



A Season for Desire (Desire and Discipline #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: The Marquess of Camden is almost healed, and his lovely nurse will soon be moving on to a new patient unless he can find a way to bind her to him forever.

After a lifetime of service to the crown, Lord Oliver has grown tired of commanding spies and capturing traitors. The time has come to claim his ultimate prize: the strict nurse whose touch has done far more than just heal his injured body.

Miss Diana Rutherford is content with her unconventional life, freely traveling from place to place and earning money to send home to her family. While love and marriage were never part of her plan, neither was falling for one of her most intriguing patients.

But when the spinster nurse falls so far that she lands in the roguish lords bed, both are surprised by just how far he is willing to go to claim her as his wife.

Total Pages (Source): 13

Diana

“What is the Marquess’ ailment?” That was the one question Diana had not had answered before she’d accepted her new position. Normally, she insisted on knowing, but Miss Stuart, the Marquess’ niece, had convinced her with both a large sum of money and an urgency for secrecy that spoke of a delicate situation. Diana tried to picture the Marquess of Camden in her head, but she did not think she’d ever seen the man.

She’d chosen to take up a profession rather than having her debut—her father had been knighted, but unfortunately, that knighthood did not come with land, nor did it come with the kind of income that would allow him to bring out five daughters into Society. Without the lineage most of the ton looked for and tiny dowries besides, the gentlemen were hardly scrambling to make their acquaintance.

Still, her two older sisters had managed to make good matches. Susannah, her beautiful eldest sister, had found a Scottish baron who had fallen head over heels for her and did not mind that she was the daughter of a mere knight. Next had been Juliana; her soft-spoken sweetness had caught the attention of the second son of Baron Crommey. As a second son, he’d had more leeway in choosing his bride.

Then there was Diana. Too smart for her own good, too outspoken to charm a gentleman, with a prickly demeanor, and not nearly beautiful enough to make up for the combination. When she’d announced she wanted to be a nurse, her parents had been both appalled and relieved. They’d supported her, though, and eventually, she’d worked her way up to caring for members of the society she’d eschewed marrying into.

So, while she was familiar with many of them, she'd never been formally introduced to the crowd, and there were certain members whose paths she'd never crossed. She was fairly certain the Marquess of Camden was one of them. Not that she attended social events, like balls and high teas, but she had occasionally been added to a dinner party to help round out the numbers when an employer needed it.

She had not met Miss Stuart before, either; she was sure of it. The stunning combination of raven-wing hair and shining green eyes would be hard to forget.

Rather than answering Diana's question, Miss Rutherford strode over to the doorway of the parlor and gestured for Diana to precede her. Very well, then. Diana had just arrived at the house, and she'd found that quite a few of her clients preferred to talk over tea and biscuits. She would rather get straight to her business, but she'd long ago accepted that part of that was making the family feel at ease.

"Stims will take care of your bags," Miss Stuart said when Diana started to bend to pick them up. From the hallway, a tall man came forward, and Diana started. She had not seen him standing there, despite his size. He moved completely silently. While he was hardly the first unobtrusive butler she'd met, he was certainly the quietest.

"Thank you," she said gratefully. Another lesson she had learned was not to assume where a client might place her in their household. Some of them put her in with the other servants, others treated her more like a governess, and a very few as though she was an honored guest. Diana was happy to adapt to all of them, though she preferred the latter two, as those who were haughty with her were also the most likely to fight her methods. No matter that she was there to help them get well.

The parlor was beautifully decorated, flavored with the subtle taste of wealth. The light colors and delicately carved furniture declared it a woman's domain. Miss Stuart went to the cream-colored couch and sat down, gesturing for Diana to take one of the seats across from her.

“Please sit, Miss Rutherford.” She said ‘please,’ but it was spoken as a command. Also unmarried, though nearly a decade younger than Diana, which meant by Society’s standards it was not too late for her, Miss Stuart’s composure and confidence rivaled the matrons who ran the ton. If Diana had met her on the street, she would have assumed Miss Stuart was one of them.

Very well, then. That was how she would treat the younger woman. Those matrons respected strength of will and competence.

“Thank you,” she said again, taking her seat as the door to the parlor opened, and a maid came in with a tea tray. By silent agreement, she and Miss Stuart waited to speak again until after the maid had left.

“Do you take it with sugar?” Miss Stuart asked.

“Yes, please, and cream.”

Miss Stuart picked up the teapot and poured the first cup with a steady hand as she spoke.

“Last week, my uncle was shot.”

Diana froze, her hands outstretched to take the teacup, but her fingers were suddenly trembling. Surely, she could not have heard Miss Stuart correctly. Or perhaps the younger woman was pulling her leg.

But no. Miss Stuart was not the type. And she was still holding the teacup as steady as her emerald gaze on Diana. It was caught between them, both of their fingers touching it, but if Miss Stuart had released it, Diana would have dropped it to the floor in shock.

A marquess had been shot? The sheer lack of gossip about such a matter was what made it so unbelievable. Both below and above stairs ran on gossip in ton households, which meant Diana was kept well abreast of all of it by one or the other and often both.

Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, she suddenly understood why Miss Stuart had wanted tea before beginning the discussion. She firmed her grip on the saucer, taking it from Miss Stuart, who released it quickly, now that she knew Diana was not going to drop it, and began pouring a cup for herself.

“I had not heard.” It came out sounding far more cynical than she’d intended, almost accusatory, but she truly was struggling to understand how such an amazing event could be kept a secret. They must have the most loyal household servants in the whole of England. To her surprise, Miss Stuart met her disbelieving statement with an enigmatic smile.

“Good.” Miss Stuart’s smile faded. “What I am going to tell you now is a matter of utmost secrecy. I approached you for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, your reputation for utmost discretion. No matter who you have been employed by, no matter how you were treated, you have never divulged anything you learned during or after your time being employed.”

Diana blinked. She had not realized she had such a stellar reputation, though, of course, it was what she had tried to build. Being a woman, her job was already more difficult than any doctor’s, as employers trusted her less and often underestimated or even discounted her intelligence. She had worked hard to overcome the assumptions that were made about her.

“Thank you. I appreciate hearing that.” She took a sip of her tea, hoping it would settle the nerves in her stomach. This was unlike any interview she’d had with a family member before, and it was causing a sense of disquiet, as though something

terrible was on the horizon.

Miss Stuart nodded in acknowledgment.

“The second reason I chose you is because you’re a woman.” The smile returned to Miss Stuart’s face at Diana’s start of surprise. She had been chosen before because she was a woman, always to tend to another woman or a girl child. Her gender did not normally factor in when her patient was a man, especially a gentleman. Diana frowned, but Miss Stuart was already continuing, and her next words eased Diana’s sudden concerns.

“My uncle is fighting his recovery every step of the way, and there is not a single man he will listen to. He’ll hear my cousins out, then do exactly as he pleases. Every doctor we’ve brought in has left within a day. He is more polite to the maids and our housekeeper, but his force of personality is such that they end up bowled over by his demands. The only person he will listen to is me, but I cannot spend all my time forcing him to behave. His manners will not allow him to chase off a woman in the same way he did the doctors, but he needs one who will be able to be by his side in a way I currently cannot.”

Diana saw where this was going. The other part of her reputation. She did not put up with nonsense from patients, and difficult personalities were her specialty. Personally, she thought it was just easier for some of her patients to accede to a stranger rather than relinquishing their power to someone they knew, and as long as she put her foot down and demonstrated that she was not going to be chased off, they all eventually bowed to her authority.

“I have already told you a secret,” Miss Stuart continued, taking a sip of tea to wet her lips. Her expression was becoming grim again, the look in her eyes hardening like the emerald stones they resembled.

Diana was not surprised she was the only one who managed to control her uncle—she saw a lot of herself in Miss Stuart. Like recognized like, after all.

“As you now realize, the ton does not know my uncle has been shot. The reason they do not know is it is a matter of secrecy to the Crown. This is your chance to step away now. My uncle was injured during an assassination attempt. It is possible you will be in danger as well if you choose to take this position. Our last butler was killed...”

Miss Stuart paused, taking in a deep breath as sudden wetness gleamed in her eyes. Astonished, Diana realized she was grieving. There were very few households who would mourn the death of a servant. Quite a few of them saw their servants similarly to their clothing—items to be used and discarded when they were no longer useful.

That Miss Stuart obviously cared was only another point in her favor, though hearing it was an assassination attempt on the Marquess was a point against.

“Our last butler was killed during the attempt on my uncle.” Miss Stuart’s lips firmed as she leveled her gaze at Diana. “If you choose to take this position, I will be able to tell you more, but before I go on, I need you to understand the gravity of the situation. We have taken measures to ensure the entire household’s safety, but nothing in life is ever certain. Do you still wish to continue?”

Goodness. This was the most unusual position she’d ever been put in.

Logic dictated that she should remove herself from the situation immediately. Assassination attempts? Secrecy to the Crown? Yet, her heart was racing. This was different. It was exciting. She would know secrets that others did not. Difficult patients were something she was used to; this sounded like another thing altogether.

“It is a lot to take in,” Miss Stuart said. “If you need more time to think about it?”

“Yes, I wish to continue,” Diana interrupted. She wanted to know more.

“Very well then.” Miss Stuart put down her teacup and picked up the Bible that was sitting on the edge of the table. Diana had not given it a second glance when she’d sat down. Her eyebrows raised up in surprise as Miss Stuart held it out in front of her. “What I am going to tell you next, you can never reveal. You are going to swear it on the Bible, though I will tell you that the far more immediate threat is being branded a traitor to the Crown if you suddenly develop loose lips.”

Diana stared at the Bible. She had already made her decision and knew that in her heart of hearts. Whatever this incredible secret was, she had to know.

By the time Miss Stuart had finished her accounting of her uncle’s injury, the tea was cold, Diana’s head was spinning, and they were no longer Miss Rutherford and Miss Stuart to each other—they were Diana and Evie.

The Marquess of Camden was the spymaster to the Crown.

His was only the latest assassination attempt by someone who knew his identity.

There had also been an attempt on the Duke of York’s life.

“Are you ready to meet your patient?” Evie asked, getting to her feet.

Was she ready to meet her patient? Diana was not sure she was ready for anything at this point. She nodded her head, though. It was her job, after all. The thought of her job steadied her. Everything that was new and exciting, and perhaps a little frightening, was only a possibility. Tending to a patient was something she knew how to do.

As Evie led her down the hallway, a door at the end of it opened and a rather harried-

looking maid emerged, holding a tray. She appeared to have tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Do not worry,” Evie murmured. “Beth cries over everything. It’s why I assigned her to give my uncle his meals. He hates it when he makes a woman cry, so he’s nicer to her than the rest of us, but he must be in a mood today.”

Well, crying was not in Diana’s repertoire, but she took note of Evie’s machinations and the information for the future.

“Miss.” Beth sniffled as they approached, casting a curious glance at Diana and bobbing a curtsy, though she kept a steady hand on the tray despite her tears. “I’m sorry, but he’s out of sorts today. He would not eat anything but his pudding, no matter how I begged.”

Indeed, the tray was full of bland but nutritious food, the sort one might feed a man recovering from a severe injury, and there were only a few crumbs left of what looked to have been dessert.

“That’s alright, Beth,” Evie said soothingly, her entire demeanor changing as she comforted the watery maid, taking the tray from her. “Thank you for your assistance. This is Miss Rutherford. She’s going to be handling my uncle from now on.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, miss,” Beth said, her expression lighting up with relief as she beamed at Diana, wringing her hands in her apron before reaching up to dash the tears from her eyes. “The whole household will be in your debt.”

Before Diana could respond, Beth scurried past them, clearly eager to get away from the room—and possibly to spread the news to the rest of the household that they no longer had to deal with the irascible Marquess. Other than her tears, however, she did not seem any worse for the wear.

Diana was not entirely sure what she expected when she met the Marquess. She knew his age and now his temper, and Evie had spoken of him in a frustrated but resigned fashion, describing his inability to accept his age and injuries. Diana found herself picturing an irascible old man. One far too used to getting his own way. However, he was also the spymaster to the Crown, so clearly, his mind was sharp. She imagined he was wiry, small even, like a spider sitting in the center of his web.

She could not have been more incorrect.

The moment Evie opened the door and led Diana into the Marquess' bedroom, Diana was overwhelmed by the sense of presence emanating from the figure in the bed. Despite the dimness of the room, with its drawn curtains that required candlelight to see, no one walking in the door would miss seeing him where he was propped up against the pillows. No wonder the maids and the housekeeper were having trouble managing him. He had even more confidence and self-assuredness than Evie, which was saying something.

This was no elderly, wiry spider at the center of a web.

His broad shoulders and dark glare made him look more like a Roman centurion, ready to spring forth and do battle... if only he was not so severely injured. He took her breath away in a manner she was unused to, a reaction she was going to need to firmly squash if he was going to be under her care.

"I am not eating that slop," he admonished Evie by way of greeting, ignoring Diana's presence altogether, though she did not make the mistake of thinking he had not seen her. This man saw everything. She got the distinct feeling she had been categorized as not a threat, at least for now, so he had prioritized haranguing his niece over a formal introduction. Diana did not mind, as it gave her a moment to catch her bearings. "I need something substantial. Something with flavor. Get that tray out of here, and do not bring it back."

“Like a cake, perhaps?” Evie asked dryly, walking forward with the tray, clearly undeterred by his stern tone. Diana had to commend her bravery—she also was taking mental notes on what she would have to put up with. Though from the way Evie had spoken, the Marquess was likely to be less rude to someone who was not an immediate family member, Beth’s tears notwithstanding. “You know you are supposed to eat the dessert last, do you not?”

“Life is uncertain. What if I choked on that slop and missed dessert?” He shook his head decisively. Another personage might have sounded petulant with such utterances, but when he said it, he was utterly reasonable and totally assured in his rightness. It was rather impressive, though Diana was determined not to be impressed. “I will not risk it.”

The large four-poster bed he lay in was richly adorned with dark green velvet curtains drawn back and tied with gold cord. The sturdy, ornately carved bedframe was even more imposing than the rest of the furniture in the room, though all of it matched.

There were several chairs on either side of his bed, obviously places for visitors—or a maid assigned to feed him—to sit. The chairs had obviously been brought in from other rooms, as they were the only unmatching furniture.

“You are going to eat your supper.” Evie turned slightly to indicate Diana, which allowed her to see Evie’s brilliant smile. “Miss Rutherford is here to take care of that.”

The Marquess narrowed his eyes at Evie.

“She’s fired.”

“She is not.”

“She cannot stay here. It is not safe.”

“I have fully informed her of the situation and the possible dangers, and she has agreed to stay, anyway.”

The Marquess puffed up before their eyes, righteous anger filling him. He was utterly menacing, despite being injured and bedridden, and Diana had no doubt this was the version of himself that had thrown the doctors and footmen out on their ears. There was even a part of her that quailed.

But he was her patient.

“What do you mean, she has been fully informed? I did not authorize that!”

“Excuse me, Evie,” Diana said serenely, coming forward to take the tray from her. “I believe this is what you hired me for.” She had the satisfaction of watching the Marquess’ jaw drop open in shock that she was not running from the room. Instead, she sat down beside him, trying to ignore the way her heart fluttered at his nearness.

Lingering fear, probably. He really had been quite intimidating before she’d caused him to gape like a fish. Though even with his mouth dropped open, he was far too attractive. Not that she was noticing. At least, she was endeavoring not to note his broad shoulders and chest, the way his salt and pepper hair swept over his brow, and the strong lines of his face. None of that was important.

“Thank you, Evie,” she said, flashing her new employer a smile. Evie beamed back at her, clearly pleased by the turn of events. Diana gave her a nod before turning back to the Marquess. “Now, my lord, are you going to feed yourself, or do you need me to do it for you?”

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Five Months Later

Diana

Surrounded by masked men, Diana had no hope of escape, though not one of them truly appealed to her. Still, she had come to the masquerade this evening for a reason. There was a man she was trying very hard to put out of her mind. The Marquess of Camden hovered at the edges of her thoughts, regardless, the way he often did.

Exasperating man.

“May I fetch you a drink, my lady?” asked one of the masked men, beaming eagerly with dark, worshipful eyes, his hopefulness showing through the mask as if he wasn’t wearing it. The powdered wig he was wearing hid his hair, and his mask covered most of his face.

If he was someone she’d previously met, she had no idea. Though, that was the point of the mask and the reason she was wearing both a wig and a mask as well. She’d also added a beauty mark to her cheek and rouge to her lips to help her look as different from herself as she could.

Though it was not the first time she’d attended a Society of Sin event, she never did so as herself, and she was most comfortable with events where everyone’s identity was hidden. After all, she might one day be hired by one of the attendees, which could make things very awkward for everyone.

