



# Enchanting the Duke (Their Wicked Ways #5)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Miss Chrissy Westfall's life is full of surprises lately.

First, her sister married a duke.

Then she discovers what sort of entertainments are provided at the gaming hell her new brother-in-law owns, Sutcliffe's.

But the most shocking event comes when she reads some of her grandparents' love letters.

No, wait.

She wasn't truly shocked until her sister told her that yes, those stupefying activities they described were, in fact, possible, and most were quite enjoyable.

Gabriel Palmer, Third Duke of Nomansland and co-owner of Sutcliffe's, overhears the sisters' discussion and volunteers to demonstrate any of those activities Chrissy desires.

He has never met a woman as delightful as Chrissy, and getting to know her becomes a challenge he can't resist.

He quickly comes to realize none of his rakish expertise will charm his way into her heart.

What's a duke to do to get a pretty young lady to notice him?

**Total Pages (Source):** 16

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:48 am*

London

Chrissy Westfall's slender fingers brushed away the cobwebs as she lifted another dusty crate away from the damp walls and ceiling where rain had been leaking through the roof.

The attic, with its steeply sloped ceiling and musty air, was a forgotten realm above the cozy rooms below where she lived with her grandmother.

Today, however, it demanded attention. The incessant dripping from the ceiling in a corner of the kitchen below announced a leak that could no longer be ignored.

"Truly, this place is a repository for all things ancient and neglected," Chrissy murmured to herself.

She had taken upon herself the task of clearing out the water-damaged items to see how bad the damage was, but what began as a chore now teased her curiosity.

Among the crates, she spied an ivory-colored hatbox, edged in faded gold.

It was oddly pristine compared to its surroundings, and something about it called to her.

With a gentle touch, Chrissy lifted the lid.

Inside, nestled atop a cushion of aged silk, lay a bundle of correspondence tied neatly with a ribbon that time had worn from crimson to a delicate rose hue.

She hesitated, aware that these were private words shared long ago, but her curious nature got the best of her as usual.

Carrying the hatbox with reverent care, Chrissy descended the narrow attic stairs to the solitude of her bedchamber. In the privacy of her room, she settled into an armchair by the window, the soft light illuminating the yellowed papers as she unfurled the ribbon.

The script was elegant yet bold, dancing across the page with confident flourishes—a stark contrast to her own plain, utilitarian hand. Her eyes danced over the date at the top of the first letter, several years before her mother's birth.

Dearest Eleanor , the letter began, and Chrissy's heart fluttered seeing her grandmother's name.

The letter continued with news of business travels, descriptions of distant cities and their bustling markets.

And there, at the bottom of the page, was the signature.

Yours evermore, Jonathan . Her grandfather, who had died before she was born, was alive on the page in her hand.

Transfixed, Chrissy flipped through the letters, one after another, each a picture of a life once vibrant and filled with adventure. These were missives of love and longing, sent across miles and inscribed with the deepest affections of her grandfather's heart.

With each letter, her understanding of love—what it could be, what it should be—shifted and expanded like the petals of a rose reaching for the sun.

She felt a connection to the grandfather she had never known and the grandmother so

different to who she was now, a bridge across generations formed by ink and paper.

And as she read on, Chrissy couldn't help but dream of a love as grand and enduring as theirs.

Chrissy unfolded another delicate sheet, her fingertips grazing the aged paper as if it might crumble under the weight of her touch. As her eyes traced each line, the words took on a more intimate tone.

Your lips, my dearest Eleanor, are the sweetest petals of my existence. Yet it is the hidden blossom in the soft folds between your thighs that calls to me in the night...

Chrissy's breath caught, her cheeks flushing with a heat that seemed to ignite from within.

She stumbled over the next words, unversed as she was in such explicit terms—a kiss bestowed not upon lips that smile but on those that remained unseen?

Her heart raced as she pieced together the implications of the kiss described.

One placed upon a woman's most private area.

A rush of scandalized curiosity mixed with embarrassment surged through her, and for a moment, she acknowledged she was spying on a moment never meant for her eyes.

Her own innocent experiences, mere pecks on the cheek or fleeting brushes of the lips, stood in stark contrast to the fervent desires penned by her grandfather's hand.

She dropped the letter in the box and replaced the lid, then glanced nervously toward the door when she thought she heard footsteps in the hallway. But no, it was just her

nerves and the whispers of the past, now silenced by her trembling fingers.

She looked around her room for a place to put the box.

She dared not reveal her discovery to her grandmother.

To do so would be to admit she had trespassed into the sacred privacy of their love and passion.

Perhaps the attic was the best place for the box, in an area not exposed to the leaking rain.

When the hatbox was safely tucked away, Chrissy left the attic, the door closing softly behind her.

She wished she could shut away the questions that now fluttered through her head.

Did all married couples do what Grandfather described?

Some of those intimacies were beyond imagining.

She shuddered and squashed the idea that her parents...

her sister and brother-in-law? She gasped. It was too shocking to think about.

Then Chrissy remembered why she'd gone to the attic. The leaky roof. She should send a note to her brother-in-law, the Duke of Abingdon, and ask for him to send someone to repair the leak.

That was what a sensible person would do... write the note so she didn't have to look Abingdon in the eye while she still had the words of her grandfather's letter lingering

in the back of her thoughts.

But Chrissy was never sensible, unless she had to be.

And how would she ever learn the answers to life's questions if she didn't ask?

Her sister Dinah might berate her for reading the letters, but in the end, Dinah would explain such matters, Chrissy was certain.

Thus, going to her to ask for help with the roof was the smart thing to do.

Certainly, it was much smarter than asking Abingdon, whom she probably could never look in the eye again. She was likely to burn up in a heated blush if she saw him, thinking of what he might have been doing with her sister.

If she left now, she could catch Dinah in the office of Sutcliffe's Gentlemen's Club, the gaming hell owned by Abingdon and his two friends, the Duke of Nomansland and the Duke of Dainsfield.

Chances were good of catching her alone in her office, since her husband would be busy elsewhere.

She could never even think about asking questions about what her grandfather wrote with any man in the room.

