would share, I was suddenly conscious of footsteps.

Footsteps in this direction.

“Blast,” I muttered.

I had only just managed to stand out of Fynn’s embrace when the door opened.

“There you—oh.” Markham glared at the man seated beside me. “I thought you’d gone.”

“Tomorrow is my last day,” said Fynn pleasantly—far more pleasant than my friend was being, at any rate, which wasn’t difficult. “Saturday is when I go.”

I could see the displeasure on my friend’s face, knew he saw Fynn’s presence here as an inconvenience at best, and a betrayal on my part at worst.

“Right,” Markham said with a heavy sigh. “Fine. Georgiana, tomorrow when he’s gone, we’ll talk.”

The door slammed before I could say anything.

Fynn whistled. “Not my biggest fan, is he?”

I shrugged, slipping back into his arms. “I suppose not—but then, I don’t think any of my friends have much better opinions of you, to be honest. Markham just utterly fails at hiding them.”

“Oh, charming!” Fynn chuckled, kissing the corner of my mouth before moving slowly to the center. “Are all of you this welcoming?”

“To people coming here in the hopes of writing a four page spread about us and tanking our reputations?”

It was the wrong thing to say. I could feel it in my chest the moment the words had stumbled out, barely breathed between kisses, but Fynn had heard them.

He pulled back, his brow heavy. “You really think that’s all I’m here for now?”

I hesitated. I was not usually one to make demands of people, let alone the men I flirted with. Not that I’d flirted with many.

I’d learned few things from my time with Paul, however mundane it was, and that was that men didn’t like getting pinned down.

I mean, I was almost certain some of them did.

But not when it came to commitment. Men didn’t wish to be told where to go, who with, where they would be in five minutes time, let alone five months. Five years.

And Fynn was...special.

There was something different about him. Certain though I was that he had only come into my life to destroy it, he hadn’t, had he?

And he was an honorable man. I knew there was nothing for Fynn to find, and he was a man of his word. If he didn’t find anything...

“Why, Georgiana, then you can do whatever you want with me.”

He wouldn’t just print lies, I told myself firmly as I looked into his deep eyes. He wasn’t that kind of man. He wasn’t a man to lie to improve his own lot in life. Why, he’d refused to reveal the truth to claim back his own inheritance.

Perhaps it was his principles that attracted me so deeply. I mean, his looks didn’t hurt,

but looks could be found anywhere in London if you knew where to go. Plenty of handsome gentlemen.

That was how Lilah kept herself busy, at least.

I couldn't blame her; widows had a great deal more latitude than unmarried ladies.

But Fynn was different.

"I don't know why you're here," I whispered, surprised at the softness of my own voice.

Fynn smiled weakly. "Good. Because neither do I. None of this makes sense."

"Does it have to?"

Whatever had come over me, it was radically altering my preconceptions of what a connection like this looked like. I held my breath as I looked at him, my hands pressed up against his muscular chest which I had had the benefit of seeing utterly stripped of all clothes just yesterday.

His own hands were tight around my buttocks. I shifted slightly, feeling the strength of his fingers, watched him swallow.

Whatever I was to him, he was the same to me. We just didn't know what it was yet.

"I shouldn't be distracting you from work," I said quietly, before dipping my head to kiss his neck.

Fynn groaned, but he didn't push me away. "How can you say that, and then do?—"

“This?” I whispered in his ear before nibbling it.

What had come over me? This wasn’t me; and yet it was. Perhaps it was the me that had always been there, dormant, never meeting a man to coax it out.

Whatever it was, I was aching to be touched by him and knew nothing could satisfy in the way Fynn did.

Not even our bet.

Our bet.

I sat up and looked Fynn directly in the eye. “The bet. We’ve only got a day before the winner is decided.”

He nodded, his dark hair tousled by my kisses. “You told me you’d stack the deck.”

“I told you to throw out the deck and make your own,” I said quietly.

What would happen on Saturday, when Fynn was meant to leave? Would he? Would I leave with him?

“Well, as far as I can see, there’s no point in stacking the deck.”

I tensed. That didn’t sound like the Fynn I knew. “What do you mean?”

My gaze raked over him, trying to understand what he meant, where this conversation was going—where I wanted it to go. The whole thing was a mystery to me.

Fynn’s finger stroked my buttocks, not in a ‘I’m going to tear your clothes off’ way, more’s the pity, but in a ‘every part of you deserves to be touched’ way. It was

hypnotic.

“Fynn?”

“I mean,” he said slowly, his voice low, “that as far as I am concerned, you’ve won.”

I stared. The words didn’t make sense. “Won?”

“I always play to win.”

“Then win, Fynn.”

It was impossible to prevent a shiver of desire rushing through my body. Had he felt it?

“I’m not sure if I have,” I said quietly. “Not yet, at any rate.”

I thought for a moment he would say something; admit his feelings for me, pour out his heart, let me know what he was thinking, explain to me my own thoughts and feelings because I had no idea what they were.

Only that they were about him.

Then a slow smile crept over his face. “You’re right,” Fynn said quietly, his right hand moving from my buttock and slowly meandering past my hip toward my secret place. “You haven’t won yet this morning.”

My breath hitched in my throat. He couldn’t mean— “Fynn?—”

“Quiet,” he said darkly, capturing my lips with his own as he slid his fingers under my skirts and moved toward my clit. “Or someone will hear. And you don’t want me

to stop, do you?”

I whimpered in his arms, leaning my head against his shoulder as his fingers pushed past my undergarments and into my wetness. “No.”

“Then win, Georgiana,” Fynn moaned under his breath as his fingers started to work me. “Win.”

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:30 am

NINE

Fynn

I stared at the piece of paper in front of me, blinking, hardly able to believe it.

But there it was. Black and white. Lines and lines of numbers that anyone else might have skipped over, bored, believing they would be impossible to find.

I closed my eyes, screwed them up, shook my head as though shaking sense into it...then opened them again.

The details were unchanged. In fact, the longer I looked at them, the more they made sense. The more impressed I was that I hadn't found them before, hidden as they were so carefully at the back of the very last cabinet.

Blowing out a heavy sigh, I leaned back in my chair.

I was alone in the room; it was my last day here at Dalhurst Manor, and Georgiana hadn't thought it necessary to chaperone me. I'd kissed her senseless, but it hadn't been enough to make her stay.

Now I was glad.

Markham Cartice---?150

Markham Cartice---?140

Markham Cartice---?250

Markham Cartice---?1750

Markham Cartice---?140

On and on it went, line after line, the proof I had been searching for from the very beginning.

Markham, the Duke of Markham, Georgiana's own friend, was stealing from the club. Not a lot; not when it came to wealthy dukes, at least.

But enough. Again and again, small amounts transferred, made to look like nothing but entirely separate from the rather generous incomes I had discovered each of the members drew from the club.

My heart was racing, but this wasn't the hedonistic glorious rhythm I had indulged with Georgiana.

Oh, damn and blast it.

This was completely different. He was stealing from?—

“Discovered any great secrets yet?”

I immediately closed the folder as Georgiana placed a lingering hand on my shoulder. I hadn't even heard the door open. She sat on the desk, bright eyed and mischievous, all the passion I adored in her brought out by my mere presence.

“I hope you don't mind me dropping in,” she said with a laugh. “I couldn't stay away, I'm afraid.”

I smiled weakly, then forced the smile to expand, knowing I was doing a terrible job keeping a poker face.

Really terrible.

“What’s wrong?” Georgiana frowned, her blue eyes dark in this low candlelight, piercing me. “Fynn?”

I took a deep breath, but no words came out. How could they? My stomach churned at the very thought of revealing what I had discovered.

For she didn’t know. She couldn’t know. I looked at Georgiana, her innocence, her trust, her complete belief there was nothing to find, no point in me being here...the idea that any of her friends could betray her, betray them...

It hadn’t even crossed her mind.

I didn’t want to take that trust from her.

But I had to say something. She had the right to know...before she saw the headlines.

“I...Georgiana, I found this,” I said quietly, opening the folder.

A smile still danced on those trusting lips, lips that brushed across my forehead before she slipped effortlessly into my lap, curling into me as she turned to look at the piece of paper.

My eyes shut. I wanted to enjoy this moment of peace and innocence, luxuriate in it, try to recall it when all hell had broken loose.

It did not take long.

“It isn’t true,” Georgiana said quietly.

I swallowed. “I found the records in?—”

“You didn’t find these,” she said, eyes flickering down the page. “No. No, Markham would never—he has no need of money!”