“May I fetch you something to eat, my lady?” Another man, wearing only a half

mask, revealed him to be the younger son of the Earl of Chesterfield. Having met his very prim and proper mother, who was also a terrible gossip, Diana had to wonder at his choice to be so easily identified. The lack of circumspection on his part had her mentally crossing him off her list of possible partners for the evening.

Not that she was certain of what she intended for the evening. Though her hand itched to pick up a whip, she would only do so if she found a partner she truly felt would be worthwhile. There was always a risk when engaging in such scandalous conduct, especially for a woman making her own way in the world with a profession that relied on the ton but was outside of it. As much as Diana wanted to satisfy the urgent needs growing inside her, she would not risk her future for them.

“A drink and?—”

“She does not need anything.” The voice that cut through the crowd around her was accompanied by a broad-shouldered man pushing his way through. Diana’s breath caught in her throat, an unvoiced scream of despair that choked her airway, as the Marquess of Camden stepped in front of her.

Half a head taller than her, his dark eyes flashed through the mask he was wearing. His clothes might be plain, but the bearing he carried himself with was such that her admirers all stepped back, automatically giving way to his presumed authority.

“May I have this dance, my lady?” If she’d somehow hoped she’d gone unrecognized, the little emphasis he put on the last two words made it clear he knew she was no lady.

She was a mere miss, a spinster, from a good family, but certainly not a lady.

Lifting her chin, realizing she was going to have to indulge him if only to keep him from making a scene, she nodded her head.

“A dance does sound enjoyable,” she replied, deliberately leaving off the ‘my lord’ and not even giving him a ‘sir.’ Regardless of their social stations, the masquerade not only gave her the excuse to pretend she did not know his title, but at the Society of Sin, she shed her social status entirely. Diana did not bow and scrape to any lord here. They did so to her and thanked her for the pleasure.

Well, except for those who were the dominant party in their own encounters, they did not bother with her at all. Something about a woman who was willing to command and torment willing men seemed to make most of them extremely uncomfortable, and they were nothing but respectful in their dealings. Far more respectful than the Marquess was being now.

She turned to the two admirers, who now looked crestfallen, and smiled sweetly at them.

“I am sure I will need both food and drink upon my return. Champagne, please, and some of the sandwiches.” At her words, both of them perked up, and the rest of her circle looked unhappy at not having their own instructions. They all sighed, watching with longing and open curiosity as she took Camden’s hand. It was the latter that sparked her temper. Eyeing him with displeasure as he led her to the dance floor, she kept her voice low as she admonished him. “I hope you remember that the Society requires discretion. I do not wish for the members to wonder who I am.”

“Why not, if discretion is required?” he asked rather than acceding to her point. “They can hardly say anything.”

“They can refuse to hire me.” She turned toward him, facing him, her head held high as he put his arm around her. They had never stood this close before, his body nearly pressing against hers, her skirts shushing around his legs as he stepped forward and began to lead her in the waltz.

He was a powerful lead, moving with a surety that nearly took her breath away all over again. She could not remember the last time she had danced a waltz with anyone, though she and her sisters had all learned how. At one point, her parents had hoped to debut all of them. Diana had been the third of five daughters, though, and she had decided she would rather train in a profession, and her parents had allowed it.

“You do not need them to hire you. You have a job.”

Diana rolled her eyes.

“Clearly, you are fully recovered.” She nodded her head at the way he was confidently leading her around the ballroom.

“Likely, I am being foolishly overactive, as you are fond of warning me against, and will be bedridden tomorrow.”

She snorted. The Marquess was fully recovered and had been for some time, though he liked to pretend otherwise. She still did not know why. Sometimes, she thought perhaps he enjoyed her company... and she had allowed herself to be persuaded to stay because she enjoyed not only his but the rest of his family's. They lived very exciting lives. Far more exciting than searching for a new client would be. The steady income from watching over him was also money she could send back to her family. Her youngest sister, Amanda, was debuting next year. They needed the funds.

Tomorrow, she would have to leave, though. It was time. This felt like a sign from the fates that she had overstayed her welcome, regardless of the Marquess' manipulations. She may never discover why he'd insisted on her remaining after he'd recovered from being shot.

Wondering why might have been another reason she'd stayed. A fondness had developed between the two of them. A friendship.

An attraction.

She ignored the whisper in her mind. She was too old for such things. Their stations too different. And it would be wildly inappropriate to feel such things for a patient. A client.

Other gentlemen had tried their hand at seducing her when she was under their employ, for themselves or a family member. Diana had never had any trouble putting them down with an icy rebuff. Only once had one tried to force the issue and had swiftly discovered that accosting a woman who knew where the most painful spots on the human body were was unwise. Before leaving that house, she'd made certain that his mother knew exactly what he'd gotten up to. The last she'd heard, he was now living on his own on Jermyn Street with only a manservant for staff.

The Marquess' arm shifted, bringing her closer to him, and Diana's breath stuttered.

"What are you doing?" she sputtered as they continued to revolve around the room, moving at such a pace that his leg now stepped between hers, so she could not help but feel the press of his body against hers.

"You were not paying attention to me." There was a touch of petulance to his tone, almost a pout on his lips.

Diana pressed her own lips together, her heart racing as she shook her head.

"You should feel blessed I am not because if I were, I would have to flog you for impertinence." The threat came automatically to her lips, a surefire way of putting off any of the Sin of Society men who preferred to dominate their partners. They did not enjoy the reversal of roles.

"Then flog me." His eyes gleamed, and before she could ascertain his intentions, he

had them at the edge of the dance floor—on the opposite side of the room from where her circle waited for her return. The doorways were open, leading into the dimly lit hallway.

“You cannot be serious,” she said as he led her off the dance floor toward the hallway.

“Very. There are plenty of rooms open. Come and flog me for impertinence, my lady.” Again, that little emphasis on ‘my lady,’ and this time, it felt like mockery.

He must be mocking her, and Diana did not appreciate it. Fine. If this was the game he wanted to play, she would call his bluff and take it as far as he allowed.

Oliver

She’s too young for me.

The idea that she might be too innocent had been thoroughly eradicated upon discovering her at a Society of Sin event. Innocents did not know such secret gatherings existed, much less attend them. From the way she comported herself, it was clear she was no stranger to the perversions practiced by the members.

Otherwise, she would not have threatened to flog him.

His back tingled in anticipation. It had been years since the last time he’d felt the kiss of the leather, since he’d allowed himself such an indulgence. And she knew the terms. She knew what a flogger was. How skilled she would be at it... he didn’t care.

Once she’d made the threat, he had to know.

He’d approached her with no real plan, which was hardly like him, but he did not

object to the way the interaction had gone. He'd wanted to know what she was doing here, how much she knew, and... well, he'd wanted to get her away from those fawning puppies.

The complicated mix of envy and jealousy he'd felt upon seeing them, hearing their offers, had nearly bowled him over. Envy that they had her attention. Jealous she might choose one of them. The amount of possessiveness that had struck him was an emotion that had not struck him since before his late wife passed.

He'd wanted her attention.

He'd wanted her.

And now he had both.

Miss Rutherford—Diana—strode confidently into one of the rooms with an open door. He might have led her into the hallway, but once she'd taken the lead, she'd done so with alacrity. Oliver was happy to follow along. A large wooden frame in the shape of an X was set up in the middle of the room, currently unoccupied. Beside it was a table covered in various shapes and lengths of leather.

Ignoring him, she walked up to the table and looked it over, her head turning back and forth as she examined the options. It gave him an excuse to stand and study her, watching her inspection, seeing the way her gaze lingered longer over some implements while immediately dismissing others. She had a fondness for the whip, it seemed, and no interest in the paddles. She merely glanced at the crop.

Oliver's cock stirred as he watched her, a woman in her element, deciding what she was going to whip him with. It didn't matter that she was still too young; his attention and his body were both engaged. He wanted her. He wanted this. He hoped she was not a novice, though the more he watched her reactions, the more he felt she had

experience he would have never guessed at.

Finally, she picked up a long leather flogger. The falls were about an inch wide and two feet long, the handle thin enough she was just able to get her fingers all the way around it. Hefting it in her palm, she turned to look at him.

Even in the dim candlelight, he could see her dark eyes flash. The mask made her expression harder to read, but he thought she was surprised to find him still standing there, waiting for her. Her chin lifted in a kind of challenge.

“Strip to your waist.” Her cool, clear command was delivered in the same tone she’d often used to get him to pay attention when she was tending to his wound.

Perhaps he should have realized she had some tendencies before now, but he honestly had not considered it.

“I could just strip,” he offered as he shrugged out of his coat, taking several steps to his left to place it over the back of a chair. She’d accused him of being a bad patient, which he was, but he was even worse when it came to following orders in the bedroom. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to, but he enjoyed the battle of wills... and he especially enjoyed losing. “No need to stop at the waist.”

“The waist will be quite enough.” Her gaze dropped as he began to unbutton his waistcoat, his hands moving down the middle of his front, drawing her attention to the prodigious bulge that had formed at the front of his breeches. Her eyes widened, breasts rising and falling as she sucked in a breath.

Oliver was very aware of a couple wandering into the room, moving to the side to watch what was happening. He wondered how Diana would react. He was not sure she remembered she’d left the door open. It was entirely possible she had forgotten and would request privacy. Since she was worried about discretion.

To his surprise, she glanced at them, then looked at him as if assessing his reaction. Oh my... did she think he was bluffing when he'd invited her to flog him? It would not be entirely surprising. Though he'd gone back and forth with Marianne about who was in control when she was alive, most people, upon meeting him, assumed he would rather lead.

However, he'd had to take the lead every day of his life. Not just when he'd been growing up, learning how to be a marquess, but after he'd become a spy and risen quickly through the ranks until he was the spymaster to the Crown. He'd literally held life and death in his hands every day, and sometimes, he'd wanted nothing more than to have someone else wrest control from him and let him float. Marianne had done it for him, though it had not come naturally to her—not the way it clearly did to Diana.

A smile curved his lips.

He was very much looking forward to her reaction when she realized how much he was enjoying himself. Though it would be dependent on her skill—the intent way she'd examined the implements and how easy the flogger seemed in her hand, he was fairly certain she knew exactly what she was doing.

Tossing his waistcoat on the chair, he jerked his shirt over his head. Of course, she'd seen him shirtless more than once—he'd been shot in the torso, and she'd been caring for him as his nurse since almost the beginning—but this was the first time she was looking at his body with anything other than clinical precision. Her gaze swept over him as though she was seeing him for the first time.

Oliver puffed out his chest. He might be too old for her, but he knew he was still in fine form, even compared with a man half his age. If she wanted to look, he was happy to pose for her viewing pleasure.

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Diana

Though it was hardly the first time she'd seen the Marquess without his shirt on, it was the first time she had really allowed herself to notice his broad shoulders, muscular chest with its liberal sprinkling of black and grey hair, and a tapered waist that disappeared into his breeches. One part of her mentally noted the gunshot wound he'd sustained had fully healed to a pale mark on his side. It shouldn't be a concern when she flogged him. The old injury was what should have consumed her thoughts, but she was unable to resist drinking in the sight of him, fighting against acknowledging how attractive he was... and losing.

Seeing the wound and realizing her reaction to his half-naked body only confirmed that she needed to leave his employ. Despite his claims that he was not fully recovered and despite the steady pay... after tonight, they could not possibly go back to before. She knew what bedroom play was. One could not be part of the Society of Sin without receiving a thorough education in the many different ways people could come together for both pain and pleasure. But she'd never before been tempted to find out for herself, never imagined what it would be like for her to experience the pleasurable side of the coin.

Yet one look at him and she... yearned.

There was no going back to before.

Several more people trickled into the room, taking up places to watch. Diana usually asked her partner whether or not they preferred privacy, but with the Marquess, she was determined to force the issue. The sooner he bowed out, the sooner she could

leave and go back to his house to pack her things. She always kept enough money with her for some nights in a hotel before she needed to move on.

The Marquess just watched their audience growing with a smile.

Very well, then.

He was determined to keep going. Perhaps he thought she would not actually dare to flog him, but she had no fears of being fired as she had already decided to move on. She had no reason to let him off the hook so easily. She was going to call his bluff and flog him with all the fervor she desired. The blasted man even deserved it for being such a poor patient while she was treating him.

There had been many a time when she'd wanted to swat him for pushing himself too hard, too fast, or ignoring her admonishments. Now, she could actually do so, at least until he called it to a halt. Might as well enjoy what she could get.

And perhaps flogging him a few times would release some of the strange tension swirling in her gut, tightening her nerves.

Desire.

She'd heard of it but never truly felt it. Diana was honest enough to be able to admit to herself that she'd avoided it. If there was a frisson of attraction between her and a man, she did not flog him.

It was her pride that had gotten her into this position. Her pride and the challenge. If she was wiser, she would walk away now... but she couldn't stand the thought of him thinking he had won.

"Turn around and put your hands on the frame," she ordered, wondering at what point

he would finally realize she was in earnest and was not going to go easy on him just because he was a marquess or her current patient.

The smug little smile that curved his lips was infuriating. Flexing her fingers on the handle of the flogger, she hefted the weight as he turned his back to her. At least she could no longer see his smile. Instead, she was greeted with the view of his very fine shoulders, the curve of his backside beneath his tight breeches, and his muscles rippling as he reached upward, leaning forward to rest his body on the frame and let it support him.

It was almost as though he had done it before.

For a moment, Diana hesitated. Had she misread him? There were powerful men who enjoyed being whipped, even humiliated, especially by a woman. But the Marquess had never seemed that type. Then again, how often did she interact with those gentlemen outside of this particular sphere?

Almost never. Although she never turned down a patient in need, she also did not accept long-term positions with anyone whom she'd engaged with at the Society. If she'd known the Marquess was a member, she never would have allowed herself to be hired. Though she'd seen several of his sons at events before, she'd never engaged with any of them, not even Joseph, whose preferences ran the same way as hers. He'd found Lady Catherine, and that had been that.

Thankfully.

Taking a deep breath, Diana focused on the matter at hand.

Right now, the Marquess was before her, waiting to be flogged, and they had an audience.

“If you need me to stop, say the word ‘Nurse.’” Being called that would immediately halt her in her tracks. Though not everyone at the Society used such safety measures, there were several who did, and Diana preferred to ensure anyone she was whipping could stop her with a word.

The Marquess chuckled, turning his head to speak over his shoulder.

“I hardly think that will be necessary.” The haughty way he made the claim caused a few chuckles around the room, though it was unclear whether they were in support of him or her.

Diana narrowed her eyes, her grip on the flogger tightening. She almost wished she’d picked up the knotted one, which would have a much stronger strike than the soft leather of the one she was holding. Well, if he was determined to be smug, she could certainly trade them out after warming up his back. She’d give him the chance to back out first, though.

After a few lashes.

“Very well. Face forward.” She intended to start with his shoulders, and she did not want to risk accidentally catching him in the cheek. He turned his head back around, and Diana stepped forward, getting into place so she would be close enough for the leather falls to make an impact.

Lifting her arm, she brought the flogger down across his shoulders with a satisfying thwapping sound that both settled something in her soul and disturbed her body. Seeing the red marks on his skin, the way he shuddered—from his clenching fingers all the way down to his feet as he went up on his toes for just a moment—made the desire inside her burst into flames. She could feel the heat igniting in her core and spreading outward, like a flush of warmth that traveled in bursts along her limbs and up to her cheeks, making her blush hotly.

Men had shivered for her before, moaned, even begged, but not one of them had ever affected her like this. And he hadn't even made a sound.

Taking a deep breath, she reversed the strike, taking him across the other shoulder with a quick snap that left her feeling breathless. This time, his head tipped back, and he did groan, flexing his muscles and rolling his shoulders before his head fell forward again. It was a movement she recognized, though she could hardly believe she was seeing it.

She'd dismissed the bulge at the front of his breeches as an anomaly, perhaps just due to their surrounds. Certainly not because he was actually aroused by the idea of submitting to her.

The signs were all there, no matter how she tried to dismiss them. He was attracted to her and aroused by her domination of him. She wished she didn't know because she knew that meant she should stop this madness. Immediately.

But she didn't truly want to.

Oliver

Had he overplayed his hand by showing his enjoyment of the lick of leather against his skin? His ears strained, listening, trying to figure out what she was doing. Wondering if she was taking her time or if she'd paused because she was going to stop after hearing him moan. He'd thought about trying to stifle it, but the fact was he wanted her to know that he was enjoying himself.

He'd wanted her to be able to hear it.

To see how she'd react.