Her embarrassment would be bad enough with just her sister there. But her curiosity would never let the subject drop without answers.

\* \* \*

After receiving a shopping list from Grandmama when she mentioned going to ask

Abingdon for help with the roof leak, Chrissy slipped through the bustling streets of London on her way to see Dinah.

The late afternoon sun cast its golden glow upon the pavement, dappling it with light and shadow.

She clutched her small reticule in her hands, the excuse of seeking a repairman for their leaky roof at the forefront of her mind.

Their father had been an employee of the club until his death, and Dinah had helped him with the bookkeeping when he'd taken ill.

Dinah was smarter than Chrissy in so many ways, and was so much like their father.

Even after she married Abingdon, she insisted on continuing her work.

She didn't trust others, either in their honesty to report income without pocketing any for themselves, or in their ability to notice when the books didn't match the nightly reports.

So, the Duchess of Abingdon continued to monitor the books of her husband's gaming hell.

As Chrissy neared the notorious club, a carriage pulled to a stop in front.

She paused, the imposing facade of the gambling club looming before her—a world away from the quiet domestic life she knew.

The grandeur of the establishment was a beacon for those who reveled in games of chance and the perilous dance of seduction in the private rooms available for whatever entertainment the members might desire.

The door of the gleaming black carriage opened, and the Duke of Nomansland, one of the three owners of the club, stepped down from his coach with the grace of a predatory cat.

The air seemed to thrum with his presence, an invisible energy that drew the eye and held it captive.

Beside him, a vision of feminine allure stepped down, a young woman who was every inch his match in poise and beauty.

The lady's gown was a work of art, crafted from the finest silk, it appeared.

Its ivory hue was pure and lustrous, setting off her companion's dark attire in stark contrast. Embroidered roses cascaded along the hem, each petal meticulously stitched in shades of blush and crimson, as if plucked from the garden of Eden itself.

They twined around her form, a delicate dance of flora that hinted at the lush curves hidden beneath.

The gown seemed a bit formal for the time of day, Chrissy thought, but she was certainly no expert on fashion standards for the ton .

Chrissy watched, mesmerized, as the couple approached the door of the club, the woman's gown swaying gently with each step. The duke offered his hand, assisting her through the entrance, his touch lingering just a moment too long, suggesting intimacies Chrissy wondered about.

The memory of her grandmother's letters and their enticing words sent a flush of warmth across Chrissy's cheeks.

With a deep breath, she gathered her courage, drawing the shawl tighter around her



shoulders against the chill that hadn't thing to do with the afternoon air.

She stepped forward, resolute in her quest for knowledge.

## Page 2

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Chrissy's gaze lingered on the retreating figures until the door closed behind them, the lady's gown taunting her.

She felt the weight of her own modest frock, suddenly coarse and dull in comparison.

A sigh escaped her lips as she envisioned herself draped in such finery, the object of affection from a man as dashing and noble as the Duke of Nomansland.

She was in such an awkward position after her sister married the Duke of Abingdon.

Dinah and Abingdon were more than generous, giving Chrissy an allowance, buying her clothes more suited to the sister of a duchess, but Chrissy wasn't comfortable accepting money she hadn't earned taking in laundry, as she had done since she was old enough to work at her grandmother's side.

As grateful as she was that she and Grandmama no longer needed to work thanks to Abingdon's generosity, she would never feel as if she had the right to enter the club through the main door, rather than the trade entrance, nor did she go to the modiste or haberdasher unless Dinah dragged her along.

The way Nomansland hadn't even noticed her presence, when he knew who she was, demonstrated her place in Polite Society.

"Such fancies," she chided herself softly, tucking a loose strand of hair into her bonnet.

The very notion that someone of his ilk could look twice at a girl like her seemed as

far-fetched as the stories in the novels she so adored.

Yet, in the secret garden of her heart, she nurtured a tender hope that bloomed with reckless abandon—a dream of a love so fierce and consuming that it would eclipse all others.

The idea of marrying a tradesman, respectable though they might be, paled compared to the grand romances she conjured in her quiet moments.

The thought of the upcoming Season sent a flutter through her chest. Dinah had promised to present her to Polite Society, and her first ball was only a week away.

The prospect both thrilled and terrified her, for it was not just a parade of elegant gowns and sparkling jewels, but a gateway to the kind of love she yearned for—one that rivaled the passion her grandparents shared, the depths of which she had unwittingly discovered between the lines of their old correspondence.

After making her way around to the side entrance, where employees and tradesmen entered, she descended the narrow staircase to the basement of Sutcliffe's.

Her heart pounded with a mixture of anxiety and curiosity.

She knocked on the door of her sister's office and opened it when Dinah bade her to enter.

Dinah hunched over an accounting book, her brow furrowed in concentration as she traced a line of figures with the tip of her finger.

“Good afternoon,” Chrissy ventured, her voice tentative amidst the solemnity of the dimly lit room.

Without raising her eyes from the ledger, Dinah offered a distracted hum of acknowledgment—a mere shadow of a greeting.

Chrissy watched her sister, noting how the flickering candlelight cast a golden hue on Dinah's auburn hair.

She was a study in contrast, working in the basement office when she should have been at home preparing for morning calls with a bevy of Society matrons.

Chrissy hesitated to speak, the tantalizing words of the scandalous letters burning in her mind's recesses.

Yet, watching her sister work, she accepted now was not the time or place to divulge the contents of the attic discovery, nor to discuss the confusion that tangled within her like wayward ribbons.

Her fingers laced together in a knot of nervous energy.

"I hate to disturb you. I came because we need some assistance at home. The roof has sprung a leak, quite a persistent one. I hope we can repair it before it rains again."

Finally, Dinah glanced up, her expression softening as she registered her younger sister's presence fully.

"Oh, Chrissy, I'm sorry to ignore you. You should speak to Abingdon about it.

He'll know who to send for the repairs. If he's not in his office upstairs, just leave a message with his secretary. "

"Thank you." She turned toward the door.

Dinah's voice cut through the quiet, halting her sister's departure. "Remember, you must take the servant stairs. The club is no place for an innocent such as yourself."