Her voice was strong, unwavering, yet I could see the panic in her eyes, feel the taut tension in her arms as she leaned forward, inspecting of my findings.

Guilt swept my heart and I knew then, as I had never known before, that I could have just walked away. I could have closed this folder, never bothered to tell anyone. A few hundred here or there, who would miss it?

No one was at the moment.

Georgiana rose out of my lap, stepping away from me. “You’re lying.”

And the guilt was replaced by rage. “Lying?” I repeated, disbelievingly.

She nodded, her fingers sweeping a strand of golden hair out of her eyes. “Markham is not stealing from the club.”

“You—Georgiana, you saw the ledger,” I said, standing myself. How could she think that I would—“You think I falsified the records?”

“Anything can be done with a pen and paper,” she shot back, eyes narrowing.

“You’re joking!” I thrust a hand toward the folder. “This is your folder, Georgiana, your ledger, your records!”

“Kineallen is our leader, he would have spotted?—”

“It’s taken me six days to find even a snippet of what’s been going on, and I’ve been looking !” I dragged a hand through my hair. “Georgiana, I am not lying!”

My heart was pounding but it wasn’t the passionate beating of a heart about to make love. It was a heart ready to run, to flee, to escape this nightmare that I had created for myself.

And for her. Georgiana.

She was staring at me as though she had never seen me before. “Markham has worked as hard as the rest of us to build this club?—”

“I’m not saying he?—”

“—and the very idea he would steal from us...” Georgiana took a deep breath. “It’s a mistake, an accounting error, that’s all. I mean, it isn’t even that much money!”

I stared, a battle within myself that I knew I would lose, my better judgement overruled by my moral stance.

The moral stance Georgiana had been attracted to.

“Georgiana, it’s hundreds of?—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” said Georgiana, turning away from me, striding toward the door, then halting. She turned back to glare and I almost stepped back, her ire devastating. “Markham has always looked out for me, always stood by me. He stood by me when Paul died?—”

“Just because he supported you then, that doesn’t make him innocent now,” I said darkly. “Plenty of people have believed in me, and?—”

“I don’t want to hear your sob story,” Georgiana snapped, eyes fierce. “This is my family we’re talking about, not yours. They are more than friends to me. We don’t betray each other—not like your family.”

The words echoed around the drawing room, bouncing off the walls, repeating over and over again. Or was that just my mind? My heart, unable to stop listening to the anger in her voice, the substance of her words.

“This is my family we’re talking about, not yours. They are more than friends to me. We don’t betray each other—not like your family.”

I stared; the first woman I had ever truly cared about, though I had not admitted that to myself, or her. Now I never would.

The fire sparked and died in her eyes. “I didn’t mean?—”

“Yes, you did,” I said dully.

So it came to this. Two people who cared about each other, without a doubt, though I was unsure just how deep her affections were. I really didn’t know now.

But I had hoped...foolish hopes. Hopes that included Georgiana coming back with me to London, us walking in Hyde Park in the summer heat and laughing about the week I had spent at her family home, trying to find secrets that weren’t there.

But they were. And I’d found them.

And I hadn’t been able to keep them to myself.

I picked up my satchel. “I’ll leave?—”

“Back to London?” Georgiana stared as though I had betrayed her, and I had, I knew, but I couldn’t pretend I hadn’t found the truth of what I had known, instinctively, was there.

I swallowed. I had to ensure my voice was strong. “Back to London.”

Georgiana folded her arms before her chest. “Then I suppose I have the answer to the question I was going to ask.”

There was such sadness in her tones, I wanted to wrap her in my arms and kiss away the pain. But it was pain I had brought, clearly, and pain that I was only going to exacerbate when I returned to London.

To my editor. To the newspaper.

“Question?” My curiosity got the better of me as I took a step toward her.

Georgiana laughed bitterly as she stepped back. “It doesn’t matter now. A foolish idea, I don’t know why I even bothered to think of it. You only want your scoop, that’s all you care about.”

“That’s not all I—Georgiana!”

“Everything we shared, all our conversations, our—our kisses, it all means nothing to you,” she said, eyes meeting mine and there was such pain there, I could almost have cried out. “Nothing.”

“It didn’t mean—you don’t mean nothing,” I said urgently. “I would never lie to you, Georgiana, I’ve been lied to before and I never will again.”

A dark, wry smile creased her lips. “And you won’t lie now? You won’t hide the truth, for me?”

I hesitated. It was a tempting question. She didn’t need to bribe me, my heart was closely tied to her to make me want to give her everything, tell her I would destroy the ledger, burn it, only I would ever know about it.

But that wasn’t the truth. And the truth was something we both valued...perhaps more than each other.

“You once told me that you studied the law because you wanted to do what was right,” I said softly. “What is the right thing to do here?”

I tried to ignore her beauty, focus only on her pain, but as Georgiana stepped toward me hope I had not permitted myself to feel started to rise.

She stopped right before me; I could smell her perfume, breathed in her loveliness?—

“I want you to leave.”

I blinked. “What?”

Georgiana’s face was serious, her eyes fixed on mine. “I want you out. Out of here, out of Dalhurst Manor...and out of my life.”

Georgiana

I picked listlessly at the salmon and asparagus on my plate. Neither tasted—well, of anything.

Cook hadn’t suddenly lost all ability in the kitchen, of course. It was me.

Fynn had left yesterday. The weekend was here, Saturday, the last day before we all returned to London. The heatwave had finally broken and around the table my friends were chattering eagerly about what they were most excited to get back to the city for.

“—my townhouse will be baking, I’ll have to air the thing out?—”

“—market has the best flowers, I simply haven’t found anything to compare?—”

“You rotten liar, Markham, you haven’t!”

I flinched. I couldn’t help it.

“Markham has worked as hard as the rest of us to build this club ? —”

“I’m not saying he ? —”

“—and the very idea he would steal from us... It’s a mistake, an accounting error, that’s all. I mean, it isn’t even that much money!”

I hadn’t spoken to my friend about the accusations Fynn—Mr. Monroe had made. I couldn’t bring myself to.

It had been a full hour after Fynn had left yesterday that I had been able to return to the drawing room and open up the ledger. What I found there, right where Fynn had found them, were records upon records of...

“You quite well, Georgiana?”

I glanced up at Markham’s concerned face and my stomach twisted. “I’m fine.”

He was about to say something else, something I braced myself for, but he was

distracted by a question from Lilah and turned away from me.

“He’s gone, then?”

I glanced to my left and tried to smile. “Yes. He’s gone.”

Kineallen nodded sagely. “For the best, I suppose.”

“I suppose.” My voice was listless, but I couldn’t force life into it. My emotions for Fynn were complicated; untangling them would take a long time. I didn’t know whether I would ever be entirely sure of what I had lost.

“You must be relieved to see him go,” Kineallen persisted. “After he was here for so long.”

Here for so long? I almost smiled but the burden of knowledge, of knowing the lies and deceit in our own club, weighed on me too heavily.

So long? It barely felt as though Fynn had been here; he had come and gone before I had really registered just how much I needed him. Wanted him.

But that was stupid—lust was not a good enough reason to keep a man like that here. Why, I thought darkly, he’d be in the newspaper offices right now, right this moment, spilling my family’s secrets to his editor.

I’ll have to check the newspapers tomorrow, I thought with a lurch of my stomach. I didn’t know how quickly these things got turned around.

For the rest of my life, until it happened, I would be waiting to see our disgrace printed in black and white.

“Georgiana?”

My gaze focused. Kineallen was looking at me with great concern, had obviously been talking to me but I hadn’t paid a blind bit of difference.

“You feeling quite well?” My friend asked quietly.

Not quietly enough.

“Is Georgiana feeling unwell?” Lilah asked from across the table, speaking over Markham. “Georgiana, you’re unwell?”

“I am not unwell,” I said reassuringly.

Well. Perhaps not reassuringly enough.

“That’s the last thing we need as we start to prepare the final details for our next big gamble,” said Markham jovially.

I shot him a glare I knew he both did and did not deserve. “Is that all that matters? The gamble, not the fact that I may be ill?”

“I—Georgiana, I didn’t mean it like that,” said Markham awkwardly.

A strange sort of chill had descended on the room and I only realized after a moment that it was me.

“I’m leaving.”

I looked up as Kineallen rose from his seat. “What?”

He shrugged. “I want to get back to London. I’ll take the curricule, if no one minds?”

“Well I’m staying to look after Georgiana,” said Lilah staunchly.

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at that. “Lilah, I don’t need?—”

“You just do what you’re told,” she said with a wry smile. “Neither of us are very good at it, to be sure, but you do it, and you’ll have fewer people clucking over you.”