Because despite her presence here and her willingness to take up his challenge, he was unsure of how she felt about him specifically. And he wanted to know. Now that he knew her preferences, now that he knew she was part of the Society, it was as though the fetters holding him back had finally been released.

Some gentlemen older than him took brides who were much younger than her. It was her presumed innocence that had always held him back. Some spinsters took lovers, but she had never struck him as the type. She'd always held him and every other gentleman that he'd seen her with at arms-length.

And if she had had a lover—or taken one—while in his employ, he would have known about it. He might be the former spymaster to the Crown, but he still had plenty of informants at his fingertips for whatever he might want to know. His employees were under his protection, and if he kept a closer watch on his nurse than he did a footman... well, she was a lady, after all. Not entirely a member of his household, and therefore, she needed extra protection.

That was how he excused it to himself, anyway.

“Was that it?” he asked over his shoulder when the waiting became interminable. Was he deliberately pushing her? Absolutely. If she was having second thoughts, he did not want her to dwell on them for overlong.

She had already shown some reluctance, though he noted it was more due to what she likely thought was proper as opposed to not being attracted to him. If anything, she was fighting her attraction. He did not want her to.

What had felt forbidden had now become pure temptation, and he wanted to give in. All he had to do was convince her to give in with him.

Rather than answering him verbally, the leather snapped against his skin. She must

have taken a step back because now only the ends were hitting his skin, which made them far stingier. Which he liked just as much as he had the more thuddy sensation.

He'd missed the feel of the flogger in all its myriad forms.

Knowing it was Diana behind him added a different element to the situation he'd imagined when he'd decided to attend the masquerade this evening. It was far better than how he'd thought his evening would go.

The flogger fell again and again, stinging his skin and lighting him up from the inside out. He groaned more than once, shuddering as he sank into the sensations, the hard bulge of his cock rubbing against the wood in front of him.

Bloody hell.

Closing his eyes, he could picture her in his head, wielding the flogger with all the skill of Artemis with her bow. The longer it went on, the surer he was that she was a very practiced hand. She was not a novice. His cock was rejoicing as much as his fantasies.

"Was that better?" she asked, her voice silky.

A gentle hand swept over his shoulders where she'd been flogging him, caressing the heated, tenderized skin. The sensitive surface tingled as she touched him, making him groan again, but this one, he held back now that he was more aware of her sensitivities. He recognized what she was doing—it was not so much a sensual touch as checking in to see how he was faring.

"Yes, my lady. More, please." He asked because he wanted it. Because he didn't want her to stop. Because he'd never asked her for anything before, and he wanted to see if she would indulge him.

There was a pause, a hesitation in her hand, before she removed it. For a moment he did not know what her answer would be, and he held his breath, waiting to find out.

“Very well, then.”

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Diana

This was madness she should put a stop to right now... but she could not make herself do so because she'd heard the true need in his voice when he'd asked for more. Moreover, she could not recall him ever requesting anything else of her. He'd ordered her to stay on when she would have declared him fully recovered; he had not asked her to stay.

She would have not considered it in his nature.

Yet here he was, asking her not to stop. Saying 'please.'

How could she deny him?

She couldn't.

Putting down the flogger she'd been using, she picked up the heavier one with the knots. It would be far more thuddy and the effects far more lingering.

Somehow, she already knew he would love it.

Dimly aware of the room slowly filling, she could only wonder if anyone else had recognized him. Not that anyone would care particularly that a marquess was being flogged. At least he did not run the risk of running into his family members. Their absence from the event was why she had felt free to come and likely why he had as well.

She doubted any of his sons suspected that she or he knew anything about the club, and she had wanted to keep it that way. Now, she was especially grateful as she rained leather across his back and shoulders, her senses thrilling as he groaned and flexed under the assault.

Knowing he wanted it, knowing he was vulnerable to her... it was such a difference from her usual partners. They knew each other. She'd spent every day for months arguing with him, bullying him into bettering his diet, pushing him to rest when he needed to rest, and finally accepting that he was likely as recovered as he was going to get. From the way he'd swung her around the dance floor, he was even more recovered than she'd thought. Now, she knew for certain that the cane he'd kept using was entirely for show.

Blasted man.

Diana swung a little harder, not that it changed his reaction. He shuddered and moaned, leaning his head against the wooden frame. Her nipples tightened at the sound, the heat in her core feeling as if it was growing as she focused in on him. Was it the fact that they already knew each other that was making her so heated? Or was it knowing what a strong man he was and having him at her mercy?

Normally, she barely knew more about her partner than possibly their name and who they might be related to. She didn't know what they sounded like when they shouted or ranted. She had never seen them in bed and weak. Never been the confidant to who they confessed their fears and anxieties.

During the months she'd been in the Marquess' household, she had done all of those things and more. Knew he'd not wanted his sons and niece to see him weak because he had not wanted them to fear for him. Knew his determination to catch the traitor to the Crown who had been responsible for his injury. Knew that he liked blackberry jam with his crumpets and that his favorite color was orange but felt it was too flashy

to wear.

She knew he liked a good argument and was very pleased when she did not back down to him.

Now, she had more of an inkling why.

Breathing hard, her muscles were beginning to strain. It had been a while since she'd flogged anyone this hard or this long, yet she kept going because she did not want to stop. Because when she stopped, it would be over.

However, she could not go on forever, and finally—with her arm screaming at her for relief—she let the flogger drop by her side. A smattering of applause went round the room as she inspected her handiwork. No skin was broken, though it was quite red across his shoulders and a nice dark pink everywhere else. She'd avoided his lower back, as it could be quite dangerous to whip someone there.

The inspection gave her one final excuse to draw her eyes over the curve of his backside, which made her blush again. She had seen what went on between some of the men who liked to submit to women in the Society. Diana had never worn the harness, never been curious to, but now she could not help but picture the Marquess in such a position. Not that she had any right to.

“Thank you,” she said to the applauding crowd as she returned the flogger to its place on the table. “Please give us some privacy for the denouement.”

Not everyone enjoyed having an audience for the aftermath of such activities. If anyone was going to assume she was asking for privacy so they could enjoy the pleasures of the flesh... well, she could not do anything about such conjecturing. She wanted privacy to allow them to speak frankly, and they did not need an audience for that. Thankfully, she did not spot anyone either she or the Marquess would object to

among the voyeurs. Well, that she knew of. There was always the possibility there were personages he would prefer not to be seen by that she was unaware of. She had been rather embedded in his life for months now, and he was hardly a social creature. Perhaps, other than his family, he would not care either way.

The last person to exit the room closed the door behind them. By that time, the Marquess was straightening up, pushing away from the cross. When he turned, he had an expression on his face she had never seen before—at least, never seen on him. The utter bliss and relaxation made him appear almost an entirely different person from the man she knew. A softer one, though no less confident and self-assured.

His presence was always robust, but it was gentler now, like being in the presence of a peaceful protector rather than a god of war.

“My lady.” A smile curved his lips. “Thank you.”

He stepped toward her, and though there was nothing to indicate ill intentions, Diana felt her alarm rise. Despite the way his demeanor had gentled, there was nothing at all soft about the heat in his eyes. She had seen it before, but he had always banked it. Pulled it back.

Worse, she felt an answering tug of need inside her. A little voice that said, yes... let me discover for myself what everyone is on about. She'd eschewed pleasures of the flesh when she'd eschewed marriage. Though granted, the Society had shown her that marriage was not a necessity; she'd never been tempted before.

Because I always kept myself apart from my partners. I did not know them.

But I do know him.

Knew him. Had been attracted to him from the beginning, no matter how determined

she had been to ignore that reaction. Now, having interacted with him in such a manner... the need in her body demanded to be satisfied. If she were being truthful, she desired to know what it would be like to be with him. To have him hold her and touch her and kiss her and thrust inside her.

But it would be such an absolutely terrible idea for so many other reasons.

Diana raised her eyebrow at him, the same way she did when he was being a stubborn ass about some factor of his care.

“What do you think you’re doing, sirrah?” The question came out nicely imperious, but it did not stop him in his tracks the way she’d intended. He kept coming toward her, and Diana automatically took a step back—and ran into the desk with the display of implements. Yet even under his advance, she did not fear harm, did not feel threatened... at least, not by anything but her own reactions and desires.

She was the only danger to herself.

When he dropped to his knees in front of her, at her feet, and pulled off his mask to reveal his face, her heart pounded so hard, she thought it might actually burst out of her chest. Warmth flooded through her like fire, crackling along her senses, making her tingle from head to toe as she realized his intention.

“You did something for me. Now, I’m going to do something for you.” His smile was utterly wicked, his statement full of confidence that she was going to allow such presumption.

She was not.

Was she?

She stared down at him as he lifted her skirts and felt his hands gliding up the insides of her legs, touching her in a manner no man had ever dared to.

And she was not stopping him.

Instead, she was leaning back, her legs parting farther as the desk took more of her weight, and he disappeared under her skirts.

“Oh!” Her thighs were exquisitely sensitive as his palms and lips ran over them, kissing his way upward. She leaned back even more, her hips tilting forward, her hands bracing against the desk to keep herself steady as his presumption became her pleasure.

Though she had touched herself after witnessing some of the scenes at the Society, imagining what it would be like to be in their position, nothing could have prepared her for the reality. She controlled herself, but right now, she did not control him. She never knew where he was going to touch next, whether it would be firm or gentle, whether he would use his fingers, lips, tongue, or all three.

Diana gasped as his fingers parted her split drawers, brushing against her dewy curls. She could feel his hot breath on her inner thighs, and it was deliciously depraved. Her senses were swirling, drowning in the new sensations.

She was not going to stop him.

She could not.

She did not want to.

“Oh!” She cried out again as his tongue touched her for the first time, awakening ecstasy she had not known existed. It was sweet, hot bliss as his tongue delved

between her folds, curling and exploring, the hot suction sending her into a paroxysm of pleasure. His shoulders pushed between her thighs, lifting her feet from the ground, and there was a patter of thuds as several of the floggers were pushed off the desk, falling to the floor to make room for her.

The Marquess' tongue was buried in her cunt, his shoulders holding her thighs wide apart, his hands sliding under her bottom to grip it tightly. It was a fever dream of eroticism, making her writhe as tension coiled within her, tighter and tighter. She could feel the heat of his skin on the backs of her calves through her stockings.

“Oh, please... more...” Her hips moved as much as they could, pushing against his skilled mouth as her pleasure coiled tighter.

He found a spot, the little spot she'd found with her fingers, and flicked it with his tongue. Diana shuddered, gasping for breath, then he sucked the little nubbin there between his lips, and she shattered.

It was in no way equal to the pleasure she'd discovered for herself with secret touches—it was far, far greater. Her fingers gripped the edge of the desk so hard, the wood creaked as fireworks of rapture exploded inside her, more dizzying and more powerful than any at Vauxhall Gardens. Diana's legs pressed together, trapping his head there against her—not that he was trying to get away—as wave after wave of sweet release crashed over her.

He suckled that tender spot until she went limp, and her muscles turned to water from the extreme sensations that coursed through her. The arm she'd used to flog him, in particular, no longer felt functional. She wanted to lie down and not move for at least eight hours.

How did people do this, then go on to watch more scenes? Or even participate in them?

Then again, she was a novice. Perhaps it was a matter of stamina and desensitization. Two things she did not intend to experiment with.

The Marquess pulled away, coming back out from under her skirts. His face was flushed nearly as bright as his back after the flogging, and there was a thin sheen of gloss around his mouth. My arousal. My pleasure. Diana blushed hotly, pressing her legs together, which just made all the sensations simmer again.

Looking up to meet her gaze, still on his knees, the Marquess looked her directly in the eye as he licked her cream from his lips.

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Oliver

Arriving back at his home, Oliver jumped from the carriage and hurried inside, heading straight for Diana's rooms. She'd practically fled from him at the Society the moment he'd finished pleasuring her. And he'd been too damn slow to stop her.

Partly because he'd been so shocked she'd run and partly because his knees were not what they used to be, especially after so many months abed. Though he'd worked hard to get his body back into shape after his injury, there was still work to be done. He'd made a mental note to add more stretching and calisthenics to his daily routine as he hurried through the Marquess of Hartford's halls, reaching the front door in time to see Diana getting into a carriage.

It pulled away too fast for him to stop.

There had been panic in her eyes. Not because she did not want him—but because she did.

Right now, she was technically still his nurse. A situation he resolved to remedy as soon as possible, as he had a feeling that aspect of their relationship contained the majority of her rejection of him.

At least, he hoped.

He hadn't thought to ever find love again after Marianne, but...

Diana made him want again. She had from the moment she'd walked into his life.

He just had not thought he could have.

Not until tonight. And he was not willing to let that go without a fight.

When he flung open the door to her room, he was both unsurprised yet disappointed to see that she had several of her trunks already there and his maids helping her pack. Absolutely not. The door hit the wall with a bang, making everyone in the room jump. Diana jumped the highest, whirling around, her eyes widening in disbelief. She was no longer wearing her mask, and he could see every expression on her face.

Her shock.

Her surprise.

Her admiration. Or was he just imagining that one?

He could not be certain.

Had she really thought she would be able to leave in the middle of the night with no one the wiser? He was the former spymaster to the Crown of England, for God's sake. Even if she had been able to escape him in the night, he would find her eventually.

It galled him that she'd called upon his own staff to help her pack.

"Everyone out," he roared with all the pent-up frustration he'd been holding back. He stepped to the side as everyone except Diana scampered. Then he reached behind him and slammed the door firmly shut, propriety be damned.

She'd been in his room without a chaperone often enough. That Society would not conflate the two did not matter. If there was a scandal, he'd happily marry her, make

her his marchioness, and spend the rest of his life being happily bossed around by her when he wasn't pleasuring her until she screamed. Even before he'd consciously made the decision, his mind had already mapped out all the possible routes and chosen this as the one that pleased him best.

Rather than cowering or shrinking, Diana proved her mettle by drawing herself up, hands on her hips, and glaring at him. All the panic and shock were gone, at least visibly, and she was incensed. Which was much better, as far as he was concerned.

Anger he could work with. Panic, not so much.

"Exactly what do you think you are about?" she asked—nay, demanded—to know.

"Where do you think you're going?" he retorted, stalking toward her.

Another woman might have cowered or even taken a step back.

Diana narrowed her eyes and held up her hand, palm outward, almost daring him to keep coming. Since he was now only a few feet away from her and did not want her to feel threatened—at least, not any more than was required to answer his question honestly—he ground to a halt and raised his eyebrow at her.

To his surprise, a flush heated her cheeks, and her gaze skittered away from his.

"I..." She cleared her throat. "I was going to leave you a note."

"A note." He took another step forward, causing her to meet his gaze again. Sternly. Oliver waited on the balls of his feet in case he needed to step forward again, not that she had anywhere else to go. He was between her and the door, though if she truly desired to leave, he would let her.

She was not trying to get out, though, despite the packing. No, rather than insisting she be allowed to leave or attempting to flee, she was meeting him on his own level. She had not even ordered him out of her room, just asked what he was doing there.

“A note? About what?” His voice had turned silky, seductive.

This little dance they were doing around each other was as invigorating as it was infuriating.

With Marianne, they’d gone back and forth on who took the lead. Was Diana the same? He’d always preferred to be the one to follow in the bedroom, but he would do whatever she liked. But she did not seem like she was about to acquiesce to being put over his knee, even if part of him wanted to spank her for the impertinence.

A note.

He already knew what such a note might say, but he wanted to make her admit it.

That stubborn chin went up again, dark eyes flashing with her own temper.

“A note to inform you that, as you are fully recovered and my services are no longer needed, I have gone on to seek other employment.” She bit out the words succinctly but also as though they gave her no joy.

The idea of her leaving lit a flame within him.

“One night without my cane and you think I am fully recovered?” He had not actually needed the cane for weeks, and they both knew it, but she’d accepted the deception before, so she could hardly call him on it now. Her eyes narrowed, lips pursing.

Yes, he was prodding at her temper and her pride. Deliberately so.

Fighting was good. He could win a fight.

“Besides,” he continued, “it is hardly safe or seemly to leave in the middle of the night.”

“I was going to wait ‘til morning,” she claimed, but her eyes darted to the side. Lie.

He’d learned her facial cues very well over the time they’d spent together. While Diana was a very good liar, especially when she had what he privately thought of as her ‘nurse face’ on, he was an expert at reading body language in general. With the close attention he’d paid to her as they’d gotten to know each other, he doubted there was much she could hide about her emotions at this juncture.

“And say goodbye to the family?”

“Yes. I was planning to leave after breakfast.” Her gaze met his again.

Oliver bet she had not entirely decided when she was leaving, only that she was going to. Well. That was easy enough. He just had to convince her to stay.