Chrissy paused, her hand on the cool doorknob, and turned back to meet Dinah's earnest gaze. There was a severity in her sister's tone that brooked no argument, a command that spoke of an understanding of their world that Chrissy hadn't yet grasped.

"Under no circumstances are you to wander through the guest areas. It can be... overwhelming for the uninitiated," Dinah said.

"Of course," Chrissy promised, nodding her compliance even as a flutter of curiosity teased at her senses. What secrets did Sutcliffe's hold that required such caution? Her heart quickened at the thought, but she pushed the sensation aside. She wouldn't risk embarrassing her sister.

"Oh, and don't forget, Nomansland will join us for supper this evening, so dress appropriately."

Nodding and refraining from rolling her eyes, Chrissy slipped through the door and made her way to the narrow, dimly lit staircase that servants used to move invisibly through the club.

All of the gowns Dinah had generously ordered for Chrissy's Season were delivered earlier that week, so she had many lovely choices.

Normally, she wore one of her prettier gowns, also bought by Dinah, when she and Grandmama joined her sister and brother-in-law for supper.

Well, to be fully honest, she usually wore a blue sprigged gown that she particularly loved.

But she wasn't a complete bumpkin. When Abingdon's partners joined them for a meal, she took special care with her appearance.

Her maid was quite efficient with hairstyles beyond Chrissy's basic bun.

Despite the warning, part of Chrissy longed to catch just a glimpse of the forbidden opulence that lay beyond the plain wooden walls that enclosed the stairwell.

Surely a glimpse of the gaming rooms wouldn't ruin her in the eyes of Society.

She wasn't likely to see anyone here that she might cross paths with at Almack's, she didn't think.

When she reached the landing with its door to the main floor, she hesitated. Just a peek. No one would notice her. Chrissy would never know.

Shaking her head at her lack of discipline, Chrissy opened the door to the lobby of the club and stepped inside.

As expected, the space was empty, so no one would discover her.

The ordinariness of the room disappointed her.

The gilt-framed paintings were landscapes, not satyrs and nymphs.

Nothing about the décor spoke of lewd, lascivious acts being enjoyed within these walls.

"Miss Westfall?" a male voice spoke nearby.

She turned to see the Duke of Dainsfield standing near a hallway opening. She

cringed. “Your Grace. I, er, I’m looking for Abingdon.”

Dainsfield smiled. “Ah, I see. Shall I take you to his office?”

“No, thank you.” Her cheeks were burning, and she wished she’d simply asked Dinah to pass along her request. “My sister doesn’t want me to be seen here.”

He chuckled. “Wise woman. Take the stairs behind that door to the next floor, and you’ll find our offices.” He motioned toward the door she’d just come through.

She curtsied, offered her thanks, and scurried back into the stairwell.

Abingdon was indeed in his office and promised to have a man come to repair the roof first thing the next day.

Chrissy didn’t linger, having already proven her inability to avoid temptation, so she quickly left.

She might never know what the private rooms at Sutcliffe’s looked like, but if they were decorated like the lobby, her imagined version was much more intriguing.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:48 am*

Gabriel, the Duke of Nomansland, checked his watch as his carriage came to a stop in front of Abingdon House.

Relieved to see he was on time, he tucked the watch back into his pocket.

He hated to be late, no matter his destination, and an overturned cart had required his coachman to perform some delicate maneuvers to continue on their way.

Thompson, the butler, awaited him at the door to the elegant town house and greeted him with a deferential bow. "Good evening, Your Grace. His Grace is expecting you in his study."

Nomansland nodded, handing off his hat and gloves. "Thank you, Thompson. I'll see myself there."

As he made his way through the familiar hall, his thoughts drifted to the evening ahead. He looked forward to a pleasant supper with his friends and business partners and their wives, perhaps followed by a game of cards and some fine brandy.

Passing the morning room, however, he was brought up short by a feminine voice that drifted through the partially open door.

"But Dinah, I don't understand. How could anyone possibly bend that way?"

Nomansland froze, recognizing the sweet, lilting tones of Miss Chrissy Westfall, Abingdon's young sister-in-law. His brow furrowed in confusion at her words.



“Well,” came Dinah’s patient reply, “it does require a fair bit of limberness. But I assure you, it’s quite pleasurable when done correctly.”

Nomansland’s eyes widened in shock. Surely they couldn’t be discussing...

“I see,” Chrissy said, her voice filled with innocent curiosity. “It’s so shocking reading Grandpapa’s description of some of his... er, passions. I didn’t know such things were even possible!”

A low chuckle escaped him before he could stop it.

He quickly stifled the sound, not wishing to alert the ladies to his presence outside the door.

His mind reeled at the unexpected turn of events.

Sweet, naive little Chrissy Westfall, inquiring about bedchamber activities?

The thought sent a jolt of heat through his body.

Shaking his head to clear it of such improper musings, he continued on his way to the study. He couldn’t help the small smile that played about his lips, however. It seemed Miss Westfall was full of surprises.

As he knocked on the study door, he resolved to pay closer attention to the young woman at supper. Perhaps she wasn’t quite as innocent as he’d always assumed.

He entered Abingdon’s study, his mind still picturing Miss Westfall in some of his own preferred positions.

As he settled into an armchair across from his friend, unbidden thoughts were causing

him to harden.

He imagined her soft, naked body beneath his, teaching her the very acts she'd been so innocently inquiring about.

"Blast," Nomansland muttered under his breath, shifting uncomfortably. He couldn't entertain such notions about Abingdon's sister-in-law. It was entirely inappropriate, not to mention dangerous territory.

"Is something amiss?" Abingdon asked, raising an eyebrow.

Nomansland cleared his throat. "No, no. Where is Dainsfield? Are he and Milly running late?"

"They won't be coming. It will just be the four of us."

He nodded, sitting in the chair opposite his host. "Now, what's this concern Dinah has about Sutcliffe's?"

Abingdon leaned forward, his expression grave. "It's young Allen Penbrook. The fool's run up debts of over five thousand pounds in the last month alone."

"Good God," Nomansland exclaimed. "His father will have his hide."