There was nothing I could say to that. She was right. The last thing I wanted was a fuss, to be asked again and again what was wrong.

Not when I hadn’t decided yet what I was going to do about Markham.

My eyes were drawn to him, above all my friends, as both the men got up to leave the table for one reason or another.

“—fit everything in my trunk?”

“Oh, the valet will manage it?—”

“—get some shut eye if I’m going to White’s tonight?—”

And then the door closed, and I was left alone.

Well. Alone with Lilah.

“You’ve barely touched your food, you know,” my best friend said quietly. “You only went off your food last when...Paul.”

My lungs tightened, every breath a challenge, but I forced myself to keep taking

them.

Yes, Paul. He had put me off my food, at least for a time. But Paul had done everything right, on paper, been everything right. The right kind of family, the right kind of man, the right clothes, income, connections.

His betrayal, and then his death...it had been painful, but it hadn't felt like this.

I couldn't untangle precisely why this had ended my appetite, my ability to laugh, to smile. Perhaps it was the double betrayal; Markham and Fynn.

I don't know why, but even though I had known —ha!—that there was no scandal to discover in the Gambling Dukes' records, I had thought after Fynn and I had shared...

Well. Hide it. Forget about it. Pretend he had never seen it in the first place.

It was a rather disconcerting challenge to my own moral compass, which was probably why I hated it.

But underneath it all, the reason that Fynn's betrayal in the first place, was Markham.

Oh, Markham. What had he done?

"Georgiana."

"What?" I said, my head jerking up.

My best friend was looking at me with a soft kindness I knew I didn't deserve. Hadn't I bedded the very man about to ruin us all?

“Georgiana, you know you can talk to me about anything,” she said quietly.
“Anything at all.”

I tried to smile. Yes, I knew that, and Lilah would try to understand. But how could she? She was perfect, never putting a foot wrong, never second guessing herself. Never at a loss for words, or friends, or men.

How could Lilah even comprehend what I had done?

“I may be the Chief Legal Counsel,” I said with a dry laugh, “but sometimes I wonder...whether what I have done, if I could do it again?—”

“We’re talking about Mr. Fynn Monroe, then,” Lilah said dryly.

A heavy sigh escaped my lips. “Yes. No. I don’t know.”

I picked up my fork and turned it slowly in my fingers, a piece of salmon still speared on the end. I didn’t want to talk about this with anyone, let alone Lilah. Had she ever been betrayed by a man—by anyone? Not likely.

And my stomach twisted painfully. Except she, like me, had been betrayed, and by someone we would never have expected.

Our own friend.

“If you really like him,” Lilah’s voice cut across my thoughts, “you could always look him up in London. It wouldn’t be hard to find him, the newspaper offices will be easy to hunt down.”

I laughed bitterly. Oh, my best friend could not even imagine how little I wanted to go anywhere near that place.

Besides, I had bet on the wrong horse. I had been sure that my attraction to him, my desire to be with him?—

“Eat me.”

A flush tinged my cheeks. So sure I was right that I hadn't stopped to consider his loyalties were not to me, but to himself. I was a founding member of the Gambling Dukes, a widow, a dowager duchess...and I had allowed myself to be overwhelmed by a handsome gentleman.

A gentleman who had left here yesterday with all the information needed to ruin me. Ruin us. And he'd taken my damn heart with him.

“You told me you'd stack the deck.”

“I told you to throw out the deck and make your own.”

I could almost laugh. I had been so determined then, so sure of myself. So sure of him. So sure of my best friend, our friends.

And I had been wrong.

How could I ever be sure again?

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TEN

Fynn

I couldn't face the office on Sunday.

I should have gone in. I knew that. I had the information I needed, the information I had been sure was there. My editor would be chomping at the bit to see me—at least, if they knew I was in London.

Keeping a low profile wasn't hard. I just let myself back into my tiny lodgings, crashed onto the bed, and tried to move as little as possible.

But when Monday rolled around, I really had no excuse but to go in. So when I stepped off across the street, breathing in the early morning air, my satchel grew heavier and heavier as I stepped along toward the office.

“Monroe,” nodded one of the lads who sold the papers on the streets. “Haven't you seen you for a while, been away?”

I nodded.

The lad grinned. “Business or pleasure?”

My stomach twisted painfully as I tried to smile, pushing open the door and crossing the entrance hall.

Business or pleasure.

The lad couldn't know what a pertinent question that was. In a way, I still hardly knew myself.

"I wanted to do this the moment I met you."

"I wanted you to do the moment I saw you."

Try as I might, I couldn't push away every thought of Georgiana as I slowly walked up the staircase to the fifth floor. Everything reminded me of her; the shine of the sun in her hair, the way she smiled at me, half curious, half desiring?—

"Monroe!"

I tried to smile. "Mr. Jordan."

"God, I'd forgotten you'd be back today, last week flew by so quickly I hardly know what month it is," said my editor, rushing past me with a cup of tea in one hand. "You got what you wanted?"

I hesitated. I knew the words I should say, the words I had been so desperate to say just over a week ago.

That I had found it, something in the Gambling Dukes' records that would prove them to be scandalous—perhaps even tricking others out of their fortunes.

"Fynn?"

I blinked. Mr. Jordan was still standing before me, and I still hadn't answered their question. I still hadn't decided how I wanted to.

“I need the scoop, Monroe,” my editor said slowly, as though I was an imbecile. “Remember? You went to that goddawful place with that goddawful club?—”

“They’re not?—”

I caught myself just in time, but it didn’t seem to matter. Mr. Jordan wasn’t listening anyway.

“—something funny, no one gets that rich that quickly. Not honestly, anyway.”

I watched them pull their jacket taut, as though they had just proven an impressive point. Others of the office joined in, each of them speculating about how the Gambling Dukes had managed to go from nothing to something.

But I hadn’t seen any sign of underhand dealings.

At least, not any that mattered. Nothing that would have sparked up their ability to win card games, nothing about stealing secrets or paying off jockeys to win when fluttering on the races. As far as I had seen, The Gambling Dukes paid their servants over the market rate.

The Duke of Markham was stealing from the club, yes, and it was clear his friends didn’t know. At least, I thought uncomfortably, Georgiana hadn’t known. I didn’t know about the rest of them.

But who was it hurting, other than the friends themselves?

“Fynn?”

I blinked. Mr. Jordan had snapped their fingers before my eyes.

“We lost you there for a moment,” my editor said with a laugh. “Right then, tell me all about it.”

In that moment, I knew what I was going to say. What I had to say. There didn’t seem to be much choice, which was the strange thing.

“There’s nothing to tell.”

Mr. Jordan blinked. A few other reporters looked up from desks, eyes weary in the case of those who had been in early.

“What?”

I swallowed. I had to make this believable. “There’s nothing to tell, Mr. Jordan. I didn’t find anything.”

My editor stared at me for a moment, utterly at a loss—then for some reason, winked. “Come on, into my office.”

I followed them out of habit more than anything else. I knew what was about to follow, had seen it done many times. But never to me.

The door closed with a snap.

“Come on, Monroe,” said Mr. Jordan as they settled behind their desk. “I know you found something, you always do. Nothing has ever gotten past you, that’s why I keep you.”

The subtle hint was not unnoticed.

“I don’t have anything for you,” I said, stretching my hands out wide as though in

apology. “I’m sorry, Mr. Jordan, I?—”

“Don’t give me that nonsense.” All the warmth was gone from the room, and their voice, their beady eye glaring. “I know you found something, and if you’re not willing to talk it means they’ve paid you off. What did they give you?”

It took all my self-control to meet their eye dead on. “Nothing. There was nothing to buy off.”

Vindication roared through my heart. I had made the right decision; Mr. Jordan didn’t deserve to know the inner workings of the Gambling Dukes.

No one did.

I had felt it was right to tell Georgiana, and I still stood by that decision, though it cost me the most precious thing I had to lose.

But despite my fine words to her just days before, it was only when I had returned to London that I realized sharing a personal betrayal wasn’t in the public interest. It wasn’t in anyone’s interest.

Only hurt was going to come from this revelation.

My heart contracted painfully. Had Georgiana already confronted him? Had the Gambling Dukes exploded, imploded, ended before it could truly see its potential?

Mr. Jordan slammed a hand on their desk. “I’ll fire you.”

“Fine, fire me,” I said calmly.

I hadn’t thought it would come to this, but the moment they said the words, I knew

what my response had to be. There was a calmness in me I hadn't expected; no tension in my shoulders, no twinges of regrets.

This was right.

"Fire you?"