Diana

How horribly awkward. She truly had not expected him to follow after her. The entire way back to Camden House, she fretted in the carriage over what her next move was to be. Leaving in the middle of the night was not ideal, but it would have been easier than facing him in the morning.

After she’d...

And he’d...

Then he'd burst through her door like Mars on the warpath, ordering everyone about like the god he thought he was. Part of her had been relieved. Another part flattered that he'd come after her. Very small parts. Most of her had been horrified and shocked.

She could only imagine what the servants were saying.

Damn him. This was going to make getting another position difficult. Perhaps she should leave the capital. There was always need out in the country, especially with elderly relations who had retired to their manors or villages for a quieter life in their later years. It would not be as exciting as living in London, but right now, she felt like she'd had quite enough excitement.

If she could outrun the gossip, eventually, it would die down, and she could return. Another scandal would take its place. The ton had long memories, but she was hardly a person of interest, other than if she was paired with a marquess. If she disappeared to the country, tongues might wag for a short bit, but with no further meat to chew on, they would soon move on to other, more delicious fare.

"So. After breakfast, then." He took another step toward her.

Something in his expression had changed. Diana's heart started to pound. He was looking at her the same way he had before he'd dropped to his knees in front of her.

Somehow, that was far more intimidating than when he was actively trying to push her around. This—the way he looked at her, the way it made her feel when he looked at her like that—this was new. This was something she did not know how to counter.

She did not even know if she wanted to counter it.

"Yes, after breakfast," she said calmly, making as if to turn away, so she could escape

the heat in his gaze.

But she'd made a mistake.

She'd forgotten how close she was to the bed.

It was only a couple feet in front of her, blocking any easy path, and the moment she saw it—the moment she was reminded of where they were while her body was still humming from his tongue—her mind and movement were arrested.

Then he was behind her, his arms around her, his body pressing against hers.

His hands slid from her stomach up to just under her breasts, not quite touching them, and her breath stuttered in shock. The thick bulge against her backside made her hyperaware of the rest of her body, especially the pulsing in her core, the emptiness that was suddenly aching to be filled.

“If you are leaving after breakfast, then what's the harm in one night?” the Marquess murmured in her ear.

One night.

One night in his arms. One night with him in her bed.

What's the harm? The little voice whispering in her head agreed with him, urging her to take the offer. One night. Then she'd leave on the morrow. It was the same plan she'd had before but with an additional bonus.

She had just had her menses. The likelihood of a child resulting from their union was extremely unlikely.

He was the first man who had ever tempted her. The first who had ever made her feel this way. If all he wanted was one night before he would let her go... Her heart ached at knowing that was all he wanted, but then it was more than she'd ever wanted before. One night, then she'd leave and have an incredible memory to take with her.

An even more incredible one than the one she already had. Something to take out and treasure and remember when she was an old grey spinster, surrounded by nieces and nephews. The night she'd been seduced by a marquess.

Why not?

"Very well." She gasped as his hands moved up to cup her breasts, her back automatically arching, pushing her back against him as he squeezed the firm handful. "But we do this my way."

"Of course, my lady," he murmured in her ear, running his lips down her neck. His thumb moved over her nipple, and even through the fabric of her dress, she felt it. It was as though her entire body was heating up from the inside, all over again.

She was starting to understand how one could indulge multiple times in one evening. If anything, she was even more sensitive, more eager than before. She wanted him, and she did not want to deny it anymore.

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Diana

Turning in the Marquess' arms, she reached up to bring his lips down to hers. Now that she had made her decision, she felt utterly brazen. Though she lacked personal experience, she'd watched enough couples at the Society of Sin to know what she wanted. She had her own personal fantasies, and if he was insistent on seducing her, she was going to try the things she wanted.

Well... not everything. There were things she would like to do that one needed certain equipment for, but they could do everything else. Everything she could do for her first time with a man, so that it was exactly the way she wanted it. How many ladies were able to say that?

Very few that she knew of.

And she'd overheard quite a bit.

The Marquess' lips on hers were like a brand, his tongue sweeping into her mouth ruthlessly. Diana kissed him back just as passionately, though perhaps not as expertly. She had been kissed before, but not quite so thoroughly. Not with such fervor. And certainly not with the man's hands traveling up and down her spine, caressing her flesh and curving over her bottom to squeeze and pull her more firmly against him.

Oh, heavens.

She might be in over her head.

No... no 'might' about it. She was definitely in over her head. She had jumped in like an utter ninny, and now it was too late to pull back. Even if he let her, she already knew she'd regret it forever. She just hoped she did not regret giving in in the same way.

Passion spiraled up inside her. Given permission to touch each other, knowing this was the only night, lent desperation to her movements. She'd touched him before, of course, while tending to his wound, but the difference between then and now was even more than the difference between seeing him shirtless under her care and tonight when he'd stripped down to be flogged.

The heat filling her body was a blaze that was not going to be extinguished without him. She had never felt like this before.

Fabric tore as they pulled and tugged each other's clothing. His hands on her bare skin was a thrill like none other. She was awash in sensation, drowning in the pleasure, yet knew they'd barely gotten started. Having him under her skirts had been naught but a tease by comparison as they touched and caressed each other now.

His skin was so smooth, except where he was hairy, and the bristles rubbed against all her sensitive parts in a manner that was wildly arousing. Diana was not used to such stimulation. Or having every part of herself touched and caressed.

She pushed him, partly to get herself some breathing space and partly because she wanted him on the bed. If he did not slow down, she was going to burst... and that was not part of her plan for the evening. She wanted to take her time, so she could remember everything in detail. Already, their earlier encounter felt like a blur—she did not want to risk forgetting any moment of this.

The Marquess fell back onto the bed, a wicked grin on his face that made her whole body flush. Well, she would have flushed if she were not already so heated.

The thick stalk of his cock lay against his body. This was the first time she had seen him unclothed from the waist down, and it was worth taking the time to admire. To memorize. He was a beautiful specimen of the male form, and she had plenty of comparisons to go by.

“What now, my lady?” he asked, clearly amused by the situation. The satisfied smirk on his lips was as infuriating as it was appealing.

She knew very well that some of what she enjoyed about their relationship was that it was always a battle to the top—one she liked winning over and over again.

“Lie back and hold on to the headboard,” she said with no hesitation. She wanted to see him spread out before her like a meal, and having his hands occupied meant he could not be touching her.

But she could touch him as much as she wanted.

Still smirking, he lay back and did as she said, his muscles flexing with his movements, which gave her further opportunity to drink in the sight of him. The salt and pepper of the hair on his head continued all the way down his body. He had a sprinkling of hair across his chest that ran down the center of his stomach, leading straight to his cock.

A shiny bit of fluid was balanced precariously on the tip of the fat mushroom head, and Diana’s mouth watered at the sight. She had always wondered what a man would taste like ever since she’d realized that some people used their mouths in entirely indecent manners.

She wanted to use her mouth in an indecent manner. On him. Like he had on her.

Diana crawled onto the bed, savoring the way he looked at her. His eyes devoured

her, the way his mouth had, the way she was doing to him.

“Do not let go of the headboard,” she ordered, though she was not entirely sure what she would do if he did. She did not have a flogger here. Though she could use her hand, she preferred an implement.

“Of course, my lady. Do with me what you will. Use me for your pleasure.” He grinned at her, his hungry eyes blazing with his desire.

Well, if he agreed to keep his hands where they were, she could probably trust that. Eventually, she would let him touch her, but not until she was ready to lose control. She had very specific ideas of what she wanted to do.

Wrapping one hand around the base of his cock, she was surprised at how warm and soft it was. The skin was soft against her palm and fingers, though, of course, the stalk itself was stiffly firm. The Marquess groaned, closing his eyes and thrusting his hips up as she touched him, pulling his cock upward so that it was pointed at the ceiling. More fluid leaked from the lip, droplets decorating the dark-red head, and Diana leaned down to flick her tongue over them.

Salty and sweet, the flavor burst on her tongue.

She was not sure she liked it.

“My lady teases me.” His eyes were open again and on her. “More, please, my lady.”

Well, it had not tasted so bad, especially when he looked at her like that. Diana lowered her head, pressing her lips to the soft, spongy tip, then opening her mouth to take him within. His answering groan sent a wave of hot arousal through as the realization of the power she had over him surged.

Oliver

Bloody hell. Diana was a torment and a revelation. Her headboard creaked as his fingers tightened on the wooden spindles. This bed was not nearly as sturdy as his own. It was too late to transfer their activities to his rooms, not wanting to give her an opportunity for second thoughts. Not while he finally had her right where he wanted her—in bed, torturing him.

Her dark hair was still pulled back so that he could see her face and her body, her breasts hanging low beneath her. The thatch of curls at the juncture of her thighs was finally visible. He would like to explore that more, but he did not know if that would be allowed. She was all pinks and creams, her pale skin the same hue all over and untouched by the sun—she was very careful with her parasol and gloves when she went out of doors. The pink tips of her breasts were tightly budded, tempting berries begging to be nipped. He could only hope he would eventually be given the chance.

“Fuck!” His hips thrust upward as she took him into the warm, wet heat of her mouth, and he groaned, shuddering at the incredible sensation. Her tongue swirled around the head, exploring, questing, and eliciting the most incredible pleasure.

It had been so long since he’d been with a woman... He’d been too busy for a mistress, much less a lover, and he had never been the trusting sort. Many men had spilled secrets they should not have over the pillow, as if their brains turned off the moment they spilled their seed. Oliver had not been tempted to risk such a thing before, but Diana had already shown herself capable of keeping the family’s secrets.

Lifting her mouth from his cock, she began to lick up and down, her hand still firmly wrapped around the base. Her other hand moved over his thigh, coming to cradle his sack. Every movement was slow, exploratory, as though she was memorizing every centimeter of him.

Shuddering, he gasped and groaned as she toyed with him, taking her time in the most torturous way possible. Despite the length of time he'd gone without a woman's touch, his completion remained far out of reach as she licked and suckled and savored. It was as if she was being deliberately, maddeningly random, to drive him absolutely wild while not allowing him to even near climax.

"You're killing me, my lady." That was as close a complaint as he could force himself to make. He was not sure how much longer he was going to be able to withstand the sensual torture without reaching for her if she did not advance their progress soon.

Though he was curious what she would do if he disobeyed her order, he did not want to do so without very good reason. He wanted to show her that he could obey. That he respected her commands. That he could be trusted.

Otherwise, he did not have a hope of convincing her to stay after tonight.

Her low chuckle rumbled vibrations through his cock, making him groan and thrust into her mouth again. The firm grasp she had on the root pushed his hips back down, so he could not surge up as much as he wanted, adding to the agonizing ecstasy he was experiencing.

The warm heat of her mouth lifted, which was both a regret and a hope—her mouth was not where he wanted to spend.

"Ah, well, we would not want that after all I did to get you back to full health," she teased.

Just as he hoped, rather than lowering her mouth again, she straddled his hips. Her hand was still wrapped around his cock to help her aim it at the right spot... then she hesitated.

Hell and damnation.

He was so close to the promised land. Perhaps he should not have interrupted her.

“Permission to use my hands, my lady.” He hoped that giving her another option—one that did not involve stopping—would sway her back to the very promising direction she’d been headed in.

Asking permission would remind her that she was in charge.

It would show that he accepted being under her control.

She stared down at him, hand around his cock, the warmth of her pussy so close to the tip. Her breasts swayed as she did, and he could practically see the gears turning in her head as her thoughts tumbled over each other.

Oliver’s breath caught in his throat, waiting for her decision.

Diana

The moment of no return. By Society’s standards, she was already ruined from the moment the Marquess had slammed the door behind him, but now she truly would be.

And she’d hesitated.

The way the Marquess had reacted as she’d moved her mouth up and down his cock had been wildly exciting, the power she had over him intoxicating, but that was a different matter from taking him inside her. Would it hurt? Would he know?

Would he care?

The questions had sprung up in her mind.

And now he was looking up at her, asking to touch her.

One night.

Her resolve returned.

“Yes. Touch me.”

That was all he needed. Immediately, his hands came down, and they did not go for her hips the way she expected but rather for her breasts. Diana gasped at the feel of his palms cupping them, cradling them, as his thumbs swept over her sensitive nipples. Her muscles quivered, her thighs aching to lower and fill the emptiness.

Yes.

As his hands squeezed, massaging her breasts, Diana sank down.

She could feel the tip at her entrance.

Feel the stretch.

It burned, adding to the heat in her core. It also hurt, but in a good way, the way a muscle hurt when it had been unused for too long and finally got to stretch. She cried out as she let go of his cock and impaled herself completely, shuddering as she took in a deep breath to get past the initial sting.

The sensation of having him fully inside her took her breath away, especially as he groaned, thrusting upward and rubbing his body against hers. It was painful bliss. She sat there, unmoving, trying to get her breath back... trying to adjust to her new

reality.

She had a man inside her.

She was no longer a virgin.

In some ways, she felt no different, but in others, her entire life had just changed with a single movement. Her muscles squeezed, adjusting to their new dimensions. She shifted atop him, making him groan, rubbing her swollen clit against his groin, which sent a surge of pleasure shooting through her. The sensation soothed away the last of the sting.

“Please, my lady.” His fingers toyed with her nipples, tugging her forward. Lost in her haze, Diana went until her lips were hovering over his, his gaze boring into hers. “Please do not torture me anymore. I will not be able to last long as it is.” His faint smile acknowledged her power over him, and she recognized the warning.

Whether or not she would be able to reach her own climax, she did not know, but she wanted to try.

She also did not want him to realize that her hesitation had been because she’d just divested herself of her virginity, not because she was continuing to torment him. If he had not noticed, that was all the better.

Rising up again, she sucked in a breath at the change in sensation, the raw feeling of him moving inside her. Thankfully, he was as enamored of the slide of her body over his, and he groaned, closing his eyes and arching his back. When she sank down on him again, he thrust up into her, melding them together.

She had seen this often enough, she knew what to do, and her body was strong from having learned how to ride a horse. Her thighs strained as she went up and down atop

him, but she could not stop. The faster she moved, the more her body yearned, working toward a monumental climax. She could feel herself rising higher and higher as his hands finally released her breasts to move to her bottom, cupping it and assisting her as she ground herself down on his cock.

The orgasm was growing from deep inside her rather than starting in her clit, and she could feel her entire body buzzing and humming from the growing rapture. The Marquess' groans filled the air, and every gasp elicited was a delight. She loved seeing him beneath her, straining, shuddering, knowing she was the one doing that to him. She was the cause of those sounds.

Watching him, feeling him, fueled her own desire. His hands gripped her tighter, his jaw locking against a groan, and she knew he must be close.

So was she.

One of his hands shifted, moving from her bottom so his fingers were splayed against her thigh, his thumb rubbing against her clit. She cried out as her orgasm swept over her, bursting forth like a tidal wave that crashed along her senses. The waves of ecstasy pounded through her, carrying her along as he shuddered beneath her, calling her name with a shout. Her muscles clenched around him as she felt him stiffen inside her, the hot warmth of his seed spilling into her.

They moved together as one until she finally slumped over atop him. Her head tucked into the spot between his shoulder and his chin, and she could feel his damp skin beneath hers as her fingers toyed with the hair on his chest.

"That was lovely," she said with a happy sigh.

Fingers stroked down her back, and she felt his lips press against the top of her head. She yawned. From excitement to panic to... this. The events of the evening would

have exhausted her even if she had not already had a busy day before it.

“Sleep, my lady,” he said, as if he’d read her mind. He did that too often for comfort.

“I will take care of everything.”

Rolling off him, Diana smiled as she pulled up the sheets over her.

One night.

But what a night.

Oliver

Getting up from the bed, Oliver could not help but smile down at Diana’s still form. She was already asleep. To him, that was an indication of a job well done.

Turning to take a cloth from beside her wash basin, something caught his eye. Oliver frowned down at the smear of blood on his cock.

What the...

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Oliver

Something poked him in the side. Hard.

“Ow.” Dammit, he’d been completely comfortable, so deep in sleep that coming up out of it felt as if he was suddenly underwater and floundering to get to the surface.

“What are you still doing here?” Diana hissed in his ear as she poked him again, making him flinch away from her. Which was not easy because he still had his arms wrapped around her.

“Sleeping.” He yawned, forcing his eyes open. Bloody hell, sleeping in her bed was the best rest he’d gotten in months... possibly years. It was warm and soft, and so was she. He tightened his grip on her as she poked him again. Despite her very hard finger, that was not going to be enough to keep him off her. Or to diminish the erection he’d awoken with.

With her pressed up against him, it was also a lot harder for her to poke him. Her furious gaze met his, only inches from his face, as she tried to pull farther away. While he was happy to let her take the lead, at the moment, he was not inclined to let her go, and he noticed she had not actually asked him to.