"If he finds out. The question is, do we cut him off now or give him a chance to recoup his losses?"

He considered this, absently running a hand through his hair. His business instincts urged caution, but he also remembered his own youthful indiscretions. "Perhaps a warning first? Cut him off if he doesn't heed it?"

As they debated the merits of each approach, Nomansland found his thoughts continuously straying to Miss Westfall. He wondered what other surprises the seemingly innocent miss might hide beneath her proper exterior.

The butler's discreet cough interrupted their discussion. "Dinner is served, my lords."

Nomansland rose, his muscular frame unfolding from the chair. As he followed Abingdon to the dining room, he steeled himself for the encounter ahead, given the visions he'd been enjoying. The moment he entered, his eyes were drawn to Miss Westfall like a moth to a flame.

She sat across from his assigned seat, her golden curls framing a face that seemed to have matured since he'd last seen her. Was that only four or five months ago? Her blue eyes sparkled with an intelligence he hadn't noticed before, and the gentle curve of her neck drew his gaze lower.

"Good evening, Your Grace. I trust you're well?" she asked, her voice melodious.

He took his seat. "Quite well, Miss Westfall. And yourself?"

As she answered, he hung on her every word, imagining those lips wrapped around his erection.

He shook himself mentally. What had gotten into him?

This was Miss Westfall, for heaven's sake—the same girl who'd tripped over her own feet at Abingdon's wedding.

She was the younger sister, he knew, so probably not older than three-and-twenty, but she had a naivete about her that made her seem younger.

As their eyes met across the table, he felt a spark of attraction. Her cheeks flushed a becoming pink as if she felt it too, and she quickly looked away. He blinked, surprised by the intensity of the moment.

Dinah's voice drew him back into the conversation happening around him.

"Abingdon insists on serving clear turtle for the opening course, though it's frightfully out of favor since that incident with Lord Spatterfield's chef.

" Her eyes twinkled with mischief as she set aside her spoon in favor of her glass.

Abingdon looked up from his methodical dissection of a bread roll. "I maintain that nothing fortifies the nerves for an evening of Polite Society like turtle soup. Particularly when one's younger sister is about to be unleashed upon said society in a matter of days."

The comment drew a flush to Miss Westfall's cheeks.

She reached for her own glass, nearly knocked it over, and then composed herself with a forced laugh.

"I suppose I ought to thank you for your confidence, sir." Her voice quavered with an odd mixture of dread and delight, the tremor barely perceptible unless, like Nomansland, one watched her as if she were the rarest specimen in the room.

He did. Every line of tension in her neck, the gentle twist she gave to the corner of her linen napkin, was mapped in his mind with the thoroughness of a cartographer. He felt the slow burn of something sweet and deeply protective ignite within his chest.

"Don't let my husband intimidate you, Chrissy," Dinah said, but the protest was

largely performative.

Her tone suggested nothing on earth delighted her so much as a little intimidation.

“It’s the nature of these things to seem monstrous until the night itself.

Afterward, it will all be anecdotes and handshakes, and you’ll wonder why you ever worried. ”

Miss Westfall sighed. “But will anyone even notice me? What if—what if I fail to make an impression? Or worse, what if I make the wrong sort of impression?”

“I assure you, my dear, you are wholly unforgettable,” Nomansland said, unable to restrain the warmth that crept into his tone. “And as for impressions, I’d wager at least half of Mayfair will be in attendance for the express purpose of being impressed by you.”

Dinah cackled. “Ha! See, Chrissy? Even the duke is reduced to empty flattery in the face of your nervousness.” She reached over and patted her sister’s hand, which was, at present, in the midst of wringing her napkin into a noose.

A liveried servant appeared at Nomansland’s elbow, exchanging the soup course for plates gleaming with a fan of thinly sliced salmon, garnished with sprigs of dill and the daintiest triangles of buttered toast.

Dinah ate a bite before continuing. “I have completed the list for the assembly. There are precisely one hundred and twenty-four names, not counting the necessary additions for chaperones and the handful of country cousins Abingdon insists upon for balance.”

“Who’s on the list?” Miss Westfall asked, eyes wide as she speared a morsel but

seemed too nervous to actually eat it.

Dinah clasped her hands. “Let us see. Lady Rivenhurst, naturally, and her dreadful twins. The Duke and Duchess of Carroway. Lord and Lady Pembroke. The Munsterleys, the Cordings, the entire Scarrington set, though I debated whether to leave out Lady Arabella—her penchant for inappropriate limericks is legendary.”

Nomansland watched with rapt interest as each name landed like a pebble in Miss Westfall’s composure.

With the mention of Lady Rivenhurst, she only nodded.

At “the Munsterleys,” her hand hovered a fraction higher above her plate, and at “Lady Arabella,” she stifled a giggle that sounded more like a hiccup.

“I expect Carroway to be a model of decorum, if only to counteract the duchess’s reputation,” Abingdon mused. He dabbed at his lips and said, “And Lady Rivenhurst’s twins are rumored to have sworn off capers this season. Or so she claims.”

“She claims a great many things,” Dinah replied dryly.

Miss Westfall was quiet for a moment, her gaze fixed on her glass. “It’s so many people,” she said finally. “I feel as if I’ll forget all their names by the end of the first dance.”

Nomansland leaned forward, as if there wasn’t a table between them. “If you forget every one of their names, simply remember you are Miss Westfall, the brightest ornament of the night. No one will mind.”

“But what if?—”

“Then you may rely on me to keep you afloat. I shall be at your side,” he said.

## Page 4

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She smiled at him, the expression shy but more genuine than any he'd yet seen in this company. The urge to reach across the table and take her hand was almost overwhelming, but he contented himself with brushing his thumb over the rim of his glass and drinking in the sight of her.

The main course was next, roast beef carved at the table, with Yorkshire pudding puffed to golden heights, and a side of spring peas.

Abingdon picked up his fork. "I think what my wife means, Chrissy, is that there is no one on the list who will wish you ill. At least not openly, and not unless you dance better than Lady Arabella. Then, you may expect daggers and poisoned bon mots."

"Dancing," Miss Westfall said faintly. "I must practice, Dinah. I'm sure I've forgotten everything."