I nodded slowly at my editor's amazement. "Fire me. Nothing is worth betrayal."

"You've played your hand, and you've lost," said Mr. Jordan with a dark laugh. "And I admire you for continuing to try to play the game, but the newspaper world is a small one, Monroe. Get fired here, you might not find it as easy as you think to find somewhere else."

"I know that," I said quietly.

And I did. My career in the papers was over, I knew, but it was a simple and obvious price to pay if it meant Georgiana could try to tangle up the crap Markham had left her with—and privately.

Besides, I'd been betrayed before. My stepfather had been one of the few people I trusted, and look where that had got me.

I wasn't about to betray someone else's trust. Not while I was in love with?—

"Don't be a sore loser, Monroe," grinned Mr. Jordan. "I'll get it out of you, you know—or I'll send someone else. Someone better. Someone able to charm the truth out of that Gambling Dukes club of theirs, or charm the clothes off them, it doesn't bother me. A little scandal might sink that ship just as easily as?—"

"Damn you, Jordan," I spat, finally goaded beyond all endurance. "This was

supposed to be a financial investigation, for the good of the people, not a smear campaign!”

“Then tell me,” they said quietly. “Tell me the truth.”

I took a deep and steadying breath. I looked at my editor, perhaps one of the few people I would have trusted before this week.

Now I only trusted one person in the world, and she was miles away, determined to hate me I was sure.

“I may have lost the hand,” I said quietly, “and I may have lost my job. But I didn’t even know what I was gambling until the cards were dealt, and now I’ve lost the only thing worth losing. And it’s not this, Jordan. It’s not this.”

With a wave of my hands around the small room that reeked of cigar smoke, I threw open the door and strode out of the office for the last time.

Georgiana

The whiskey in my glass shone bright amber as the sunlight rushed through it. I had poured it almost an hour ago, according to the delicate hands of the longcase clock which was chiming through the open window, but I’d barely taken a sip.

Wasn’t that what you supposed to do, after heartbreak? Lose yourself in alcohol?

I’d never seen the appeal.

The late afternoon sunlight glittered through the aquamarine light of the lake. I’d asked Harris to set a few chairs outside for me, certain a swim would improve my mind, but I hadn’t even been able to bring myself to go in.

So here I sat, on a chair, with a whiskey in my hand and worries on my heart.

I could almost laugh. I sounded like a terrible folksong. And the only trouble was, if you ignored the impending doom of the club we had built from nothing, and the loss of a man I was almost sure I loved, I still hadn't talked to?—

“There you,” said Markham as he stepped out of the house, through the doors where I had first seen Fynn. “I thought you'd returned to London.”

I smiled weakly. Everyone had, even Lilah, under protest. There had been such a kerfuffle yesterday that no one had thought to ask me when I was leaving. Or whether I was leaving.

London felt too close to Fynn.

Which was ridiculous. I had lived the last few years in London and never come across Fynn—and I was unlikely to now. Now I knew to avoid him, and any places journalists frequented. He was not likely as a mere commoner to be invited to the sorts of balls and dinners which were always open to me, and so...so I would never see him again.

Markham settled on the chair beside me and removed his hat. “Bright out.”

I nodded, twisting my glass slowly so that the ice remaining rattled. Perhaps my friend would get the hint; that I just wanted to sit here, not drinking, in peace.

“You're quiet.”

Markham was perceptive, as ever. Damn.

“Just thinking,” I said airily, as though nothing in the world had ever touched my

heart, and never would. “That’s all.”

My friend examined me. “Thinking?”

I nodded. I wasn’t going to let my pain spill from my lips, not yet. I had to have a plan, had to think about how I was going to approach this. Approach him.

Because I had to. Fynn was right, damn him, as he was about so many things. I couldn’t simply let this go, I couldn’t ignore what Markham had done. I couldn’t pretend the damage he had done to our club, our reputation, would never be found out.

If Fynn had found it, someone else would. Before you knew it, no one would gamble with us anymore, invitation rescinded, vouchers to Almack’s declined, Society unimpressed...because everyone had thought that everything was above board.

And it wasn’t. I knew that now.

I could never un-know it.

“Sorry for interrupting, then, I suppose,” said Markham with a wry smile.

I tried to match it. I hadn’t thought ask what he was still doing here, why Markham hadn’t gone back to London. Though in fairness, I hadn’t justified my presence, and he hadn’t asked me to.

I smiled. My friend. Why would I believe Fynn over him?

Surely the records were falsified. Fynn had been so eager to find something, anything, I told myself, there was no knowing what he would do to find a story. Make a story. Concoct something that would?—

“Fynn’s gone, then.”

My thin smile immediately disappeared. I couldn’t maintain it in the face of hearing that name again. “Yes.”

Markham looked at me closely. “You know, Kineallen thought you were foolish, inviting him here.”

“He’s not the only one, as I recall,” I said dryly.

I sipped my whiskey. It was mostly water now, the ice almost completely melted. I should have spoken to Kineallen before he left. I should have asked him his opinion, what I should do about Markham.

If I should do anything.

He was the eldest, my eldest friend. He had cared for us all in different ways when our spouses had died, even when he had lost his own.

He would have known what to do.

“Well, you said it wouldn’t matter,” said Markham matter-of-factly. “Inviting him here, I mean. It was not like we had anything to hide.”

I couldn’t help it. Even in the sunny afternoon glow of the day, there was something wrong when a secret was being hidden from me. Between friends, there shouldn’t be secrets.

Not like this one.

I raised my eyes to Markham’s.

“Blast,” he said quietly. “You know.”

Shame rushed through me, mirroring what I knew he was feeling. My friend, my darling friend. What have you done?

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me,” I whispered, tears sparkling in my eyes, unshed for the moment but dancing along my bottom eyelid. “Markham, how could you?”

“I didn’t mean to—it isn’t as simple as that,” Markham said fiercely.

I could see the panic in his lungs, every breath rising his fear, and knew I shouldn’t have admitted I knew. Now I had lost him, lost his trust. Just as he had lost mine.

And he had lost me more than that. The health, the reputation of the club.

Fynn.

“Oh, Markham,” I said wearily, resting a hand on his shoulder. “You should have told us.”

“I couldn’t, not after—well, the first time doesn’t feel like anything, and the third time it feels easy, so easy,” Markham said, his words spilling out, thick and fast, “and before I knew it I couldn’t stop, and how could I go to you then, how could I tell you I was?—”

“Stealing from us,” I said flatly.

All the warmth had gone from the day. I sat there, staring at the man before me, a shadow of the man I knew. My friend’s hand hung low, his hands twisting together, shame pouring through him but I could do nothing to alleviate it.

Not now.

“I wish you had told me, long before Fynn came but especially then,” I said quietly, gripping his shoulder now, trying to hold onto what mattered. “I could have helped you, could have protected?—”

“Once you invited that journalist, I knew it would come out,” Markham said dully, not meeting my eye. “I should have left.”

“You should have returned the money.”

He shrugged, pushing my hand away. “You think I still have it?”

My heart twisted painfully. Of course he didn’t. Markham had the tastes and expenses of a duke.

Oh God, what had he been doing with that money?

“But there’s nothing in the newspaper,” my friend said eagerly, finally looking up at me. “Whatever you did, whatever you said to that journalist, Georgiana, he didn’t publish. There’s nothing?—”

“You idiot, you think because it’s not out today it’ll never come out?” I couldn’t help it, rage and frustration poured from my tongue as I realized just what I’d lost.

Fynn had been right.

“You think I falsified the ledgers?”

“Anything can be done with pen and paper.”

I should have trusted him, should have asked for his help—should have at the very least not accused him of lying, the worse sin, from both our pasts.

And now I had lost him.

“I’ve thrown away the hand of a lifetime,” I said quietly, thinking of Fynn, of the happiness we had already found in such a short amount of time.

Markham laughed bitterly. “You can’t be that good, if you lost so easily.”

I glared at my friend. “You stacked the deck against me by lying, Markham. Lying. I could never have won. And now we’ve lost...we need to decide whether the game is over.”

Fynn

I rode through the night.

I should have left earlier, but I had prevaricated too long. Unsure what I was doing, what my reception would be, whether Georgiana would even see me let alone believe me, I had waited until the earlier hours of Tuesday morning—far too early—before I ran to a stable livery, hired a horse, and started off for Dalhurst Manor.

Sunlight peeked over the country hedges about twenty minutes before I arrived. By the time I got there, pulling up on the drive and seeing the strangely familiar manor before me, day had fully broken.

The day I would discover my fate.