“You said you were going to take care of everything! You are not supposed to be here!” Her voice was becoming rather shrill. Apparently, she had not expected to find him still in her bed this morning. Interesting.

He wondered if her assumption was because she was a virgin or because she actually

thought he was going to let her go after just one night. Maybe he'd ask her later when she was no longer in a snit.

"I did take care of everything. I cleaned both of us up—you slept through it—and blew out all the candles."

"That is not taking care of everything! You were supposed to go back to your own room!" Even shriller than before, she pushed at his chest.

As nice as it was to feel her hands on him rather than her finger poking into his side, the situation was still not ideal.

"Let go of me!"

Damn. Oliver let go of her with a reluctant sigh, and she rolled away, clutching the sheet to her bosom. As if he had not seen them the night before, had not held them. Though he had not gotten the chance to put them in his mouth, that was true. There was still a long list of debaucheries he wished to commit with her.

"You did not truly expect me to go back to my room," he countered, frowning at her. "Why would I?"

She stared at him, aghast, as though he had just announced that he had no brain in his head.

"Because... because... because you cannot be here!"

Sitting up, Oliver crossed his arms over his chest and looked at her. The sheet fell away to his waist, and her gaze skittered over him before coming back up to meet his. Yes, he was still erect and would be perfectly happy to service her again this morning. Hands, tongue, and cock were at the ready.

“Of course I can. It is my house. Where else should I be?”

“Not in my room!” She looked like she was ready to explode. “I need to pack! You need to do... to be in your room when your manservant arrives... Oh God, he’s going to think you are missing! You have to go!”

The point about Johns was a good one, but his valet was not one to panic. However, he would be rightly concerned to find Oliver’s bed empty and probably begin searching immediately.

Before Oliver tended to that, there was a more pressing matter to attend to.

“You are not leaving this morning. We have things to discuss.” Many things. And, if he had his way, she would not be leaving any time soon, if ever. He’d done some thinking last night and realized that she would be a perfect marchioness.

No one else in the ton would blink an eye at her relative youth. She was firmly on the shelf, but he was a marquess and already had an heir. As a second wife, her age was far less of a consideration, socially speaking. She already fit in with his family and household and knew their secrets. And... well, if he was being honest with himself, he had a mountain of unacknowledged feelings for her that he had been suppressing for one reason or another. Feelings he no longer felt required to suppress.

In fact, knowing she had still been a maiden before last night, despite being part of the Society of Sin, had solidified his intentions. He had been her first, and he intended on being her last. Besides which, waking up next to her in bed for the rest of his life made life seem far more appealing. Something he did not discount since he’d found himself at loose ends after his niece and her husband had taken over as spymasters to the Crown.

“Then you may make an appointment with me to discuss it. I will be staying at the

Hotel Thames.” That stubborn chin went up in the air.

Hell and damnation. It might be time to resort to more serious tactics. But he gave it one last go.

“Stay another day. We will talk, then you can decide what you want to do.” He said it in his most reasonable, wheedling tone.

Unfortunately, she knew him as well as he knew her, and her eyes narrowed at him.

“You think you can convince me to keep staying on? Why do you want me to?”

“Why would I not?” He countered. “What is so pressing that you feel you have to leave?”

For a moment, he thought she would answer him, but then she pressed her lips together and shook her head.

“Impossible. You are impossible. Get out. Go back to your own room. I am packing, then I am leaving. If you are intent on talking to me, I can return for dinner or supper tomorrow.”

Well, that would not do. Once she was out of the house, it would be much more difficult to convince her to come back to it. Fine. Drastic measures it was.

“Diana—” He started to get up, then let himself pale, putting his hand over his heart and falling back into his seat.

“My lord?” She was back at the side of the bed in a moment. “My lord, what’s wrong? What is it?”

“I... I feel odd...” Aware he was possibly overplaying his hand, he let himself fall back onto the pillow, gasping. “I feel so odd. My arm...” He’d seen men fall victim to similar ailments. His heart was pounding rather fast in his chest, but otherwise, he was perfectly fine.

It was a little insulting how easily she was convinced of his oncoming doom.

“Oh, no... I... just wait...” Still holding the sheets around her, she lifted them up without thinking, scampering to her door and throwing it open. “Help! Sylvie... fetch help! We need a doctor!”

They did not. He’d trust her judgment over any doctor’s, but he was content to let her call for help.

That was the entire point of this charade.

Diana

She should not have argued with him. Despite being healed—for far longer than he would likely admit to—he was hardly exerting himself the way he likely used to. How much had last night overworked him? And then arguing with him on top of that... blast.

But she had not thought...

He’d seemed perfectly...

Aware she was feeling far more frantic than she would for any other patient who had ever been under her care, Diana gulped in air as she swung around, heading back to the bed. It was not until she was more than halfway there that she realized the Marquess was no longer palely fallen back against her pillow, clutching his chest.

No, he was propped up on one arm, another of her pillows pulled over his lap to hide his manhood while leaving no doubt that he was completely naked. A smirk played on his face under his tousled, bed-rumpled hair. He did not appear to be a man in dire straits. No, he was clearly, happily, a man who had just scared the life out of her for his own reasons.

“What is wrong with you?” she shouted in extreme aggravation, stomping her foot. The excess of emotions built up inside her needed somewhere to go. It was a good thing she was standing in the middle of her room with nothing around her, or she might have reached for something to throw at the most exasperating man she’d ever met. “Why would you?—”

“What is going on?” The question, uttered in aghast shock, made Diana whirl around. It was not a doctor standing at the door, or even Sylvie... no, it was the Marquess’ niece, Evie, standing there. Behind her stood her husband, Captain Anthony Browne, with a confused frown on his normally impassive face, his gaze glancing over everything in the room, taking in the entire scene.

Even then, Diana did not realize what the Marquess had wrought.

“Good morning, Evie, Anthony. Oh, dear, I’m afraid you have caught us completely dishabille. I have impugned Miss Rutherford’s honor, but not to worry, my lady, I will make things right immediately.” The Marquess’ cheerful tone did not contain any regret.

Evie pinched the bridge of her nose as her husband covered up a guffaw behind a cough. Whirling back to face the Marquess, Diana found that her palm was itching. For something to throw, yes, but also for a flogger. A knotted one. Possibly with some metal worked into the falls. Clearly, she had not beaten him hard enough last night.

“You will what?” She had not known her voice could hit that high a pitch, yet she could not contain it.

“Make things right immediately.” His grin widened. “I’ll procure the special license, and we’ll be married as soon as possible. No harm to your reputation done.”

“We will not.” There. That was better. Much less shrill, much firmer.

“Of course, we will. You would hardly allow me to be so dishonored as to ruin you and not marry you.”

“I am not ruined.” Technically, she was, but she knew Anthony and Evie could keep their mouths shut. There was no reason for them to tell anyone. “No one needs to know about this. You have the most tight-lipped household in the ton. The only way my reputation will be ruined is if you want it to be.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, maybe I do.”

“Uncle—” Evie started to say before the Marquess interrupted her.

“Stay out of this, Evie.”

“You brought me into it,” Evie replied sternly. “At least, I am assuming all the commotion was due to you.”

Since it was, he could hardly gainsay her and stayed silent in the momentary pause before she spoke again.

“This is hardly the way to propose to a lady.”

“It is when the lady in question is planning on leaving the house in the middle of the

night without giving me a chance to properly ask her.” He raised his eyebrow at Diana, as if it were her fault!

She glared back at him.

“You are leaving?” Evie’s voice was a little higher, the question directed at Diana.

Taking a deep breath, Diana turned around to face her again. Blast. That was another reason it would have been easier to go. Evie was now looking at her with a forlorn expression on her face.

She had to know that Diana was no longer needed, yet she did not want her to go.

“The Marquess is fully recovered, and my services are no longer needed. Yes, I was going to move on to new employment.”

“In the middle of the night? What on earth happened last night?” Evie’s brows drew together in a frown, obviously trying to put the pieces together and failing. Without knowing that both her uncle and Diana had attended the Society of Sin masquerade, she was hardly going to be able to come to the correct conclusion.

“Can we discuss this after I have gotten dressed?” Diana did her best to rein in her temper.

A quick departure was clearly out of the question. She was going to need to speak with Evie at the very least. Probably the Marquess, too, though the last thing she wanted to do was talk to him. On the other hand, the things she now wanted to do to him were exactly what had gotten her into this position in the first place. Blast the man.

“Yes, of course.” Evie paused. “Come on, Uncle Oliver. I think we need to have a

word. In the meantime, Miss Rutherford promises not to leave until after she's spoken to us." Evie spoke over the beginning of her uncle's protest.

Diana sighed.

"I promise."

Oliver

Properly dressed for the day, Oliver sat in the parlor with Anthony and Evie, jiggling his foot as his nervous energy ran rampant while he waited for Diana. He'd run down the previous evening's events for them, with some glossing over of the intimacies they did not need the details of, and had been unsurprised at Anthony's amusement and Evie's censure.

After all, Evie had resisted marriage to her husband under just such terms.

To be perfectly honest, Oliver did not expect Diana to say yes—yet—he just had not wanted her to leave before he could convince her to. Desperate times called for desperate measures and all that. Though, if she had accepted that she needed to marry him to avoid ruination, he would have been perfectly happy with that outcome.

If he'd had to continue faking illness to keep her in the house, he would have, but her reaction had opened another avenue for him.

“You appear far too pleased with yourself,” Evie said, shaking her head and narrowing her eyes at him. She slouched on the couch, the way she often did when she was completely relaxed. While she could appear the perfect lady when she desired, it was not her natural state.

Oliver preferred when she was acting the proper lady she should have been brought up as, only because when she was not, it was a reminder of how long it had taken him to find her after her parents' death. She should have never been on the street in the first place, yet she had, for far, far longer than any child should be. Must less a girl

child.

He thanked every deity he could think of that worse had not befallen her than what she'd gone through, but he did not like to be reminded of how he'd failed her. Not that he would ever tell her so because he wanted her to be comfortable more than he needed to be comfortable. It was the least he could do for her.

"I am pleased with myself," he answered her. "Miss Rutherford was going to leave in the middle of the night. Now, she's not. You should be pleased, too."

"I might be pleased that she did not disappear in the night, but that does not mean I approve of your tactics to leverage her into marriage." Evie huffed. "You could not have just asked her?"

"She might have said no." He shrugged as Evie rolled her eyes. "She was determined to leave. If she left, convincing her to return would be much more difficult than convincing her to stay, so I did what I had to do."

"Men," Evie muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose. Her husband chuckled. Anthony was the perfect man for her—steady, lethal, and strong enough to stand by her side. Oliver had not thought that she would ever marry, but she'd chosen the right man.

There were a few more long moments of silence before he heard footsteps approaching the open door, and he sat up straight. A pause in the steps, then Diana appeared in the doorway, and both Oliver and Anthony got to their feet. Something inside Oliver relaxed.

Despite her promise to come and speak with them, part of him had still worried she would bolt.

“My lords. My lady.” She was starkly formal, utterly rigid as she strode into the room. Rather than moving to a seat, she came to a halt several feet away from the furniture, folding her hands in front of her as if she expected to remain standing.

“Oh, do sit down, Diana,” Evie scolded as she sat upright, waving her hand and thankfully saving Oliver from having to give the order. He was not sure Diana would have listened to him at this juncture. “Anthony, close the door, please. We do not want to be interrupted.”

Oliver waited until Diana was seated in the armchair beside his before he took his own seat again. The expression on her face said that she was not pleased with having to sit next to him, but the only other alternative was the couch where Anthony and Evie were sitting, which would have been unnecessarily crowded.

“Now, then. Diana, you wish to leave the household?” Though she kept her tone even, Evie was playing the part of the perfect lady of the ton now, and the imperious way she spoke made it clear she was not thrilled with this development. Since that was all to Oliver’s benefit, he deemed it best to sit quietly and let his niece take the reins of the conversation for the moment.

“I think it best. The Marquess is fully recovered, and my services are no longer needed.” Diana was just as firm as Evie in her statement. She really would make a fantastic marchioness.

“If he is fully recovered, then why was Sylvie running through the hall shrieking that he was dying this morning?” Evie asked, causing Diana to glower at her.

“Because he pretended his heart was giving him trouble.”

“How do you know he was pretending?”

“Because the moment I turned around after I went calling for help, he was no longer clutching at his chest, and he was clearly feeling perfectly fine. He only did that to... to...” Diana’s voice faltered. She had not been looking at him, but now the way she avoided looking at him was pointed rather than because she was focusing on Evie.

“To... trap you into marriage with him?”

Diana huffed and held out her hands in front of her in a helpless gesture.

“As ridiculous as that sounds, yes.”

“Why does that sound ridiculous?” Oliver asked, deciding it was time for him to speak up.

Finally, she turned to look at him, her exasperation with him written clear across his face.

“Because why would you want to marry me?”

“Why would I not?”

“I am a nurse, not a debutante.” She threw her hands up in the air, as if he was being the unreasonable one.

“I would not marry a debutante.” He would likely run roughshod over the poor girl. Diana might be a bit too young for him, but at least she was far older than a debutante, far more experienced, and had already proven herself capable of managing him. Besides, what he liked in the bedroom would horrify a debutante. Diana was exactly what he wanted in that sphere as well. He crossed his arms over his chest. “Are you saying you’d rather impugn my honor than marry me?”

“I did not say that!” She huffed again. “I am not trying to impugn your honor, but there is no need to marry me.”

“I did not say I needed to marry you. I said I wanted to marry you. If anything, you need to marry me to save your reputation.”

“You are impossible,” Diana snapped. “My reputation is intact and will remain so unless you deliberately tell your servants to spread the word, which would be dishonorable.”

Across from them, Evie and Anthony were watching with interest. Oliver was not sure whether or not he was glad of their presence. On one hand, he preferred not to handle matters of the heart in front of witnesses. On the other hand, he had a feeling their presence was the only thing keeping Diana from running.

Before he could retort, there was a sudden loud pounding on the door, making all of them jump.

“My lady! My lord!” At Stims’ urgent tone, Evie and Oliver exchanged a glance, both jumping to their feet, Anthony only a moment behind them. Diana remained seated, seeming to take the moment to recompose herself.

“Come in.” Evie’s voice whipped out in command. Whatever had driven Stims to interrupt them, it would not be small. As soon as the door opened, Oliver knew it was worse than he might have imagined, and a cold chill went down his spine.

The normally unflappable man was pale and sweaty, wringing his hands in front of him with his mouth slightly open in shock.

“My lady. My lord.” His gaze flicked back and forth between Evie and Oliver as though he did not see the others in the room.

“What is it, man?” Oliver asked, bracing himself. His mind was already going through all the events that might have caused such a reaction in Stims, his chest tightening. Was it Elijah? Joseph? Adam? A member of the royal family? A war?

“The dukes, my lord.” Stims’ mouth worked up and down, as though he was trying to find the words but could not.

“What dukes, Stims?” Her tone much more soothing than Oliver’s had been, Evie took a step toward the butler, hands out in front of her as if to reach for his, which seemed to snap him out of it. The lady of the house should not be comforting him, and his pride would not allow it. “What happened to them?”

“They’re dead.”

Diana

Stims’ announcement set the household into a flurry, and the Marquess was in the thick of it, which worried Diana. It would have been the opportune moment to leave, but...

But.

There were things she wanted to know.

Like what happened to the dukes.

Like why he wanted to marry her.

She was also legitimately concerned that he might throw himself into the middle of the crisis and overdo it. While he was recovered, he had handed over the reins of his duties to Evie and Anthony for good reason. Now, he was right there beside them,

cursing, stressed, and barking orders at the people coming in and out of the house.

Eight dukes were dead, along with some of their retinue, killed in an explosion and subsequent fire at a hunting lodge... and that was all they knew. Clarence, Hereford, St. Albans, Bolton, Montagu, Ormonde, Grafton, and Northumberland. All men in their fifties with sons old enough to take over, all of whom were being informed that they'd just inherited their titles. The ton was going to be thrown into complete upheaval as the news spread and gossip was going to be rife.

Information was coming in quickly, but not quickly enough for the Marquess.

"We need to know if it was an assassination." He pounded his fist on the desk, his face turning red enough that Diana had to bite her tongue against telling him to sit down and breathe. Though if he did not calm himself, she would do just that in a minute. "We need to know who it is behind it."

"I know, Uncle," Evie snapped back sharply, flipping through a sheaf of notes that had just been delivered as she stood beside the Marquess' desk.

They'd taken over his study, though Diana sat off to the side, organizing the incoming letters once they'd been read. Notes were coming in from all the many eyes and ears the Marquess had placed all over the city.