"Nonsense. You spent as much time with the tutor as I did last year." Dinah sipped her drink, then added, "If you appear to have difficulty at any point, we'll let Nomansland cut in. He's rather skilled, I'm told. He'll make you look graceful."

Nomansland inclined his head, matching her slyness with an even gaze. "I flatter myself that I am competent, at least."

"And who, precisely, is expected to partner me for the opening set?" Miss Westfall tried to sound nonchalant, but the anxiety in her voice betrayed her.

Dinah's lips twitched. "Why, the most eligible man in London, of course. You will be led out by Nomansland himself. I would settle for nothing less."



Miss Westfall's flush returned, brighter this time. She lowered her gaze, but not before Nomansland caught the quick, shy glance she shot his way, as if she were afraid to look too long at the sun.

The meal wound to a close with a procession of puddings, syllabub, trifle, and something with candied violets that Dinah insisted was all the rage in Vienna.

Nomansland watched as Miss Westfall poked at the desserts, sampling but never quite finishing a portion.

Her nerves hadn't abated, and as the servants cleared the plates and left them to their port and candied fruits, he resolved to speak to her privately before the night was through.

For now, he contented himself with watching her.

Every slight movement, a tug at her sleeve, a dart of her eyes toward Dinah, spoke of the tremulous excitement and dread that coiled within her.

She was about to be cast into the churning sea of London society, and Nomansland realized, with a quiet start, that he wished nothing more than to be her anchor.

He would be her anchor. Even if it meant following her into the very heart of the storm.

Nomansland's attention drifted to Miss Westfall's lips as she worried the rim of her glass with her thumb. He imagined the taste of port there, the faint sweetness of dessert on her tongue. His hand, wrapped around the bowl of his own glass, tightened as if by reflex.

"Lady Arabella is the one with the laugh," she said quietly, seeking his confirmation.

“The one that could wake the dead.” He was rewarded with a small, delighted snort of laughter.

“You mustn’t listen to a word she says,” Dinah said. “Lady Arabella is both a menace and a marvel, and she will test your forbearance in ways you cannot imagine.”

“I like her already,” Miss Westfall declared, her voice gaining strength. “It must be thrilling, being a menace.”

Nomansland watched the line of her jaw as she spoke. “Careful. I have it on good authority that you yourself can be quite dangerous when sufficiently provoked.”

She looked at him then, full on, and for a heartbeat, he saw something in her expression that was not innocence but challenge. “Have you ever seen me provoked?”

He smiled. “Not yet. But I rather look forward to it.”

The tension between them was palpable, a current running under the surface of the table like a live wire. Dinah shot a sideways glance at Abingdon, who merely raised an eyebrow and poured himself more port.

“Honestly,” Dinah said, “the two of you flirt like schoolchildren behind the hedgerow. I expect to find you pulling her braids next.”

Nomansland was not ashamed. “It is a time-honored tradition, is it not, to torment the lady one admires most?”

“And how many braids have you pulled in your time, Your Grace?” Dinah retorted.

“I was always more inclined to... other forms of mischief.” As he spoke, he let his

eyes drift over Miss Westfall's hands, then upward to the fine arch of her brow.

For a moment, silence pooled at the table. The only sound was the low click of a servant refilling glasses. Miss Westfall was the first to break it, with a small, breathy laugh. "You're all mad," she said, but her eyes sparkled with a reckless delight.

Nomansland wanted to do something mad, himself. Wanted to drag her from the table, press her against the wall in the corridor, and kiss her until her hair tumbled loose and her cheeks burned. He wondered, almost idly, what she would taste like. Honey and port and trembling anticipation, probably.

Instead, he sat back and regarded her with a hunger he made no effort to disguise. "You have a lovely laugh, Miss Westfall."

That got her. She went beet-red from the roots of her hair to the hollow of her throat, and he was overcome by an urge so vivid he felt it in the tips of his fingers. He forced himself to remain still, to savor the moment.

"Thank you," she said, barely audible.

Abingdon cleared his throat. "You will not dally with my wife's sister."

Nomansland sobered. There was the crux of it. Miss Westfall was not his to enjoy at any time.

The air in the room grew tense. Dinah rose and beckoned to her sister. "Come, let us plot your domination of the ton and leave the men to their cigars."

Miss Westfall slid from her chair with a sudden, graceless haste, nearly knocking her knee against the table as she did so. As she turned to go, her eyes darted to Nomansland and lingered there, luminous with confusion and something else.

He watched her go, every muscle taut. He felt as if he'd just gone ten rounds in the ring, all from a single evening's conversation.

Abingdon chuckled. "You have the look of a man about to do something exceedingly foolish."

"I suspect you're right," Nomansland replied, his gaze still fixed on the doorway where Miss Westfall had disappeared. He finished his port in one swallow, savoring the heat that lingered long after the glass was empty.

Let the men of the ton come. He would gladly fight them all, bare-knuckled, for the right to see her blush again.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:48 am*

On the night of Miss Westfall's debut, Nomansland surprised himself by arriving early at Abingdon House.

He rarely attended balls. Now that his two business partners were married, he used the excuse of being needed at Sutcliffe's during the busy night hours.

Good business practices said at least one owner should be present to flatter the clients, to offer a free drink here or there, and to do anything in his power to encourage them to spend—or lose—more money.

As he joined the press of guests making their way up the staircase to the uppermost floor, he again questioned the sanity of his being there.

Yes, he was expected to dance with Miss Westfall, and he'd never disappoint a young lady, especially not the sister of a close friend.

But his presence implied a willingness to be social, to dance with other young ladies...

ones who might put more importance to being singled out by him.

He was not in the market for a wife.

Nor was he interested in entertaining himself with young ladies of the ton .

He enjoyed the company of several widows to meet his carnal needs, and could invite one of them should he wish to attend the theatre.

They had no expectations when it came to his time, his future.

They knew better than to imagine he'd choose one of them as his duchess, when he finally decided to procreate.

Given all that, he should dance with Miss Westfall and make his excuses, wish her well and be on his way.