I dismounted and tied the horse's reins to a mounting block just to the side of the house. Gravel flew up in the air as I ran to the door, ignoring the doorbell and opening it, ignoring the startled servant in the entrance hall who had evidently been stepping out to greet me.

“Georgiana?” I only had my gut telling me she was here in the first place. Only then did I wonder; had I just stormed away from London, only to leave her there?
“Georgiana?”

“What in blazes?—”

I turned on the spot to see the de facto leader of the Gambling Dukes standing there, a

book in one hand and a glass of orange juice—freshly squeezed from the Orangery, I supposed—in the other.

“Kineallen,” I said urgently, stepping toward him. “Your Grace, I?—”

Bad idea.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing here?” Kineallen said quietly, a strange sort of cold ferocity in his voice. “I returned to see Georgiana, she seemed most odd. And now you’re here.”

I halted. Definitely a bad idea. “I’m looking for?—”

“Don’t you think you’ve caused enough trouble?” he said angrily. “Why don’t you get back in whatever carriage you came in and?—”

“Who are you talking—you!”

I swallowed. The butler had entered, a tea tray in his hand—a tray that fell to the floor as he stared at me.

“You’ve got some nerve,” the servant said icily. “Coming back to the house you’ve pulled apart when?—”

“I haven’t,” I tried to begin, but it was no use.

They didn’t trust me. Of course they didn’t. I wouldn’t have trusted me, in their place, and I undoubtedly looked a mess. I hadn’t washed last night, my stubble almost becoming a beard in my haste to get here.

To see her.

“I need to speak to Georgiana,” I said evenly, trying to keep calm in the face of her friends’ fury. “Where is she?”

The butler spluttered, “Of all the self-serving—haven’t you done enough damage?”

But Kineallen looked at me closely. There was a strange look in his eye, something I had never seen before and in a way, hoped I never would again.

A look of careful consideration.

I had never been sized up like that before, never examined in quite that way. Not just as a friend, or as a friend, but...well. Almost like a father.

Kineallen sighed. “The drawing room.”

“Your Grace!”

“She’s big enough to fight her own battles,” he said at the gasped outrage of his butler. “You know the way, Mr. Monroe.”

I did. I raced along the corridors, rushing past a few more housemaids who were evidently changing beds that day, linens stacking high in their arms. I didn’t stop. I yelled apologies over my shoulder as I sped along the corridor, toward the East Wing of the house, to the end of the corridor where no one else came.

The door to the Orangery was closed, of course. It would have all too easy to march in there, but it wouldn’t have mattered. I needed to be invited in, and I could see the only person I cared about through the door itself.

Georgiana. She looked tired, eyes worn, a heavy slump in her shoulders as she pored over paperwork, her gaze flitting between that and the two ledgers placed before

her on the table where we had almost played cards.

My heart skipped a beat and I knew I'd made the right decision.

"Georgiana."

She looked up, eyes astonished for just a fraction of a second before they narrowed.

"Go away, Mr. Monroe."

Mr. Monroe. My heart sank. This wasn't the welcome I had expected—not that I had any right to expect one.

"Georgiana, please let me in."

"No."

"Georgiana—"

"I've made that mistake before," she said dryly, her voice muffled through the glass.
"And I won't again."

I swallowed. I had hurt her, hurt myself, almost destroyed something precious between us. But I wasn't going to make that mistake again.

Never again.

"Well, you don't have to let me in to listen to me," I said with a dark laugh, "and I have so much to say to you, you'll just have to sit in there and listen."

Georgiana turned away, her focus returned once more to the paperwork before her,

but I knew she could hear me. She couldn't block me out entirely.

"I made a mistake—I was wrong. Wrong to return to London, wrong not to tell you more gently about Markham—" Probably wasn't a good idea to mention him, I thought ruefully. "Wrong to leave you."

She did not turn around, but I could see her fingers shake slightly as she picked up a piece of paper.

"I am so sorry, Georgiana. Your business was your own, you were right, what I found didn't need to be known by anyone. I haven't...I didn't tell anyone. In London, I mean."

That got her attention. Georgiana turned to stare at me, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear, and narrowed her eyes. "You...you didn't?"

I shook my head, heart soaring at the mere look she was giving me. At least she was looking at me again. "No. I was fired, actually, but that doesn't?"

"You lost your job?" Georgiana frowned. "You gambled everything, then, on this scoop. And you lost."

I swallowed, heart stirring as I knew what I was about to say was the greatest risk I had ever taken. "No, that wasn't the gamble. The gamble is now."

Georgiana

"You gambled everything, then, on this scoop. And you lost."

"No, that wasn't the gamble. The gamble is now."

I stared at the man who had brought me such ecstasy and such pain. The man I believed I would not see again.

Standing there, pouring out his heart.

My feet acted of their own accord; at least, no conscious thought moved them, but before I knew it, I was standing before the door, opening it.

Fynn stepped forward. The door closed behind him.

There we stood, perhaps for a minute, perhaps forever. My breath was jagged in my lungs, his chest was moving as though he had run from London itself, yet still we said nothing. Still we did not move toward each other.

For which I was glad. The moment Fynn touched me, all my resolve to stand by my family and denounce Fynn as a thief of knowledge would disappear.

“Georgiana, I?—”

“You were right.”

I swallowed. The words had slipped from my tongue, the truth winning over my desire to protect Markham. But I couldn’t lie for him, I couldn’t. It went against not only every moral code in my rank, but in my soul.

Fynn blinked. “What?”

I sighed heavily, shoulders drooping. “I should never have accused you of—I’ve gone back through the ledgers. You were right, he was stealing from us. Had been stealing for weeks. Months, perhaps, I haven’t got that far back yet.”

It was hard to admit, even to myself, but saying it aloud was difficult. My friend, one of the few people I would have died for, lying to me. Lying to us all.

“I am so sorry, Georgiana,” Fynn said quietly. I looked up as he continued, “I could hardly believe it myself, if you hadn’t come back just as I’d found?—”

“You would have told me eventually,” I said with a dry laugh. “You’re too principled not to.”

“Not too principled to stay here and work it out with you,” he said ruefully.

My heart skipped a beat.

“I want you out. Out of here, out of Dalhurst Manor...and out of my life.”

“That was my fault, I think.”

Silence fell between us again, but in the silence I was more conscious of my desire for him, the need to be close to him, to have Fynn kiss away all my frustrations, all my fears.

God, I wanted him. More than ever.

But I couldn’t bridge that gap.

“What...what will happen now? To the Gambling Dukes, I mean?”

I sighed heavily and said the words I never thought could be true. “His membership has been rescinded. That’s why Lilah and Kineallen are here, we...we discussed it.”

A hand, on my arm. It was warm and strong and everything I wanted. “Surely not.”

I shook my head. “It was Kineallen’s decision and as our leader, he had the right to do that. We can’t trust Markham anymore, we can’t have a thief in the club. Friend or not...he’s gone.”

I would not cry for him. Not now. The friend I thought I knew was gone, a mirage, someone I had never known.

And I gasped with relief as Fynn pulled me into his arms, his strong embrace, his scent settling my nerves as nothing else had done, and his hands tightened around me.

“I’m sorry, Georgiana. I’m so sorry.”

I clung to him, Fynn, a man I didn’t know two weeks ago but now needed desperately. He was everything, all I wanted. He had not betrayed us. He hadn’t betrayed me.

He had lost his job, his only security, to protect me.

I pulled back, just enough to look into his eyes. “Fynn, I?—”

He knew what I wanted. Passionate lips crushed mine and I moaned in his mouth, letting go of everything I was, everything I wasn’t, certain in the knowledge that whatever the future held, he would be there.

Fynn Monroe.

His fingers were swiftly pulling at my gown, and I swiftly pulled at one of the shoulder ties. The material fell on my left, revealing my breast.

“God, you’re not wearing a corset or stays,” Fynn muttered, fingers scrabbling to undo the other shoulder tie. “Georgiana...”

I wasn't wearing any undergarments either. Well, I had come to the Orangery early that morning, before seeing anyone. There was no need to dress up.

I wasn't dressed up now. I was naked. The folds of muslin fell to the floor and I stood there, in Fynn's arms, within a glass Orangery, utterly nude.

And I did not care.

"I love you, Georgiana," Fynn said seriously, his gaze fixed on mine. "It makes no sense, but I don't care."

I smiled. I had known it before he had spoken the words; had known it, I think, the moment I saw he had come back. Come back to me. "I love you, Fynn, but if you don't take me now, I'll sort myself out."

He moaned at my words, pulling his shirt over his head and letting it fall. Before the material even hit the floor, his breeches were unbuttoned, pulled down, and he had picked me up.