"So far, there are no reports of any unusual activity at any of the embassies. If anyone was involved, they have hidden it very well. No one even knew anything had happened until they got our message."

"It's looking more and more like it must have been a truly unfortunate accident," Anthony commented, his brow furrowed as he read through another stack of letters. He did not look up, or he would have seen the Marquess' searing look.

“An accident that left eight dukes dead? What are the odds?” The Marquess looked like he was puffing up again.

“Well, they were all drunk, and there was apparently a good bit of gunpowder at their disposal.” Anthony sighed, shaking his head. “The twits.”

The Marquess opened his mouth, raising his fist to pound it on the table again. He looked like he was about to burst.

“Sit down,” Diana said. At the very least, he needed to be off his feet. Though she knew he’d been faking the trouble with his heart this morning, she was starting to worry that he was going to be in real trouble soon.

“What?”

“Sit. You need to sit and breathe and calm yourself. Working yourself into hysterics is hardly going to be helpful.”

The Marquess narrowed his eyes at her as he lowered himself into the seat. “I am not hysterical.”

“You were getting there. Now, breathe.”

“You should marry me if you want to boss me around this much.”

“You should cooperate if you want to convince anyone to marry you,” she retorted, a flush going through her. Despite everything, he was still bringing that up. She could not help but be flattered, as much as it also frustrated her. Why did he want to marry her so badly?

Could he possibly feel the same way about her that she did about him?

Everything had happened so suddenly, she had not had time to truly think about any of it, and without his reasonings, she did not know what her answer should be. Though part of her realized that her family's financial troubles would be over if she married him, she'd chosen a profession specifically because she did not want to be beholden to a loveless marriage. She would rather work for her income.

On the other hand, he seemed far more invested in marrying her than a man who did not care for her unless he had an ulterior motive. But she could not think of what such an ulterior motive would be.

"You should perhaps try some romance and courtship if you want to convince anyone to marry you," Evie murmured softly enough, Diana almost did not hear her.

The Marquess clearly did, though, and he paused, an arrested expression on his face. Then he looked at Diana, and she quickly ducked her head, her heart pounding so loudly in her chest, she was sure everyone else could hear it.

Romance and courtship. And he's considering it.

She had never been courted before.

Did she want to be courted?

If he's the one doing the courting.

Blast.

This was not the time for this. There was a national crisis at hand, and she was thinking about being courted by her first and only lover. Good grief. Focus, Diana. On the other hand, he was thinking about it, too, which was rather nice.

“I think I will have to go out there to inspect the premises myself,” Evie said almost absently. All the dukes had died in an explosion that set the hunting lodge where they’d been staying on fire. “Ask questions of the survivors. See what I can discover and whether or not it was an assassination or a horrific accident.”

“You are not going alone,” Anthony immediately replied, looking up from his reading.

“Fine. I will take you with me.”

“I will stay here.” The Marquess scrubbed his hand through his hair. “Someone needs to be here.”

Evie shot a pleading look at Diana. She hesitated only a moment before nodding, resigned to staying at Camden House. Without Evie and Anthony there, the Marquess would need support and someone to keep an eye on him. That would have to be her.

Besides, if she left now, it would be harder for him to court her. And Diana was very curious about what that might look like.

What was the harm in staying?

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Oliver

A bloody accident.

That's what all the information they had was pointing toward. A bloody stupid drunken accident. As much as Oliver's head did not want to believe they could have been so irresponsible, so foolish, his gut was telling him that it truly did not indicate an attack on England. Which he should be relieved about, but the fallout was going to be terrible, regardless.

Eight new dukes had just unexpectedly inherited their titles. None of them married, much less with their own heirs. Most of them were still in their feckless stage of life, more concerned with gambling and seducing than running the estates they would now be expected to manage. Oliver was going to have them investigated as well in case someone had sought to receive his inheritance early.

However, doing so in such a spectacular manner that also caused the death of multiple dukes was incredibly foolish... or brilliant, as it would make it difficult to ascertain who the true target was.

Then there were all the social ramifications. Eight newly minted dukes who would all need brides and heirs immediately? This was going to shake the entire ton.

He was simultaneously invigorated and exhausted by the prospect. At least he would not be at the helm for this mess—that was up to Evie and Anthony—yet he had enjoyed somewhat stepping back into his role today. It had shown him that he needed something to do.

Diana was right. He was mostly recovered.

For now, there was very little he could do but wait. They had all the reports they were going to get for today, and Evie and Anthony had gotten on the road posthaste. The faster they could confirm it was an accident, that there were no signs of outside interference, the better off everyone would be. Then all they would have to deal with were the vast social ramifications, and that part of the mess he would happily leave to Evie and Anthony.

In the meantime, he had a future wife to court.

Which was not his forte. Romance, courtship, wooing... not among his strengths. But he was willing to give it a try, especially because Diana had seemed intrigued by Evie's suggestion. And since she'd agreed to stay in Camden House while Evie and Anthony were gone, he had some time.

What did women like?

Flowers.

Poems.

Jewelry.

None of which seemed entirely appropriate for Diana. Especially the jewelry now that they'd spent the night together. He did not want her to think he saw her as his mistress. Once she was his marchioness, he'd be able to deck her in the family's jewels and any other shiny bauble she desired, but right now, he did not think it would send the proper message.

Hm. Carriage rides in Hyde Park. That was something he could manage for the

moment. It would also be a declaration of his intentions, of sorts, to the ton. The gossips were sure to be there all chattering, especially as the dukes' families were being informed of their unfortunate demise. His going through the park with a young lady would cause a stir on a different day—today it would be an afterthought, but it would be noted.

Very well. A drive it would be. And he could send a footman out for flowers. Perhaps a book as well. Diana did like to read.

Oh, and something for her family. That was easy enough. He'd already looked into her family's financials, of course. Before going to look for her, he dashed off several notes.

One to her family's local dressmaker to subsidize whatever her younger sisters wanted for their Seasons.

A note to the Duchess of Windham—thankfully, the duke had not been part of the hunting trip that had decimated the ton's upper crust—to request she take Miss Margaret Rutherford under her wing for the remainder of this Season. The duchess had turned into a formidable force among the ton, but she had a soft heart, especially for younger women from good families without large dowries looking for matches. A personal request from him was likely all that would be needed, but Miss Margaret's circumstances would clinch it. A duchess taking interest in the young lady should spur on some suitors, even with the upheaval to the Season.

He also wrote a quick note to Mr. Sylvester Rutherford to inform the gentleman of Oliver's intentions toward Diana. It did not hurt to establish the family connection. He did not think Diana was of the sort to bow to familial pressure, but he did want her to know he was quite serious about his pursuit of her since she seemed to think she was not a proper prospect for his wife. Informing her father would prove he was in earnest, regardless of what she might think.

As would taking her out in public.

Notes finished, Oliver smiled to himself. Sending a footman off to deliver them and another to procure the flowers he wanted, Oliver went in search of Diana.

She was in the sunroom, reading. At least a book was open on her lap, though she did not appear to be paying much attention to its contents. Instead, she had her hand propped up on her chin, her elbow resting on the arm of the chair she was sitting in. She made a very pretty picture sitting there in her day gown, almost too pretty to interrupt... but if Oliver was going to court her, then interrupt her, he must.

“My Lady.” His smile broadened when she jumped, apparently not having noticed his approach.

“My Lord.” She got to her feet, holding her book in one hand. Her gaze flickered down to where he did not have his cane to support him—no point in further pretense, and he’d rather appear healthy and virile to her—and she raised her eyebrows. “Is there more news?”

“Actually, I was wondering if you might wish to join me for a turn about Hyde Park.”

Diana blinked in surprise.

“Hyde Park?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you want me to go with you to Hyde Park?” she asked suspiciously. It was not as if outings to the park were a typical part of his daily agenda. Though she had insisted he take walks regularly, he’d consistently avoided such places, as they were more for seeing and being seen than for actual exercise. He’d also had no interest in

socializing more than he had to.

But this was an exception.

Still, announcing that he wanted to take her to the park to ensure the ton's matrons understood he was declaring his intentions toward her probably would not go over well. If she had not already cottoned on to the ramifications of driving through the park with him, it was probably best not to inform her just yet.

"I want to see what people are saying about the dukes." It was, after all, the secondary part of his desire to go to Hyde Park specifically. "If you're there, you might catch something I miss. And the ladies will be more inclined to talk to another lady." Especially one he was escorting about publicly. He suspected quite a few of the matrons would be very interested to formally meet and speak with his future marchioness.

Just because she did not understand the implications of such a drive did not mean everyone else would miss it. He could not decide if the fact she had never been a debutante and was not as familiar with all the social overtones of such gestures was a boon or not. On one hand, if she understood what message he was sending by this proposed drive, she might not agree to go. On the other hand, she clearly did not realize this was part of his courtship gestures.

Ah, well.

He would work with what he had.

"I see." Diana pursed her lips, studying him. Something must be telling her there was more to it, but she did not seem to be able to figure out what.

Finally, she nodded, and something inside him relaxed. If nothing else, he could show

her that taking her for a drive was part of his new determination to court her. And by the time they returned home, hopefully, he would have flowers to present to her as well.

“Give me a few minutes to change, then we can go.”

“Of course, My Lady. Take all the time you need.”

Diana

It had been a trap.

Drafted man.

She'd suspected he had some kind of unstated motive for suggesting a drive through Hyde Park. She just could not fathom what it was until she saw the reactions their presence was receiving.

Correction—the reactions her presence beside him was receiving.

Eight dukes were dead, yet the arrival of the Marquess of Camden at Hyde Park with a young woman caused nearly as much stir.

It did not take her long to figure out that some kind of declaration had been made to the ton with this outing. Not when their first few interactions were far more focused on who she was than on the current gossip about the dukes. The Marquess was not helping either.

“Oh, yes, have you met Miss Rutherford? Your cousin, Brackley... her sister is married to his younger son.”

“This is Miss Rutherford from Wiltshire. Yes, her older sister is Baroness Crommey now.”

“That’s right, Miss Margaret’s older sister. I take it you’ve met the family?”

Diana ground her teeth, smiling through her annoyance with him as he paraded her around. She was not going to be pressured into marrying him just because he had introduced her to the ton. If anything, she could see it as a way of meeting prospective employers.

Though, she was not sure any of them would want to hire her. Socially, being hired on as a nurse would be quite a fall from being courted by a marquess.

Dratted man.

That was the refrain that kept playing in her head.

Finally, after Lady Cowper strained the last of Diane’s patience by remarking approvingly that she had the demeanor of a marchioness already, Diana could not hold her tongue any longer. As the Marquess directed the curricule away from Lady Cowper’s barouche, she cleared her throat.

“It is not going to work, you know,” she told him in a low voice. Due to the crowded path, they could not move any faster than a slow walk, and there were ears everywhere.

“What is not going to work?”

“I am not going to marry you just because others think I should.”

“Well, I should hope not. I want you to marry me because you want to.”

Diana opened her mouth. Closed it again. Looked at him sidelong as he pulled up to another landau, this one full of another pack of matrons.

Marry him because she wanted to.

Did she want to?

It truly depended on why he wanted to marry her, and she was... unsure. Yet, Evie had mentioned courting her, and here he was, engaged in some kind of courtship ritual. Perhaps not one Diana fully understood since she had not had the benefit of a Season, but she did comprehend that something was occurring.

Maybe she could ask Evie. Not that Evie had had a Season or a conventional courtship, but she had studied the ton in a way Diana had not. She had never felt the need to because she'd never thought she would be in a position to be courted by a gentleman of the ton.

She felt wildly out of her depth.

Not only that, she felt singled out by his attentions. Which, she supposed, was the point. But what was she supposed to do with that?

“Ladies. Have you met Miss Rutherford?” The Marquess smiled widely as the ladies in the landeau all perked up with interest. Diana sighed inwardly as she pushed a smile onto her lips again... although this time, the smile felt a little more natural.

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Diana

Flowers were part of courtship.

Though it took the housekeeper explaining the meaning behind the bouquets that arrived daily for Diana to understand the full messages the Marquess—Oliver, as he now insisted she call him—was sending her.

Devotion

Admiration.

Love.

Carriage rides and promenades were part of courtship. They'd gone out every day for a week, always under the guise of exercise or looking for information. Both goals were met, but that was not the sum of the outing. London had been rocked by the news of the dukes, yet life went on.

The colors of mourning were everywhere as funerals were arranged, but there were still other colors as well and not just in her bouquets. As she was out with a marquess, Diana wore more muted tones so as not to draw attention to herself, but being beside Oliver always did. If anything, the ton was even more starved for gossip and distraction in the face of so many unexpected deaths in so short a time.

So far, there was no hint of it being anything but an accident.

Despite Oliver's obvious frustration with the lack of information, his impatience with waiting for Anthony and Evie to return, and his daily meetings with the Crown, he carved out time for Diana each day. Every night after dinner, he walked her to her room, where he'd steal a kiss... then leave her there.

Which was far more frustrating than if he'd tried to seduce her again.

Point of fact—she was beginning to want him to try to seduce her again. She was not entirely sure how to go about seducing him, or she would have already done so, but she was beginning to think she would need to make an attempt. The last time had just... happened.

She'd begun fantasizing about punishing him for his manipulations the morning he'd faked his heart issue. Other times, she fantasized about having him focused on her pleasure again rather than her on his pain. She'd wake up from heated dreams, aching to the point where her hand slid down to relieve herself. But it was not the same.

Exactly ten days after the Society of Sin masquerade, Diana decided she'd had enough.

When Oliver walked her to her room and leaned in for the kiss, she reached up to grab hold of the lapels of his jacket... and did not let go when he started to pull away. There was only a moment of hesitation, then suddenly, he was kissing her back so hungrily, so feverishly, he pressed her up against her door. Diana gasped as liquid heat poured through her when his tongue delved between her lips. She kissed him back, deepening the kiss, clutching at his jacket as his hard cock dug into her stomach.

He lifted his head just enough to end the kiss, though his body remained against hers.

"Inside," he said roughly, reaching for the door handle. It swung open. Only then did

he hesitate. "If that is what you want."

"It is." She did not let go of his jacket as she stepped back, pulling him into the room with her. The door slammed shut behind him.

Then his mouth was on hers again, and they were devouring each other as they moved toward the bed. He groaned as she moved her lips down to his chest, nipping at his skin. She wondered if his nipples were as sensitive as hers and set to find out. From his groans when she ran her tongue over the small bud, then dragged her teeth across that same path, she surmised they must at least feel close.

This time, when they made it onto the bed, she rolled so he was on top of her. She wanted to know how it was different.

Less control on her part but also more freedom on his. He took his time, playing with her breasts, licking and suckling, the tip of his cock rubbing along the seam of her cunt while he pleased them both until Diana could not take it anymore.

"Enough... I need you. Now."

She cried out as he thrust inside her, her body quivering as he filled the empty ache. Finally. Moving hard and fast, he focused his entire being on her pleasure, driving her higher and higher. Her muscles clamped around him, liquid heat pouring through her as he moved. With her legs wrapped around him, her heels digging into his flexing buttocks, she could control his movements somewhat.

"More," she demanded as her pleasure rose higher, cresting. "Harder!"

He groaned, dropping his head down, thrusting harder and faster at her direction. The growing ecstasy swirled and exploded within her, and she cried out as she shattered under the sensual assault. Each stroke of his cock sent her on a new wave of rapture,

her muscles squeezing his cock but unable to stop its movements. The friction was an overload of intense sensation, glutting her senses until she screamed his name.

Only then did he slam home within her, groaning as he reached his own completion. Rocking against her, he sent her on another paroxysm of pleasure.

Oliver

The night Diana pulled him into her room changed everything.

For one, it was the last night she spent in her room. That was the beginning of her sleeping in his room, as was due his marchioness. However, he had not brought up the subject again yet, deeming it best to ease her into it. It was not as if she was unaware of his intentions.

And he was courting her. As advised. Since it seemed to be working, he was happy to continue down that path.

However, the third night in his room led to an unexpected place—arms above his head, braced against the bedpost, with his feet about shoulder-width apart, while Diana tormented him with a crop.

She had not forgotten about how he'd tried to trap her into marriage with him.

“Ow!” Bloody hell, that particular stinging thwap had hit very far up his thigh, too close to his balls, which tried to self-protectively retract as much as they could. He pressed his forehead to the wooden post he was leaning against, breathing hard as he fought the urge to reach down and protect his tender sack.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Diana said with false sympathy. The leather flap on the end of the crop tapped against his knee before she slid it up the thigh she’d just smacked, past

the stinging spot where the blow had landed to rub against the sensitive skin between his sack and his anus.