She and her sister expected her to marry well, and likely sooner than later given her age.

Some of the young ladies making their debuts this Season were four or five years younger than Miss Westfall, and hoped to marry in the next year or two.

He never understood the haste, the urgency, but he couldn't deny it existed.

When he finally squeezed through the doorway into the large, crowded room that had been cleared for dancing.

Nomansland looked for Abingdon or Dinah so he could make his presence known.

Instead, he saw Miss Westfall conversing with a pair of young ladies.

The two guests then left, leaving her momentarily unattended near a towering fern.

His gaze lingered on her as he approached, admiring how bright her delicate features appeared this evening.

"Miss Westfall," he said, stepping into the small oasis of privacy the plant afforded them.

She turned, her eyes widening just a fraction before schooling her expression into one of polite interest. “Your Grace, thank you for coming.”

He hated how the proper look took the light from her eyes.

Where was the mischief he knew she enjoyed?

She should be glowing with excitement, with the promise of a wonderful night ahead.

He offered her a smile, one that he knew could set hearts aflutter yet hoped would put her at ease.

“You know, the other night when I was here for supper, I could not help but overhear you discussing... certain letters.”

He watched the play of emotions cross her countenance—interest piqued behind a veil of decorum. There was the dance of innocence and awakening curiosity that drew him like a moth to a flame. His hands fisted as he told himself to walk away now, while he could still face Abingdon without guilt.

His cock twitched at the notion he might enjoy a bit of pleasure with Miss Westfall.

“Indeed, those letters seemed to have left you with questions,” he continued, leaning in ever so slightly, his tone conspiratorial. “If you are interested, I find myself uniquely positioned to offer insight into the... activities they describe.”

The suggestion hung between them, bold and unchaste, yet delivered with a gentleman’s care not to overstep. He saw the momentary catch in Miss Westfall’s breath, the indecision that fluttered in her gaze before she masked it with a practiced social grace.

“Such an offer is most unconventional, Your Grace,” she said, though her words lacked conviction, her curiosity betrayed by the quickening pulse at her throat.

“Life is nothing if not an adventure, Miss Westfall,” he murmured, his eyes never leaving hers, inviting her to consider the possibilities. “And I assure you, I’m a very attentive guide.”

\* \* \*

The realization hit Chrissy like a rush of cold air on a warm summer night. He had been privy to her most private musings. Her eyes shot up to meet his. A blush, fierce and unbidden, scorched her cheeks as though she’d been caught in an indecorous act rather than mere conversation.

“Your Grace,” she began, her voice trembling slightly under the weight of her conflicting emotions. “I—I must apologize. That discussion wasn’t meant for?”

“Please,” he interrupted gently, his presence commanding yet comforting as he closed the distance between them, his stature seeming to shield her from the rest of the world. His voice was a low thrum that seemed to resonate within her. “There is nothing to apologize for.”

She bit her lower lip, the innate rebellion against the strictures she’d always known warring with the desire that sparked at his proximity.

She should not be having this conversation, certainly not with a man whose reputation preceded him—a man who was, by all accounts, as experienced as she was naïve.

“Miss Westfall, I don’t intend to discompose you. I merely wish to offer you the opportunity to seek answers to the questions those letters have undoubtedly stirred



within you.”

His words were a balm, soothing the turmoil that churned inside her. He hinted at desires, the kind she’d only dared think about in the dead of night, and Chrissy felt the pull of something daring and wholly improper.

“Answers?” Her voice was a breathless echo of the tempest inside her. “But such things are not discussed so openly, sir. And to experience them...”

“Is to understand them,” he finished for her, his smile softening the edges of his chiseled jawline. “Life is too fleeting to be left wondering ‘what if.’ And I assure you, I’m not seeking a mere dalliance. My interest lies in unlocking the passions you’ve yet to discover.”

Her heart raced, each beat an affirmation of her burgeoning curiosity. Here stood a man, a duke no less, offering her the key to a world she had only dreamed of. Could she dare step beyond the line drawn by her upbringing?

His hand lifted, and the brush of his fingers against her cheek was like the softest velvet. A stray lock of her hair yielded to his touch as he tucked it behind her ear with a deliberate gentleness that belied his strength.

A shiver cascaded down her spine, unbidden yet impossible to ignore. There was a raw honesty to his gesture that transcended the mere physical. It was as though he sought to connect with her very soul, to lay bare the secrets they were both poised to share.

“Your curiosity,” he continued, his voice now a husky whisper that only she could hear, “it’s a flame that begs to burn brighter. I see it in your eyes, and it calls to me.”

Her breath hitched, caught on the precipice of a desire she couldn’t name. His words

wound around her, a siren's call promising a world of sensation she had never known, yet suddenly yearned to explore.

“Let me be the one to guide you through this discovery. To honor your courage with my own,” he said in low, hypnotic tones.

Chrissy's resolve wavered, danced on the edge of propriety and passion. In his eyes, she saw not just the flames of desire but the embers of something deeper, something that spoke to the part of her that wanted more than the sheltered existence she had always known.

She glanced at the room beyond their little cove where her sister's guests continued to arrive.

This ball was being held in her honor. She couldn't simply vanish.

Dinah would kill her. How long would this instruction that the duke promised take?

Maybe he could explain just one or two things, and she could be back before anyone looked for her.

“Yes,” she breathed out, the word a fragile vessel carrying the weight of her decision. “But only for a moment or two.”

Nomansland's expression transformed, his smile blooming like the dawn after a night of shadows.

He exuded a confidence that was both thrilling and terrifying, for it spoke of things She had only dared to dream of in the privacy of her chamber.

With a nod that sealed her choice, she placed her trembling hand in his.

His fingers closed around hers with a gentleness that belied the strength of his boxer's physique. It was a touch that offered not just guidance but partnership, a silent vow to navigate the waters of passion together.

Glancing first at the crowded doorway, Nomansland instead motioned toward a door leading to a balcony outside. "Come. Pleasure awaits us."

They were trying, as best as possible, to remain unnoticed as they moved toward the door on the other side of the room.

It was a fool's errand. There was no version of this world in which a duke and his young companion could blend in at the season's most anticipated assembly.