The strength in his arms shouldn't have surprised me, but it did—as did his gentleness. Lying me on the floor, not thinking just acting, Fynn covered my body with his own and kissed me hard, nestling himself between my legs.

I didn't care about anything in that moment; not Markham, not my friends, not the club which would probably now fail—not even the damned glass all around us.

I couldn't think.

All I could do was feel; feel the heady delight of his strength against me, the breadth of his chest, the way his tongue devoured my own, teasing me with growing pleasure, one of his hands on my hips and the other teasing my nipple?—

“Fynn,” I moaned, unable to help myself. “Now!”

“Give me one second,” he panted.

The ache between my legs was growing, my secret place slick with desire, and I needed him, why wasn’t he?—

And I saw why. Slowly, very slowly, he was rolling a French letter down the length of him, and I tilted my head back and whimpered, my need so great that it was sweet agony to wait for?—

“Fynn!”

“Georgiana!”

He cried my name as he entered me and I almost cried with relief, needing him, welcoming him in, sparks of pleasure now rocking my body, I was so close.

“So close...” I murmured as he slid deeper into me, deeper than I thought possible.

“Oh, Fynn, so close...”

I don’t know how long we were there for. An hour? Perhaps more.

“Fynn, yes, yes!”

I don’t know how many times he made me come. Who keeps count, after five?

“Ohh, yes!”

All I know was we were fortunate no one walked past the Orangery, and my knees wouldn’t be the same for days afterwards.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

I smiled at Fynn as we stepped along the corridor, hand in hand, at some later time. My cheeks were flushed, I could feel it, and his hair was so mussed it was going to be absolutely obvious what we had been doing.

Not that it was a secret. No secrets anymore. Never again.

“No time like the present to introduce you as not the investigative journalist threatening to tear down our club and livelihoods, but as my future spouse,” I said lightly.

Fynn groaned. “You don’t have to say it like that!”

I laughed, joy sparking through my heart. “Perhaps not.”

I could feel the tension in his hands grow as we stepped across the entrance hall and through the bar, toward the French windows. Even from here, I could see them all around the lake, just as we had been when Fynn had first walked into our lives.

Into my life.

All, save Markham.

“There you—Georgiana, what the...?” Lilah rose as we stepped onto the terrace toward the lake. “What is he doing here?”

I smiled at my best friend, then at Fynn, who looked nervous. It was rather nice to see him unsettled. “This is my future husband.”

“Husband—”

“Georgiana, what the?—”

It took about ten minutes of explaining.

“—certain he’s not told his editor?” Kineallen said, unusually serious.

I nodded. “Fynn wouldn’t do that.”

“You can have my word on that, or you can check my job applications tomorrow,” Fynn jested, holding a whiskey. “I was fired for keeping this to myself.”

Kineallen nodded, and I breathed a sigh of relief. There would be further conversations, of course. No member of the Gambling Dukes merely accepted what they were told, I knew that better than anyone.

But it was a start.

“So what will Markham do now?”

I flinched at Fynn’s words. Probably not the best question to ask.

Lilah sighed. “Not sure. His townhouse is paid off, he’d got plenty of money in the bank?—”

Kineallen snorted. We all ignored him.

“—he doesn't need to work, at least not for now,” I concluded.

Lilah shook her head. “We’ll have to keep an eye on him, of course. I would usually trust that he would never say anything to another soul, but you’ll need to keep close tabs on him, Georgiana. We all will.”

I nodded, my stomach twisting. I would. The pain of his betrayal wasn't one I would be able to forget quickly—but I had found some good out of all this.

As my friends continued to chatter about how precisely we were going to keep this news from the newspapers—and the gossip sites online—Fynn sidled up to me.

“Is it always like this?”

I took his whiskey, sipped it, and gave it back. “What do you mean?”

“Well, this,” Fynn said, glancing around the pool.

I looked where he was looking. Lilah and my friends were dressed to the nines—we obviously had something on today, not that I'd remembered—drinks in hand, soft evening light glittering through the lake as they spoke in low voices.

“This?”

“This!” Fynn said with a dry laugh. “Friends almost family, and drama, and secrets, and passion? Is it always like this with you Gambling Dukes?”

I smiled, warmth rushing through me as I leaned into his arms and kissed him firmly on the mouth. “Most definitely. Scared?”

“Scared?” repeated Fynn, his free hand lowering to gently cup my buttocks. “Nope. Though I hope the next time I make a bet with a duchess, it'll play more in our favor.”

I kissed him again, and again, and knew I would never stop kissing him. “Oh, you won't need to make a bet with a duchess again. I already won big. I'm not fool enough to chance it again.”

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Briar

I wasn't looking for a complete knave. But then, who was?

The ballroom was hot, and sticky, and crowded. Normally, that would be mildly acceptable—it was rare that I didn't know at least half a dozen people at Almack's, and I was usually asked to dance by at least two gentlemen.

But tonight, for some reason, it didn't feel right.

"Hullo there!" shouted a gentleman as the musicians finished off a piece with a flourish, the dancefloor rammed with a large set.

I sighed, and tried to smile at the gentleman who'd made his approach.

In a way, I couldn't blame him. I was here, wasn't I? And clearly alone—at least, my friend Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice, had been pulled into a conversation with another acquaintance, so I looked alone.

"Let me retrieve you a drink!" the gentleman said pompously, with that sort of grin that showed me I should be grateful.

My smile sharpened.

Men . They were all the same. A brief smile, and they thought they were God's gift to women.

He did not know me, of course. Anyone who did would have known it was foolish attempting to offer to gain my good favor for the night.

“No, thank you,” I smiled tightly, adjusting my tight red gown that had seemed a perfectly good idea when I’d been getting ready in my townhouse just hours ago.

The gown had been Georgiana’s idea. A bad one, as it turned out.

“Then maybe you should retrieve a drink for me, Lady Briar Weatherford,” he said with a leer. “After all, are you not the most eligible young lady in London—heiress to your uncle, the Duke of Stanlow!”

Try as I might, my smile faltered.

Yes, that was all I was good for, wasn’t I? My money. Why were all men the same? Why did none of them bother to look past myself, who I was, the name and the wealth?

The gentleman had not introduced himself and had leaned forward most suggestively. “I can show you the greatest night?—”

“I highly doubt that,” I said curtly, stepping back. “Please, leave me alone.”

He opened his mouth as he looked at me closely, then froze. “You—really are—I was just kidding, I just thought you looked like her! You’re not?—”

“Yes, I am Lady Briar Weatherford,” I said wearily.

It always happened. At least in this case it was a good thing—being recognized as one of the greatest heiresses in Britain typically had this effect on gentlemen. It was useful when being accosted in Almack’s or approached awkwardly at a private

gathering.

I pushed aside the nasty thought that rose.

And it was very unhelpful when I was actually trying to make a connection with a person.

Lady Briar Weatherford, heiress to the Duke of Stanlow. I'd seriously considered changing my name, but it was hardly the sort of thing one did—besides, the press would get hold of that, wouldn't they? No court records were safe from them, and soon I'd be just as hounded as a Sarah, or a Rachel, or whatever name I chose.

It wouldn't change my wealth.

"I-I'm sorry, I didn't?—"

"It's fine," I said, my heart warming to him. Poor man, he'd had no idea he was leering at a woman who could quite literally buy Almack's and, likely as not, everyone in it. "Have a lovely evening."

He probably wished me the same. I didn't know, he retreated so fast I didn't hear what he said.

"What did you do to him?"

I turned round and grinned at my best friend as the musicians began another piece and couples scrambled forward to join the set.

"Oh, you know," I said airily over the noise as I took the glass of wine from Georgiana. "Being Lady Briar Weatherford. Terrifying him out of his wits."

“All in a day’s work for you, then,” grinned Georgiana. “You cannot be in earnest, though—he didn’t know who you were?”

My smile, again, became stilted.

She meant well. And Georgiana understood it, in a way. She was almost as wealthy as I was, though she’d actually earned her money. We’d met at one of those fancy hotels in Switzerland—she was on a gambling trip, and I had been taking the waters.

Georgiana, the late wife of the Duke of Cartice, recently married to a Mr. Fynn Monroe, was the sort of rich most people dreamed of. Enough to live on in luxury without ever having to worry, she had had an income that she generated with an actual job. Well, professional gambling thanks to that Gambling Dukes club of hers.

No inheritance for her.

Honestly, I hadn’t approved when she’d first told me about it. Earn her own living?
As a lady?

No, it couldn’t be borne.