Oliver groaned again, going up on his toes as his confused dick tried to decide whether it wanted to shrink or expand.

“Did that hurt?”

“You know it did,” he growled back. Then bit his lip because the crop disappeared again... when it returned, it landed on his other thigh in almost exactly the same spot.

“Maybe next time you’ll think twice about trying to manipulate me.”

“Seems to be working out for me so far.”

Dammit. Sometimes, he needed to learn to keep his mouth shut. He was utterly brilliant when it came to keeping secrets for the Crown or others. Not a single syllable he did not want to reveal ever passed his lips. However, put a woman with a crop in front of him, and apparently, every filthy thought, every witticism that passed through his head, came tumbling out.

When it came to a woman in the bedroom, he had no sense of self-preservation.

The crop did not return immediately. For a moment, he worried he’d gone too far and that she was going to retreat again. Instead...

“Turn around.” The crisp order made him relax, then tense again at the ramifications.

Presenting his buttocks and shoulders for punishment was one thing—all his most tender bits were on his front side. The side she now wanted presented to her.

He just had to play the dangerous game.

But he also trusted her.

Dropping his arms, he turned around, a little smile playing on her lips. Wearing nothing but a thin chemise that hid very little of her delectable body, her hair down in waves to her waist, she looked like a seductive goddess at whose altar he was all too ready to worship.

Immediately, his cock decided it did not want to shrink, and the little bit of softness that had crept in disappeared as he hardened all over again. She was playing havoc with his senses.

“Lean back against the post and grab it with your hands,” she instructed, that little smile turning utterly wicked.

Bollocks.

He was in trouble. Not just physically, either. She was so bloody perfect, everything he would have dreamed of if he’d dared dream of finding a second wife. His heart was on the line again, and he was not sure how to handle it.

All he could do was show her that he trusted her, court her, and hope that she came to the same conclusion.

That they could be happy together. That they belonged together.

That she should be his wife.

Leaning back against the post thrust his lower body—and his erection—forward slightly. Reaching up to hold on to it left his upper body open and vulnerable to

whatever she wanted to do to him. Stepping forward, the crop swung upward, making him flinch, even though she slowed the movement as the tip actually reached him.

The leather stroked against his skin rather than stinging, but it took a moment for him to realize that it did not hurt. Despite the way his balls wanted to shrivel, his cock was harder than ever, pulsing its need to be inside her. To pleasure her. To give her whatever she wanted.

Unfortunately for his cock, what she wanted right now was to torture him.

The leather slid against his skin, lifting his balls. He sucked in a breath, holding it until the crop moved away—upward to stroke against his cock. The appendage quivered with glee at finally receiving attention.

The crop lifted and smacked against the side of it, making him groan, caught between pleasure and pain. The sting was sharp, yet it felt good against his tightly stretched skin. His dick was happy for whatever stimulation it could get right now but confused as to whether it was being punished or pleased.

She flicked her wrist, and the crop smacked against his shaft on the other side.

Oliver groaned again, going up on his toes as the pain slightly overrode the pleasure. The movement made it look as though he was thrusting his hips forward, asking for more.

“Bloody hell, my lady. If you beat my cock, how am I supposed to satisfy you with it?” His question was answered with a chuckle as the leather flap on the crop swept up his length and tapped against the sensitive tip. Oliver sucked in a breath, waiting on pins and needles to find out if she was going to use more force on that tender part.

“You still look perfectly capable to me,” she retorted teasingly, running the leather

over the head of his dick. The slick fluid leaking from the tip was spread over his sensitive mushroom, making him shudder, his eyes half-closing as pleasure surged, overriding any lingering sting.

Then, it disappeared before snapping against the tip again.

Bloody hell!

He panted through the pain, which was somewhat soothed by the hand suddenly wrapped around his shaft as Diana pressed up against him. As soon as he had enough control over himself, still holding onto the post, he glared down at her as her breasts brushed against him. The thin fabric of her chemise was not enough to hide the hardness of her nipples as they rubbed against his chest.

“Was that really necessary?” he asked grumpily.

Her hand tightened around his shaft almost painfully, her thumb sweeping over the sensitive head she’d just abused.

“Was trying to trap me into marriage really necessary?” she countered.

“You were about to run. I would say yes.”

She laughed softly, going up on her tiptoes to brush her lips over his.

“Then so was this.” She smiled at him serenely, completely unperturbed, as his glare grew harder. “I’m not running now.”

His heart pounded in his chest. Was she saying what he thought she was?

Her hand moved, stroking him, as if to emphasize the fact she was not running.

Retreat was clearly the last thing on her mind.

“My Lady.” This was not the right moment, was it? On the other hand, it seemed as though she was encouraging him. It was surely an improvement upon not asking her at all. “Will you marry me?”

For a moment, she did not answer, though she continued smiling at him, her hand still moving on his cock, leaving him hanging from the post on her whim.

Sadistic woman.

“Yes.”

He was so caught up in thinking she was not going to answer, distracted by the sensation of her hand moving along his length, it took him a moment to register what she’d actually said.

“Yes?” Part of him could not believe he’d heard correctly.

She laughed, giving his cock another hard stroke, as if that was going to do anything but discombobulate him further.

“Yes.” She went back up on her toes for another kiss.

Unable to hold back any longer as emotions surged through him, he brought his arms down around her, pulling her tightly against him. Their kiss deepened as he swung her around toward the bed, and he could feel her laughing at his reaction, but he did not care.

He could not remember having been this happy since... since before Marianne died. And his first wife would not have wanted that. She would want him to be happy.

Diana made him happy again.

Lifting his head, he looked down at her directly in the eyes.

“I love you.” Though he’d expressed the sentiment in flower arrangements, he had not said the words aloud to her until now.

Her lips curved up, eyes sparkling like happy diamonds.

“I love you, too.”

“If this is what cropping my cock gets me, you can do it any time you want.”

Laughter followed them down onto the bed as they rolled until he was on his back, her straddling him. He ran his hands up and down her sides, brushing her breasts and hips as she hovered above him.

“Are you saying you’re going to try to trap me into marrying you often?” she teased, the wet heat of her body teasing his tortured tip.

“As often as I need to.” He grinned up at her. He had no doubt that she would be given ample opportunity to punish him in the future. Something about her brought it out in him.

“I think once will do the trick.”

He did not get an opportunity to respond before she sank down on top of him, making him groan as he thrust upward into the pleasurable haven of her body. She had probably done that on purpose, ensuring she had the last word. He did not begrudge it to her.

Moving atop him, slowly at first, she smiled as their gazes caught. His hands slid up to cup her breasts, massaging them, pinching her nipples, and making her sigh with pleasure as her pace began to pick up. Oliver gave himself over to her, body and soul, moving beneath her, letting her use him as she pleased until she cried out, her cunt clamping down around him. Only then did he let go of the reins of his own pleasure, moving beneath her, her body rubbing against his, until he also reached his explosive climax.

When she fell atop him, her body molded to his, he stroked his fingers down her back as they caught their breath.

His lady. His future wife.

Suddenly, the future looked so much brighter.

2 Months Later

Diana

“I cannot believe you’re marrying a marquess,” Amanda, Diana’s youngest sister, said, dark eyes bright with awe. Her hair was still in braids, denoting her age, but they’d been decorated with flowers, and her dress was the fanciest she’d ever worn, thanks to the Marquess’ deep pockets. Out of Diana’s entire family, Amanda was the happiest to take advantage of his generosity. Her parents were grateful but also worried over abusing his good nature—which, of course, meant they never would.

Amanda did not have the same hesitations, but in that case, Oliver was more than happy to play doting, rich brother-in-law and indulge her relentless litany of requests. Diana was starting to worry she was going to become spoiled.

“Me, either. How am I supposed to top that?” Margaret huffed, though she smiled as she said it. Truthfully, Diana’s new station would only elevate Margaret’s own status in the ton, and the Duchess of Windham had also taken Diana’s younger sister under her wing. Her prospects for her third Season had improved greatly.

“Well, there are eight dukes now in need of wives and heirs,” Amanda pointed out. “A duke ranks higher than a marquess. And they’re all young and handsome.”

“Amanda,” Diana’s mother scolded, looking slightly aghast at her youngest’s plain-speaking or perhaps her lack of sympathy. “They all recently lost their fathers. Marriage is surely not immediately on their minds.”

“It should be. They are all going to need heirs. Besides, I heard some of the old ladies talking. They’re plotting to get the dukes all married off as soon as they’re out of mourning.” Amanda’s chin went up stubbornly.

“Amanda, do not call them old ladies where anyone can hear you. Please.” Mother rubbed her temples, a sure sign she was starting to lose her patience. Seeing that, Amanda sighed and nodded.

“I know, Mama. But no one here cares.” She waved her finger around the room, which was full of Diana’s sisters and Evie, who grinned widely at Amanda. The two of them were already getting along famously.

Evie and Anthony had been the first to know about Oliver and Diana’s engagement, upon their return from investigating the deaths of the current dukes’ fathers. They had been thrilled with the announcement, which was only a little dampened by the unsettling news that their investigation had been inconclusive. Most of the witnesses present had been drunk themselves, though they all agreed that the dukes had been both inebriated and several had been foolishly playing around with a small barrel of gunpowder.

Where the barrel had come from and why they had been mucking about with it remained a mystery, as did the motives, if there were any. The Duke of Hereford was well known for being a reckless twit who had done many foolish things, but there was no indication he’d had anything to do with the accident. Evie and Anthony were already investigating the heirs in case one had thought to advance his position, and Oliver was doing his best not to overly involve himself in the mess, but of course, he could not keep his hand out entirely.

Though he would today.

“We do not care only because we are used to you.” Susannah chuckled as she shook

her head at Amanda. As the oldest, she tended toward indulging Amanda as well, seeing her as the ‘baby.’ “It is rather wonderful, though, is it not? A marquess you nursed back to health, and now, he’s marrying you. It’s like something out of a fairy tale.”

A knock at the door had them all jumping.

“Come in,” Juliana called, stepping in front of Diana. Not that Oliver would be coming to her door right now for anything but an emergency, but Juliana was determined to protect her from bad luck. Susannah might be the oldest, but Juliana still took her duties as an older sister seriously.

The door opened to reveal Josie, Evie’s cousin by marriage. Dressed in a pink gown with pale yellow trim, the beautiful blonde beamed at all of them.

“Are you ready to go?” she asked as she met Diana’s gaze. “The carriage is ready.”

Was she ready? Ready for everything being a marchioness demanded?

She had spent the last two months learning. From Evie, who had made a study of the ton and could blend seamlessly into any group. From Josie, who had been training to be a future marchioness from the moment she’d married Evie’s cousin, Elijah. From Lily, Evie’s friend who had been thrust into the position of countess not long after her wedding. And from their last friend, Mary, who had also married a marquess. All of them, as well as Oliver’s daughter-in-law, Priscilla, had been enthusiastically supportive of their union and jumped in to help.

She was still not sure she was ready for the position. She was not sure she ever would be.

But was she ready to be Oliver’s wife? To spend her days and nights with him, to

bring each other pleasure, to bicker with him for the rest of their lives?

“Yes,” she said. She could not have the man without the position, and while she might never feel ready for the position, she was certainly not going to miss out on a life with the man just because of that. “I am ready.”

Her father was waiting in the front hall, and when he saw her descending the stairs in her cream and gold wedding dress, his hand went to his heart, and his eyes filled with tears. Diana could not help but smile. Both of her parents were so overwhelmed by everything, especially as they had not expected her to ever marry. They were so happy to see her happily settled.

Her father’s reaction was mimicked by Oliver not an hour later as her father walked her down the aisle.

The Marquess stood at the end, waiting for her, his dark eyes suspiciously watery as she walked toward him on her father’s arm. Beside him was his eldest son, Elijah, serving as his best man, and then his other two sons, Joseph and Adam. They grinned at her. All of them, along with Evie, had immediately welcomed her to the family in such a way, she wondered if they had seen the writing on the wall long before she had.

“My Lady,” Oliver whispered when her father put her hand in his.

“My Lord,” she whispered back, making him chuckle.

The ceremony sped by in a blur. She could barely pay attention to anything other than Oliver. It felt like she blinked, then Father Nicholas was pronouncing them husband and wife. Oliver pulled her in for a brief but intensely sweet kiss.

Thankfully, their wedding was not a huge affair, which meant their wedding breakfast

was not overly crowded. Most of Society had left London at the end of the Season, leaving only the political movers and shakers, of which they did have to invite a few. The shocking news about the dukes had emptied the city further, some for mourning and some who seemed to feel a need to check on their own estates after such a shocking event.

None of that was allowed to pall the festivities today. All the wedding guests fit around the huge dining room table at Camden House once it was fully let out. Since it was a more intimate gathering, they eschewed formality. Rather than sitting at opposite ends of the table, she sat at Oliver's right hand while Elijah and Josie presided over the other end.

She did keep her eye on Lady Cross, who was seated not far from Joseph and Priscilla. That situation seemed to have resolved itself nicely with Lady Cross serving as mentor to Priscilla and the couple becoming closer rather than driving them apart... but Diana wanted to make sure. It was only because she was watching the lady that she realized she seemed to be unnerved by the man on her right.

Diana had met him in the receiving line after the ceremony—she knew most of the guests but not all of them.

He was a friend of Oliver's. One who traveled a great deal for business. She suspected he did more than business on his trips and likely returned with a great deal of information for Oliver. Mr. Samuel North, that was it. Wealthy, respected, but not nobility. He'd been perfectly charming during their introduction, but something about him was disconcerting Lady Cross.

Leaning over, Diana crooked her finger at Oliver, who obligingly leaned toward her, causing Amanda to sigh with stars in her eyes. She probably thought they were murmuring sweet nothings in each other's ears, not realizing that she was asking her new husband for gossip. Ah, well, she would not ruin her sister's fantasies.

“Is there something the matter between Mr. North and Lady Cross?”

His gaze shot to the couple before he looked away, so as not to be obvious what they were talking about. He coughed, though it sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

“Ah... well. Samuel was one of her suitors before she became Lady Cross,” he replied in a low voice. Diana’s eyes widened. “Rumor has it, he was the one she loved, but her parents insisted that she marry Lord Cross. Samuel was not so wealthy then, and they did not look favorably on him being in business rather than being a lord.”

Which did not make them so different from the rest of the ton, no matter that quite a few families lived in genteel poverty. They had the titles but not the funds. Over the years, more and more marriages had been made to cross the bridge, but those unions were never received as well. The ton was slowly being forced to dabble in business as well, but they did their best not to discuss such gauche matters. Diana shook her head.

“Poor Lady Cross,” she murmured. Married to a man she did not love because her parents cared more about their position than her happiness. Once again, she was reminded how blessed she had been with her own parents. They had supported the choices she and her sisters made, even though her own choice had been wildly different from what young ladies were ‘supposed’ to do.

On the other hand, here she was, now married to a marquess.

Oliver chuckled.

“I believe ‘poor Lady Cross’ can take care of herself,” he remarked.

Diana pressed her lips together in an amused smile. She and Lady Cross did share certain... proclivities.

She wondered if Mr. North knew what Lady Cross liked to do with her lovers.

“We should not have seated them together.”

“Mmm.”

Diana eyed her new husband. That noncommittal tone was hardly like him. He had helped with the seating chart since she had not known anyone.

“You’re matchmaking,” she accused.

“Hardly. A friend requested a favor, and I saw no harm in granting it.” He grinned as she made a hmphing noise. Leaning over, he brushed his lips over her cheek. “I’d rather have you thinking about me than them, though. We are married now.” The glint in his eyes told her what he was thinking about.

They’d been saving something for the wedding night, a fantasy they both wanted fulfilled. Something he’d never gotten to do before and which she’d never done. In a way, they were both going to be virgins this evening.

Just thinking about it made her smile in anticipation.

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Oliver

His wedding night.

Again.

But this was going to be a very different wedding night from his first one.

Though he did have a blushing bride, she was blushing from excitement. Neither of them was a virgin, yet both of them were taking a step into the unknown this evening. He was far more apprehensive than he'd been for his first wedding night, but that was only to be expected.

After all, he was the one on his hands and knees with Diana behind him, waiting on her whims.

"Ready?" she asked, running her hands over his hips and backside.

Is this what it felt like as a woman when a man did that? He'd been on the other side of this more than once but had never really thought about anything other than his own admiration of a woman's form and his desire to touch her. The caress made him feel both vulnerable and appreciated.

"As ready as I can be," he answered, which was the truth.

Over the past few months they'd played with the hard rubber dilators meant to help one's constitution, but which most of the Society of Sin members used to stretch each

other for different reasons. While bodily health was very important, so was pleasure, and everyone had quickly realized how very useful the dilators were for preparing a receiving partner for anal sex.