The string quartet tuning in the corner was like a ticking clock.

"Do you think we'll make our escape?" she whispered.

He leaned in, his voice low and velvet-rich. "If we do, I suspect the penalty will be dire."

"I would rather face a firing squad than a receiving line."

He smiled, slow and predatory. "Perhaps you'll be shot with compliments. Or, if you prefer, I could absorb them on your behalf."

Chrissy was about to reply when Dinah materialized, an apparition in lavender silk and pearls, her smile bright enough to strip the lacquer off a sideboard. "There you are! Hiding will not do. The first dance is imminent, and you are the star of the evening. Everyone is waiting."

"I'm certain everyone is waiting for the supper announcement," Nomansland said,

but Dinah ignored him.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:48 am*

She looped her arm through both his and Chrissy's and steered them toward the center of the room. "It's time to start the dancing."

Chrissy's stomach twisted in a knot, her pulse leaping as she realized there would be no reprieve, no pause, no opportunity to gather herself.

She felt the burn of every pair of eyes in the room, some sizing her up as a rival, others as a curiosity, a few as an opportunity.

The string quartet shifted in their seats and raised their instruments.

Guests moved aside, clearing a space for dancing. Nomansland took his place, turning to her with a courtesy so practiced it bordered on satire. "Shall we?" he murmured, and she placed her hand—gloved, trembling, and impossibly small—against the expanse of his palm.

Her feet were lead, her heart, vapor, as they waited for the music to begin.

She glanced at Dinah, who beamed from the edge of the crowd like a mother sending her firstborn off to sea.

For a moment, Chrissy wished Grandmama had come, but she felt too out of place amongst society matrons, she'd said.

"It will be over before you know it," Nomansland said, his voice pitched for her alone.

“I may faint before the end.”

He squeezed her hand, the pressure gentle but grounding. “You will do nothing of the sort. If you stumble, I will catch you.”

The music started, the first strains of a waltz so sweet and lilting it seemed to drag her forward by the breastbone.

Nomansland stepped into the lead, guiding her hand to his shoulder and placing his own at the small of her back.

She felt the heat of him through layers of silk and stays, the quiet power in his arm as he drew her in.

“I’ve never danced a proper waltz, except with the tutor,” she confessed, panic threading her voice.

“You need only follow. I’ll do the rest.”

And then they were moving, his steps sure and measured, hers tentative but quickly swept into the current of his rhythm.

The world narrowed to the click of his shoes against the floor, the sweep of her skirts, the impossible nearness of his face.

He looked at her, never breaking eye contact, as if the rest of the room had ceased to exist.

She missed the first turn and stumbled. He caught her, his arm tightening, his breath a promise at her ear. “Trust me.”

She did, somehow. She let her weight shift into his lead, let herself be spun and swept in a pattern she could not remember learning. The music bloomed around them, but it was only a backdrop to the dialogue unfolding in every glance and subtle touch.

“You are dazzling them,” Nomansland said quietly, as they spun past a knot of onlookers.

“I think they’re watching you.”

He grinned, his teeth white and wolfish. “Let them. I only want you to watch me.”

A flush crept up her neck, as if he’d lit a fire under her skin. His hand on her waist was possessive, anchoring. Every movement telegraphed a message, none of it appropriate for public consumption.

They moved as one, faster than seemed possible, and she realized suddenly that she was flying—not stumbling, not faltering, but gliding with a grace that belonged to him but was now, briefly, hers. She risked a look at the crowd and saw faces blurring past, all attention fixed on them.

He leaned in, his voice barely audible over the music. “Do you know what I think about, when I hold you like this?”

She shook her head, unable to speak.

“I think about how much I want to ruin you for all other men. I want you to remember with every step that it was my hands that taught you.”

The words hit her like a shot of whisky—scandalous and intoxicating. “That’s improper.”

He laughed deep in his chest. “Everything about me is improper, darling.”

She shivered, but not from cold. His thumb moved in slow, deliberate circles at her waist, an echo of the motions he’d made at dinner when he toyed with his glass. He was teaching her the dance, but also something else—something raw and exhilarating.

“After this,” he said, “I will take you to the terrace. I will kiss you until you forget your own name. And we’ll discuss those other items of interest.”

“People will see,” she protested, even as her pulse beat a frantic tattoo.

“They will see a duke walking with a beautiful girl. They will not see the things I want to do to you.”

The music crested, and he guided her into a last turn, their bodies pressed close. For an instant, there was nothing but the wild hammering of her heart, his eyes locked on hers, the world reduced to a trembling line between them.

Then it was over. The music stopped. The spell broke.

There was applause, loud and sustained, but Chrissy could barely hear it. She was dizzy and breathless, still clinging to his hand. He led her off the floor, but didn’t release her—would not, it seemed, until she signaled the end of the illusion.

Dinah met them with a look of smug triumph. “See? I told you. Not a single misstep.”

Nomansland bowed over Chrissy’s hand, his lips nearly brushing the inside of her wrist. “She was perfection.”

Chrissy’s cheeks were burning, but she managed a passable curtsy. “Thank you, Your



Grace. For not letting me fall.”

He straightened, warm blue eyes flicking up to meet hers. “I will never let you fall,” he said, and Chrissy felt the promise of it settle in her chest like a stone.

She barely remembered the next several minutes—the blur of congratulations, the string of suitors angling for her hand in the next dance, the endless march of faces and names.

She was still in the waltz, still reeling from the feel of Nomansland’s breath at her ear and the knowledge of what he’d whispered.

When she finally looked for him, he was across the room, speaking with Dinah and a group of gentlemen. He caught her gaze and held it, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

He mouthed, “Terrace. Soon.”

The thought sent a tremor down her spine. She wondered how many more dances she’d have to endure before she could slip away and let him keep his promise.

She didn’t know how she would survive until then.

“Miss Westfall, the next is mine,” said Viscount Something-or-Other. Chrissy couldn’t be sure she’d heard his name when Dinah had introduced them earlier.

“Lovely.” She followed him toward the quartet where the sets were being formed.