But Georgiana was adamant, and she’d found some friends to assist her, and—well, it wasn’t my place to argue with her.

A good thing I hadn’t, too, because she’d been a marvel. The Gambling Dukes took on the sorts of wagers most were far too afraid to touch—and they won.

Last I heard from Georgiana, she was able to draw an income suitable to her rank, and looked to purchase a competency if they were able to gain additional members. In the end, she hadn’t needed her late husband’s money.

Not like me. My relatives made the royals look poor.

I know, I know. Rich heiress complains about being rich, right? What a bore.

But I was tired of it. Tired of always been viewed by my bank balance, tired of nice gentlemen running toward me with hopes of townhouses and racing horses and jewels, or running off just because they saw the pound signs as a threat. Tired of never being treated like a person, just an income.

“I think it’s time for me to leave,” I said, handing Georgiana back my drink.

Her dark eyes widened in surprise. “What, you’re not going home? It’s not even ten!”

“I just...I’m not feeling well,” I said with what I hoped was a cheery smile.

Not after the day I’ve had. I should never have allowed her to convince me to come out in the first place, but she was almost impossible to say no to. But after being spoken down to by my accountant, laughed at by one of my bankers when I had the audacity to actually ask about my property portfolio, and told sweetly that I shouldn’t ‘worry my little head about it’, I was done.

Done with Almack’s. Done with being Lady Briar Weatherford. Done with all of it.

“He jested about your purchasing something for him, didn’t he?”

I nodded with a shrug. “That’s all gentlemen ever want.”

“You’ll find a man who actually values you for you, I promise,” Georgiana said with a beaming smile. The smile of a woman who had already found her happily ever after. “You really will.”

“You just keep believing that,” I said above the noise. “But honestly, I’m going to leave.”

“Your carriage is waiting for you? You aren’t going to walk home, are you?”

Georgiana looked worried, and I tried to reassure her. “I’ve got the carriage just round the corner, but I may well drop into a gambling den for a few minutes. I’ll be fine.”

Her glare was stern. “You won’t stay there too long, will you?”

Honestly, the hypocrisy! The woman earned a living through gambling, and I couldn’t have a light flutter?

I saluted as Georgiana rolled her eyes. “Yes ma’am!”

Her fist careered gently into my arm. “You know that I just want you to be safe.”

“I know,” I said, embracing her swiftly and making sure not to spill either of the drinks in her hands. “Now, take those fine drinks and enjoy yourself. Where is that dashing charming husband of yours?”

Georgiana lifted a teasing eyebrow. “You think he’s dashing charming?”

“Do I have eyes? Of course I do,” I shrugged, adjusting the sleeve of my gown and taking a deep breath. “At least one of us has their happily ever after.”

The London air was sticky, but thankfully not as warm as inside Almack’s. I took a deep lungful of air, desperate to find my equilibrium again.

Tomorrow, everything changes, I promised myself as I strode down the street toward

Ferncombe's Gaming Hell, the one Georgiana had introduced me to months ago. Tomorrow, I would be the new Lady Briar Weatherford. Responsible, insightful, involved in her own affairs.

No longer leaving life to be lived through my 'people'.

Ferncombe's Gaming Hell was busy, as I expected, but the barman recognized me immediately.

Of course he did.

"No tables I'm afraid, Lady Briar," he said conversationally, as if I'd already spoken. "Perhaps you could find someone to share with?"

"I'm just here for a glass of wine," I said, leaning on the bar and glancing about the place.

As expected, Ferncombe's Gaming Hell was filled with people who looked as though they'd stepped momentarily out of St. James'. Elegantly coiffured hair, gorgeous jewels, and a few gentlemen with more chiseled jawlines than I'd seen in Rome in a museum of classical statues.

Most people my gaze flickered over looked back, just the once. The recognition was almost immediate every time, though the reaction was different.

My cheeks heated as I took in the stares, the swift looks away, the muttering, the whispering.

And this, I reminded myself, was why I so rarely went out into Society these days. No wonder Georgiana had to convince me. It was like being in a zoo, but I was the only exhibit.

Every single person I saw was the same. The same reaction, the same?—

Perhaps not everyone.

He was tall. At least, he looked tall. He was lounging in a way only the very wealthy or the very selfish do at a bar; all over a chair at a corner table. Despite his broad frame there was strength, not heft in his build. A light dusting of dark stubble outlined his taut jaw, and his eyes?—

I looked away quickly as the barman brought over my wine, my heart racing, my cheeks surely crimson with the heat.

Which was ridiculous. It was just a gentleman, looking at me.

Just a handsome gentleman. Looking directly at me, no shame, no darting gaze when he realized who I was. No, that man had just looked at me, a teasing smile on his lips, his eyes dancing with a wicked delight.

Now that was different.

“You happy here?”

I blinked at the barman, who had to repeat his question before I realized what he was asking. Focus, Briar! “N-No. No, I think I’ll go find a seat. Join someone’s table, like you said.”

Whatever had possessed me to say that was now propelling me forward, as though there was nothing better in the whole world than going up to a random stranger and asking to join their table.

What was wrong with me?

Even before I turned around and started walking, I knew where my feet were going to take me. That gentleman in the corner table. There was something enticing about him, something utterly different from every other gentleman who I had ever met.

He...he hadn't known who I was.

I was standing before him far sooner than I had expected, and I hated how my voice cracked as I said, "M-May I join you?"

The gentleman's lips tilted into a broader smile. "I won't stop you."

It wasn't precisely the resounding endorsement I had expected, but it wasn't a no.

This was the time to be bold, I told myself. How often, after all, did I have the chance to sit and chat with a gentleman who had no idea who I was?

"Are you waiting for someone?" I said, as lightly as I could manage.

Was I as transparent as I thought, cheeks burning? It wasn't so direct as to ask if he was married, was it?

The gentleman grinned. "Markham. And no, I'm not waiting for anyone else. I was waiting for you."

On the lips of almost any other gentleman, that line would have been absolutely ridiculous. I would have rolled my eyes, given a cutting remark, and strode out of there.

Yet somehow, spoken by this Markham...it was different.

Honest. As though he had somehow predicted I would be here, and all he'd done was

ensure he was in the right place to meet me.

“And you are?”

A shiver rushed down my spine. Not being recognized...it was something I thought I'd have to go abroad to achieve, and even in Boulogne, the local magistrate had followed me within days.

Unknown. Anonymous. Able to do anything without this Markham knowing I was one of the richest women in Britain.

It was heady.

I sipped from my glass of wine. “My name is Briar.”

“Briar? Unusual name,” Markham said, his dark eyes flickering over me.

Oh, hell. I should have used a fake name.

Well, it was too late now—and besides, he clearly didn't know who I was, or he would have disappeared as quickly as all the other gentlemen.

This may just be the most interesting man I have ever met.

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She was the most interesting woman I had ever met.

Well. I hadn't exactly met her. I'd spotted Lady Briar Weatherford, heiress extraordinaire, the moment she walked into this place.

You just didn't expect to see people of her caliber in a place like this. Our caliber, I supposed. Oh, I didn't have access to the fortune I was due, but then that was my own damned fault.

Steal from the Gambling Dukes club, get thrown out. It was a tale as old as time.

Except it had been something I'd built, something I'd loved—and I'd betrayed my three closest friends in the process.

"You heading out or heading home?" Lady Briar asked, gazing out at me through delicate lashes.

My stomach stirred.

Right, fine. Not my stomach. A little lower than my stomach. Still, something stirred, and I hadn't expected it.

She was pretty. Beautiful even, if she could ever bring herself to look at me properly. How did a woman with such fine eyes and such swelling curves become so...shy?

I shrugged. "Not heading anywhere in particular. Just seeing where the night will take me."

Lady Briar raised a dark eyebrow and I tried to focus on that, and not the way her breath hitched in her throat. Or the way that breath caused her breasts to rise, just for a moment.

Something quivered down the back of my neck. I swallowed. I was not going to let this woman see just how swiftly she could affect me.

“Seeing where the night will take you?” Lady Briar repeated. “Sounds like you don’t have anyone to see, Mr. Markham. Sir Markham? May use your first name?”

Try as I might, I couldn’t quite keep the grimace down.

Peregrine, Duke of Markham. I was notorious, I knew, and not for the reasons I had hoped this time last year.

We—my friends and I—we had formed the most exciting new club. A gambling club, only open to widows or widowers of a certain pedigree who were willing to earn their keep through bets and wagers.

Everyone bet. We almost always won. We each took an income from the pot.

But I’d wanted a little more. All I needed was a little excitement. Who could blame me? It was our club, after all. Who cared if I took a little off the top, just while I was getting on my feet?