Tonight was the first time they'd be using something other than a dilator—a specially commissioned harness and cock from the favorite maker used by the Society of Sin. He glanced over his shoulder to see Diana with the brown leather harness wrapped around her hips, stark and standing out against her creamy skin. She smiled at him, a sadistic light glowing in her eyes.

Bloody hell, he was really going to do this.

Dropping his head back down, he braced his forearms against the bed as he felt the slick head of the false cock push against his opening. They'd used the dilators all week to prepare him, but the lubed cock was thicker than any of them, and he groaned as Diana slowly pushed forward, his muscles spasming in response.

It felt huge.

Invasive.

Utterly arousing.

His cock, which was already hard as it hung beneath him, felt like it stiffened even further, the tip bobbing against his stomach as his muscles flexed.

“That’s it. Good boy,” Diana murmured, rubbing her hands over his lower back, as if trying to ease the ache.

It was not so easily soothed.

She retreated slightly before pushing in again, going a little deeper. The sting of his opening being stretched combined with the throbbing ache of being impaled on the thick shaft. Groaning, his head dropped to his arms as he panted, slowly adjusting to the sensation.

Diana took her time, retreating, then pushing in again. Oil dripped over it as she added the lubrication, easing the friction as she worked her way in deeper. Not that the lubrication helped with everything, but it made it all... slicker. It did nothing for the stretch or how deep he could feel her going inside him.

“Bloody hell.” He groaned again as he felt the leather harness press against his backside, her smooth skin hot against his.

She was all the way in.

He felt so utterly, devastatingly full. The dilators had prepared him, but they were in no way comparable.

Especially because now Diana’s hands were completely free to touch him. Free to run over his hips and thighs and down to his groin as she bent over him. The effect was it felt like she went even deeper just as her hand gripped his cock, which pulsed against her palm. The sensation of her pumping his cock while she was deep inside him was indescribable.

“Diana...” He could barely gasp her name, he was so overcome by the assault of new sensations, the glut of pleasure that rippled through him, slightly tinged with discomfort. But he welcomed the discomfort. Enjoyed it even. Because he was doing it for her, to give her what she wanted. Every ounce of pain was an homage to his lady.

And for her... anything.

Diana

So this was what it was like.

The emotional charge she'd felt as she slid the harnessed cock into Oliver was immense. His groans. His shudders. Every reaction she elicited from him made her feel heady with power. Not only that, but she was dizzy with how much he was willing to give her. The things he was willing to do for her.

His cock throbbed in her hand, but she could not keep the position if she was going to actually move.

Pumping her hand several times to torment him, she released his cock and straightened up again, pulling back to thrust back in. Not that he seemed to mind the loss once she began moving again. Her own bottom was empty, but he was making her curious as to what it was like.

Something to try.

Later.

Right now, she focused on moving firmly enough to be enjoyable for both of them but not so roughly that she hurt him more than he could handle. There was a fake cock inside her as well, and her pussy squeezed it as she moved, helping her to keep the one she was using in position. Her clit rubbed against the harness, giving her physical pleasure as she slid the fake cock back and forth inside him.

The more she moved, the easier it became as he adjusted, opening for her. The tension in his body relaxed, and he began to push back against her, shuddering with pleasure every time she bottomed out. Diana grasped his hips, realizing this was as much a necessity as a pleasure, as she began to move harder, faster.

Her own pleasure increased with every thrust as his moans filled the air, accompanied by her own gasps of pleasure as her pussy clenched around the shaft inside her. Their passion grew together, punctuated by heated moans and shuddering tremors. Her fingers dug into his hips as she moved, her ecstasy growing with every passing moment.

He reached his pinnacle first, braced on one arm, the other beneath him grasping his cock. Diana could feel it, the sudden resistance as his ass clamped down around the cock, the way his body trembled under her hands as he cried out. Hearing his pleasure, knowing she'd done that to him, pushed her over the edge as well.

Thrusting fully into him, she pressed her own body against his, rubbing so her clit was stimulated by the harness as hot waves of rapture rolled over her. They moved through her, filling her, until they exploded like bursts of fireworks from her core moving outward.

Utterly undone, Diana slumped over Oliver, panting for breath.

She had not been sure what that would be like, so she'd had no expectations. It was like nothing she could have imagined, even after watching so many others engaged in similar activities.

“Bloody hell,” Oliver groaned from beneath her, which summed up her own feelings rather nicely.

Taking a deep breath, Diana gathered herself and straightened, so she could slide out of him—causing another long moan. Her pussy trembled around the cock inside her. Unlike Oliver, these did not deflate after climax, which meant the one inside her continued to make its presence known.

No longer pinned in place, Oliver rolled to the side so he was lying on his back, still

breathing heavily as he stared up at the ceiling. The fake cock bobbed in front of her, and Diana went to work on the laces, pulling it off of her so she could snuggle in beside him—on the opposite side of the wet spot he'd left on the bedding.

Cradled in the crook of his arm, her lower body still throbbing gently from the pleasure, she ran her fingers through his chest hair.

“Wife,” he said with pure satisfaction, stroking his fingers down her shoulder and upper arm.

She laughed.

“Was it everything you'd hoped it would be?” Despite feeling very sure of the answer, she still wanted to hear him say it.

“Oh, yes.” He sighed happily, shifting slightly so she could tip back her head to meet his gaze. “And for you?”

“Yes. Although I am not entirely sure what I expected, it was quite enjoyable.” She studied his expression. “What did it feel like?”

One eyebrow went up.

“Why, are you curious?” The interest on his side was clear.

Diana shrugged her shoulder, considering the question. Seeing his reactions had certainly made her wonder what it would be like, but she was unsure if she wanted to actually follow through. Still, she was undeniably intrigued.

“Perhaps. Though, not tonight,” she teased.

“Hmm... are you sure?” A wicked grin grew on his face, and he shifted slightly, turning so he could lower his lips to hers for a kiss. “Could I attempt to change your mind?”

Diana laughed, even as his hand roamed over her body, caressing her breast and tweaking her nipple to hardness again. Her arousal hummed back to life as he touched her. She could not deny that her body still felt as though there was satisfaction to be had.

Letting him push her onto her back, she moaned as he moved his hands and mouth over her body, arousing her desires all over again before he finally lowered his mouth between her legs. His tongue flicked over her folds, teasing her as she began to gasp and writhe, reaching down to twine her fingers through his hair as her pleasure grew.

She was extra sensitive now, especially the places where the harness had rubbed, and Oliver used that to his advantage. Licking, suckling, he had her moaning and writhing for him, her pleasure growing and growing... Before she reached her peak, his mouth moved back up her body.

Impatient, she reached down to grasp him by the shoulders, pulling him atop her, so she could kiss him as his cock slid inside her. He moaned against her lips as they joined together. Diana moaned with him when he pushed in to the hilt, his body rubbing against hers, trapping her swollen clit between them.

It was better, this being their second time. There was no frenzy, no driving urgency, as Oliver made love to her, worshiping her body with his. Slow, dragging strokes that ended with him grinding against her, stimulating her. They kissed, long lingering kisses that enhanced the intimate moment between them.

Eventually, their passions grew too large to be ignored, and the pace of his strokes increased. Diana tilted her hips, lifting her lower body up to meet him, both of them

moving together to the finish.

This time, she reached it first, crying out as her sensitive flesh hummed with sensation. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, heels into the backs of his thighs as she writhed in passionate bliss. Feeling her coming apart beneath him, he buried himself inside her, groaning as she shuddered and writhed against his body, bringing him to his own climax.

They panted together, joined so closely, she could scarcely tell where she left off and he began.

This time, when he rolled, it was to set her atop him, so they could lay still entwined, savoring each other's presence.

"Wife," he murmured, stroking a gentle finger down her back.

Diana smiled against his chest. She had not dreamed she could ever be this happy, but here she was, with everything she'd ever wanted. It was like a fairy tale come true... if fairy tales ever involved such extravagant perversions.

"Husband," she replied, relishing his title as much as she did her own.

"I love you."

"And I you."

There were no other words needed, only the sweetness of his touch as he kissed her again. She met his kiss with her own. Her first lover. Her last lover.

Her bliss.

Samuel

The Society of Sin.

A fascinating but fitting name for the company he now found himself in. He'd gained entrance by way of introduction to its leader, the Marquess of Hartford—more commonly known to the ton as “Rex.” He was certainly the king of this society, where he reigned supreme with his marchioness, the woman who had tamed the lion, by his side.

Though Rex might be less wild after marriage than his former reputation indicated, the whole of the Society of Sin certainly was not.

Lady Greywood's home was the current locale for the evening, and it was filled to the brim with debauchery and depravity. Everywhere Samuel looked, there were people enjoying themselves and each other in a multitude of ways.

He was no prude, but he'd never seen anything like this before.

Whips, ropes, floggers, paddles, multiple groups of people, as well as couples, all fornicating with abandon—although some of them were merely caressing or even cuddling. It boggled the mind. Certainly not the usual tonish event, though he recognized many lords and ladies. To his surprise, the wealthy but unlanded were also well represented. He was far from being the only businessman present.

Several of his contemporaries gave him a knowing nod if they recognized him, which he returned. They likely assumed he was here for the same thing they

were—pleasure.

But Samuel was here for one reason and one reason only—or rather, one person.

Lady Catherine Cross.

He hated thinking of her title and married name because it was a constant reminder that he had not been enough. She had bowed to her parents and married Lord Cross. Samuel could not even hate the man because he seemed to have taken good care of Catherine, then obligingly left her a widow before Samuel had married another.

Truthfully, Samuel had nearly decided not to marry at all.

He'd been away on business when Lord Cross died. It had taken time for the news to reach him. Time for him to wrap up his affairs, then even more time to travel across the ocean back to London. Then he'd needed to settle in and prepare himself to see her again.

Opportunity had beckoned when they were both invited to the Marquess of Camden's wedding. He'd called in a favor after all the information he'd provided Camden with over the years during his travels and managed to secure a seat beside her.

Seeing him had unsettled her. He'd realized it immediately. Even enjoyed it a little. As much as he wanted to be understanding about the choice she'd made—the decision not to defy her parents and Society and risk becoming a total outcast by running away with him—he still held some bitterness in his heart.

Though, as he walked around watching the various activities the Society of Sin engaged in, he was getting some ideas about how to overcome that...

Especially because seeing her again had confirmed that his feelings had not gone away. They were both older, different, yet the moment he'd set eyes on her, he'd felt

like he'd stepped backward in time. She'd changed, grown, and was as beautiful as ever. Maybe even more so. He'd felt like a fumbling young man again before he'd recovered.

He wanted to see if they could make things work now that they were older and wiser.

Pausing to watch one of the gentlemen spanking his lady, her moans and sobs filling the air as their audience grew, he felt his cock stir. Yes, he could think of several ways Catherine could make things up to him. And since she was already a member here, his suggestions could hardly shock her.

"Very nice," murmured the gentleman next to him. He was not talking to Samuel, though, but to the gentleman on his other side.

"She's taking it well." The other gentleman glanced at the clock on the far side of the room. "Lady Cross should be starting soon."

Samuel just barely managed to keep from jerking in reaction to Catherine's name. Of course, he'd known she was supposed to be here this evening, but it still startled him. The fact that the other two gentlemen were apparently awaiting her arrival made him bristle.

He'd realized, of course, that she'd likely had lovers after her husband's death. If he'd doubted it, the point would have been driven home the moment he'd walked into tonight's event. But he did not care how many lovers she'd had in the past. He was no hypocrite.

However, he did strenuously object to her taking another lover now unless it was him.

He did his best to appear relaxed as the two gentlemen beside him continued to observe the scene in front of him. When they left, he would follow. Presumably, they would lead him to Catherine.

And then what?

Would he be willing to watch her with another gentleman?

See another man turn her over his knee... and more?

Samuel took a long, deep breath, letting it flow out of him as he forced his muscles to relax. She was not his yet. He had no claim on her. However, he would do whatever he had to in order to court her again, and that included watching her with another man tonight if that's what it took. Though, he vowed to himself, it would be the only time such a thing would occur.

He was determined to win Catherine over, to stake his claim in a way that he had been unable to before. Now that they were older, she had her title and did not need her parents' permission to marry him.

She might not want to, anyway.

Marrying him would mean losing her title, but he would cross that bridge when he came to it. Marriage was not a necessity, just a preference. The important thing was having her in his life, in his bed, where she'd always been meant to be.

He was so lost in thought, he almost did not notice when the gentlemen began to move. Thankfully, he was not that far gone in his head. Waiting a moment to make it less obvious he was following them, Samuel casually turned and trailed behind them.

They seemed to know exactly where they were going, and they led him to the library, where a space had been cleared.

In the middle of it was Catherine and another gentleman... wait... was that?

The Duke of Kent. One of the dukes unaffected by the recent tragedy. And he was

stripped down to his underthings while Catherine remained fully dressed, standing beside him with a tawse in her hand.

What is happening?

Samuel blinked in confusion, hanging back behind the gentlemen he'd followed in, so Catherine did not see him immediately. Which had not been his original plan. He'd wanted her to see him, to know he was there, to be aware of his presence... but now, he wanted to know what was going on. This was not what he'd expected to see. A small, niggling suspicion stirred in his chest—one he was not yet ready to acknowledge.

She was entirely focused on Kent, as if the audience was not present.

“Your Grace, would you like to tell everyone what you’re doing here this evening?” Her voice lilted up at the end, as though it was a question, but her tone made it more of a command.

The man sighed heavily and lifted his head. Grief and guilt etched the man’s face, making it clear why his bearing was so heavy.

“I was supposed to be on that trip. I should not be here right now.” No one needed to ask what trip he meant. “I was supposed to be... there.”

Dead. He meant that he was supposed to be dead.

Catherine shook her head.

“You are exactly where you are supposed to be,” she said gently but firmly.

“But if I’d been there, maybe I could have prevented...” He wrung his hands in front of him.

“Or you would be dead, too. We have no way of knowing what happened.” Still gentle but even firmer in her tone. Rumors were running rife through the ton, but nothing had been confirmed. The Crown had announced it was investigating, of course, but so far, there had been no official announcements or conclusions, which meant the theories became wilder with every passing day.

“I just need to feel something.” The fervor with which he said the words struck something in Samuel’s soul. He could practically feel the emotions emanating from the grieving man, the desire to scream and cry and the utter inability to do so.

It was how Samuel had felt when Catherine chose to bow to her parents’ wishes.

“Now that, I can certainly help with,” Catherine said, reaching out to rub the man’s shoulder. A small dart of jealousy struck Samuel, but considering the man’s emotional state he could hardly begrudge him the offered comfort. “Hands on the desk.”

Kent moved forward, bending at the waist to place his hands on the desk that was just off to the side of where he and Catherine were standing. The suspicion in Samuel’s chest was growing and blooming as he watched, making him feel increasingly uneasy.

He knew where this was going.

He just could not believe it.

But he could not deny what he was seeing when Catherine got into place behind Kent and lifted the tawse, swinging it to land across Kent’s buttocks.

The sound of leather against Kent cracked through the room, making Samuel’s body jerk at the impact, as if he was the one receiving it.

Kent groaned, the sound caught somewhere between pained and relieved. As if it hurt him, but he was also getting exactly what he needed. Catherine paused for a moment, reaching out to run her hand over his lower back. Her expression was one of both concern and confidence, and something about the entire scene caused something new to stir inside Samuel. Something he had never felt before, and he was not sure what to call it.

Then she stepped back, and the tawse came down again.

And again.

And again.

Kent groaned each time, panting between the blows, hanging his head until he finally cried out and began to actually cry. A murmur went through the audience, full of sympathy and concern. Catherine paused again, stepping forward and putting her hand on Kent's lower back, bending down to his face.

They exchanged some words, far too low for Samuel to hear. Some of those closest to them might have been able to discern what was being said, but if they did, none of their expressions changed. After a moment, Catherine nodded and stepped back. Lifted the tawse again.

One of the gentlemen in front of Samuel sighed, leaning toward his compatriot. Despite their low tones, he was close enough to overhear their conversation again.

"She is so good." The man sighed again, a heartfelt expression of longing and regret. "I was hoping to engage her this evening."

"Kent needs it more."

"I know. Perhaps next time."

Their words confirmed the suspicion that had bloomed in Samuel, making his heart sink. This was not a one-time thing for Catherine. She was not looking for a man to put her over his knee for discipline. Or for punishment. She was the one who meted it out.

Bloody hell.

Through the light fabric of Kent's underthings, Samuel could see how his skin glowed red from the tawse. He felt as though he'd been struck in the chest.

He wanted Catherine.

He did.

But at what price?

How far was he willing to go?

Could he do this?