Everyone, as it turned out.

I swallowed, then turned on the charm that I knew so well. “Just Markham, if you don’t mind. What’s life without a little mystery? They call me the duke who risks it all, after all. May as well live up to that.”

Lady Briar laughed, her gaze darting down to her hands grasping her glass of wine,

then back up to me through long lashes. “Mystery, I see? I suppose you don’t want to know my surname either, then?”

Leaning back as nonchalantly as I could manage, I took in the sight of the tight red gown, the stained red lips, the way she was evidently trying not to look directly at me.

My God. Lady Briar Weatherford.

I’d heard about her, of course. Who hadn’t? One of the richest and most untamed women in London—that was the gossip. The newspapers said that she had a whole crowd of advisors round her because she couldn’t make her decisions. The gossip columns said that she had never considered matrimony because those same advisors never let her.

Yet here she was, alone and clearly assuming I’d know who she was.

And I did. Obviously.

But she didn’t have to know that.

“Briar will do,” I said with a grin. “Having a good night?”

There it was—the surprise, the dissonance in her eyes. Evidently, Lady Briar couldn’t believe I had no idea who she was.

And that was just fine by me. I didn’t want any notoriety, any attention turning my way. I’ve only just lived down the scandal when my friends threw me out of the Gambling Dukes. The last thing I need was more speculation about what I was up to.

Drinking at Ferncombe's Gaming Hell had become a habit, I suppose. Not doing anything was a habit.

But this woman? This woman was different.

“You know, you’re very handsome man, aren’t you?”

I blinked.

“But then you do know that, don’t you?” Lady Briar said, her lips lilting into a curved smile. “Who is your family?”

Who is your family?

It was the question everyone asked in London. The swiftest way to categorize someone. Worth knowing, worth buttering up, worth leaving behind.

“I have no family,” I said, not quite telling the truth. My friends were my family. “I am in London to invest.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. Kineallen—the Duke of Kineallen, my oldest friend and leader of the Gambling Dukes—had been good about that. He’d given me a payout which had far more zeroes than I deserved, and freedom to stay in my townhouse.

More than most people would have ever given.

Lilah—Delilah, the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick—had suggested hanging, drawing, and quartering. Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice, whose husband had left her penniless, had agreed with Kineallen.

Which wasn’t great. Kineallen had never been the same since his late wife, Georgiana’s sister, had died in childbed along with their babe.

Understandably so, he was rarely in a good mood. Me thieving from the Gambling Dukes...that hadn’t helped.

“Invest?” Lady Briar repeated.

I tried not to look at her lips as she took a sip of her wine. Dear God, did the woman have any idea that the whole place was staring at her?

Or did she know, and simply not care?

“It’s not as boring as it sounds,” I said, a strange desire to impress rising in my chest. “It’s actually?—”

“Oh, I know investors,” Lady Briar said dismissively. “I suppose you’re one of those people who mark up a person’s worth just by looking at them.”

A wicked smile crept over my face. Two could play at that game. “I sure can. Take you, for example.”

Lady Briar brought a hand to her chest. I took the chance to look at it, clean fingernails and gold rings, pressed against that firm, soft skin.

Christ.

“Take me?”

“Don’t tempt me,” I growled, losing control just for a moment. Clearing my throat, I continued, “You’re wearing the most impressive silk, the gold on your fingers is real?—”

“You can tell?”

“And you didn’t pay for your wine,” I finished, tilting my head slightly. “That tells me you have a tab here—and only the very wealthy have a tab at Ferncombe’s.”

Lady Briar flashed a smile. “Or I stole it.”

“I doubt that.”

“Or I gained it through my feminine wiles,” she countered, leaning forward. A necklace swung between her breasts, tempting me to look down again.

I wasn’t going to give in. Probably. “I doubt that even more.”

Damn it was a thrill, teasing this woman. Had anyone ever spoken to the great Lady Briar Weatherford like this before? Perhaps I was the only one to treat her like anyone else. Was she getting the same thrill, the same rush that I was?

“You don’t think I could get a glass of wine just by smiling at a man?” Lady Briar said, her words oozing sensuality.

My traitorous heart skipped a beat. Well, now I could believe it. How did she do that—just turn on the charm so swiftly?

However she managed it, I couldn’t allow that to distract me.

This was my chance.

For months, I’d waited to meet someone like her. Someone with more money than sense, someone who could bankroll my life in a way that I could never hope to dream. Even if they didn’t intend to.

Perhaps my luck was finally turning, now such a gorgeous opportunity had opened up. Plenty of money, and a beautiful woman, too.

“I don’t know how good these feminine wiles are,” I said teasingly, leaning back. “Why don’t you show me?”

“Show you?”

I swallowed. Lady Briar’s voice had changed. There was a darkness there now. A darkness I had not expected.

Perhaps I had gambled too far. This was Lady Briar Weatherford, after all, the heiress to some duke who was constantly one of the most fabulously wealthy in London just by...existing, as far as I could see.

“You really don’t know who I am, do you?” she said softly.

The place was heating up as the night progressed, more people pouring through. You could hardly hear the roll of the dice for the noise of the crowd trying to get the barman’s attention, but I’d only just noticed.

Lady Briar was intoxicating. Just by shifting ever so slightly in her chair, she gave me an even greater view of herself—and damn, it was a view worth seeing.

I ensured my smile was calm. “I know you’re Briar, and that you stole a glass of wine. I’m still trying to work out how.”

Something was fizzling in the air between us now. The challenge wasn’t a great one—Lord knows, I’d used better lines in my time. Probably.

But I could tell pretending not to know who Lady Briar was had irked her—or thrilled her, I couldn’t be sure. Either way, I’d got a reaction.

It wasn’t the one I expected.

“Well in that case, let me show you how I did it,” said Lady Briar with a smile that promised hot honey and kisses against a wall.

I swallowed. I'd never been particularly good with women. No, that wasn't true. I'd never been particularly good for women.

Good with them? Definitely. But after my arranged marriage had ended in the death of my wife mere months after our wedding, I'd never kept a mistress more than a few weeks. They got bored of being treated like something I could come back to whenever I was bored, apparently.

I'd certainly never had a woman look at me across a table like Lady Briar Weatherford was right now. Her eyes were liquid lust, her lips slightly parted, begging to be crushed under mine—and the way she'd put her elbows on the table, crushing her breasts together to give me the perfect view...

"You see, Mr. Markham, I'm in a bit of a bind," Lady Briar said, her voice low.

I leaned forward. To hear her better, obviously. No other reason. "You are?"

She nodded, curling a lock of her hair behind her ear. My gaze flickered from the soft vulnerability of her wrist to the curve of her neck, the way her lips arched into a smile.

"You see, you're right. I did steal that glass of wine, and the barman is going to come over here any minute and ask me for the money," Lady Briar continued in a low, fearful tone. "And I...I don't know what to do."

There was a vulnerability in her voice I hadn't expected—a pain, a panic.

Something twisted in my chest. "You don't?"

Lady Briar shook her head slowly. "If...if only there was something who could help me out. I'd owe a pretty large favor to that person."

My mouth was dry, and my manhood was hardening in my breeches. “You would?”

A favor from Lady Briar Weatherford. If I wasn’t in such desperate need of money, I’d know precisely how I’d want that favor to be repaid.

Lady Briar, naked, underneath me, begging for?—

“I don’t suppose you’ve got a pound note on you,” Lady Briar whispered. How had she moved so close to me? She was seating right beside me, one of her hands on my leg. My damned quivering leg. “I can make it...worth your while.”

I swallowed, fingers scrabbling at my pocket. “I think I’ve got?—”

“And that is how I used my feminine wiles,” said Lady Briar, her voice rising as she moved back to her original seat. “Or I just put it on my tab, which Michael always knows I pay.”

I blinked. The place stopped spinning.

Lady Briar was laughing. “Damn, I am good!”

I breathed a laugh. “Yes. Y-Yes, you are.”

God in his heaven, I hadn’t expected that. Lady Briar Weatherford was, by all accounts, dim. That was what everyone said.

But this woman was sharp as knives and had me as clay in her hand within sixty seconds.

And she was rising to her feet.

“You’re leaving?” I said hurriedly, getting out the booth.

Lady Briar glanced up at me through dark eyelashes. “Of course. Do you want to come with me?”

“Come with you?” I breathed. This could not be happening.

She nodded, taking me in, her gaze flickering from head to toe. “I need a...distraction. Do you think you could come back to my place and be suitably distracting, Mr. Markham?”