The viscount was an indifferent dancer but an enthusiastic talker, guiding Chrissy through a quadrille while regaling her with gossip about the guests.

She did her best to pay attention, nodding where required, but her eyes flicked

constantly toward the perimeter of the room, searching for a flash of blue coat or a familiar angular jaw.

Nomansland had vanished, replaced by a throng of admirers and the occasional chaperone, but she could feel his presence—like a storm cloud promising thunder, somewhere just out of sight.

The viscount's hands were damp, and his attempts at witticisms grew more frantic as the set wore on.

Chrissy, still half-dreaming of the waltz, found herself longing for the firmness of Nomansland's arm, the certainty of his step.

When the dance ended, she curtsied and thanked her partner, who somehow looked both disappointed and relieved.

The next young man to claim her hand was taller and more somber, with the pallor of a man who rarely saw daylight and the conversational skill of a banker.

He trod on her toes twice, apologized, then did it again.

Between missteps, he recounted in excruciating detail the lineage of every guest present, pausing only to wipe his brow with a handkerchief.

Chrissy's mind wandered. She imagined Nomansland in the card room, dealing out aces and dispatching his rivals with the same lethal calm he applied to everything else. She wondered if he was thinking of her, if he regretted surrendering her to this parade of mediocrity.

At the end of the dance, as her partner escorted her back to Dinah, she glimpsed the duke by the refreshment table, glass in hand.

He was watching her—no, watching the men who orbited her, his gaze as sharp as the cut of his coat.

When their eyes met, he didn't look away.

He simply lifted his glass in a silent toast, and the gesture sent a flare of heat through Chrissy's chest.

"You're the sensation of the evening," Dinah said, linking arms and steering her toward a new group of gentlemen. "Lady Carroway is apoplectic. She expected her own daughter to dominate, but I daresay you've eclipsed every eligible girl in London."

Chrissy smiled weakly, exhausted by the attention. "How many more?"

"Three more sets before supper. After that, you may rest your feet. Or retire with a headache, if you must. But I do hope you'll stay at least until the quartet leaves."

Another partner presented himself, this one younger and flush with hope.

He gripped her hand too tightly and whispered a string of compliments so flowery she worried they might stain her dress.

He danced passably well, but every conversation was an uphill battle.

He stammered and blushed and stared at the ceiling whenever she tried to meet his eye.

The cycle repeated, dance, bow, hand-off to the next in line.

Chrissy felt like a prized foal at auction, trotted out for inspection by buyers with no

intention of purchase.

Each new suitor compared unfavorably to the duke.

Their hands were clammy, their banter insipid, their stares either too timid or too bold.

Between dances, she glimpsed Nomansland again.

He was leaning against a pillar, talking with Abingdon and a pair of officers, but his eyes sought her out at every possible moment.

Once, when a partner spun her close to his quadrant of the room, he reached out and grazed her gloved hand as she passed—so swift and subtle it might have been an accident.

But the current that passed between them was no accident at all.

By the time supper was announced, Chrissy was both starving and sickened by nerves. She moved through the buffet in a daze, unable to eat more than a bite or two. The crush of guests was overwhelming, and the noise seemed to bounce inside her skull with a physical force.

She found herself at a small table in the corner, flanked by two girls who were whispering furiously about the latest scandal. They greeted her with brittle politeness, then continued their conversation as if she were part of the furniture.

She could not help but look for Nomansland. He was nowhere to be seen. For a wild moment, she thought he had left, perhaps bored by her parade of failures or frustrated by the constraints of the evening.

“Looking for your duke?” one of the girls asked, her voice edged with envy.

Chrissy startled. “I—no, not at all. I was only?—”

“It’s all right to admit it,” said the other, her eyes narrowing with sly curiosity. “I would do the same if I were you. He’s quite the catch. And rather dangerous, if the stories are true.”

Chrissy flushed, not least because the stories probably were true. “He is... very kind. He’s a business partner of my sister’s husband. He’s not courting me.”

The girls exchanged a glance that said they didn’t believe it for a second. “If you say so,” said the first, turning her attention back to her plate.

After supper, the music resumed, and so did the dance. The crowd had thinned, the atmosphere now heady with wine and anticipation. Chrissy wondered why Nomansland didn’t take her away. Her absence wouldn’t be noticed, she was certain.

Her partners became more daring, one or two pressing closer than strictly necessary, their hands lingering at her waist or drawing her in for a whispered aside.

She endured it with a patience she had never known she possessed, her mind drifting to the promise Nomansland had made—terrace, soon—and wondering if it had only been a tease, a fever dream conjured by the heat of his breath and the strength of his hold.

She didn’t see him again until the last dance was called. By then, her feet ached and her nerves were frayed to the edge of collapse. She was standing by a window, inhaling the chill night air, when she felt the warmth of a body beside her.

“Miss Westfall,” Nomansland said, and she turned to find him at her side, closer than

decorum would allow.

“Your Grace,” she replied, her voice thin.

“I have come to claim the final dance.” He offered his hand, palm up, and she took it without hesitation.

The music was a waltz, the room quieted to an intimate hush. He drew her in, and this time, there was nothing tentative in his hold—no half-measures, no sense of audience or performance. They moved together as if they were the only people left in the world.

“You endured admirably,” he said, his lips nearly touching her ear.

“I survived. But only just.” She let her cheek graze the wool of his coat.

He chuckled, the sound low and private. “You’re stronger than you know.”

They moved in silence for a while, the only sound the muted shuffle of shoes and the fading strains of the quartet. She allowed herself to relax, to melt into his arms, and for the first time that night, she felt safe.

When the music faded, he didn’t immediately release her. He bowed, then lifted her hand to his lips. Through the thin layer of her glove, she felt the press of his mouth—deliberate, lingering, a promise sealed in heat.

“I must bid you goodnight, but I shall see you again soon, Miss Westfall. Very soon,” he said, his voice hoarse with something she couldn’t name.

His eyes met hers, and for a moment, she thought he might kiss her outright, consequences be damned. Instead, he straightened, released her hand, and melted into

the crowd—leaving her trembling, breathless, and certain of only one thing.

This Season promised to be the best moments of her life.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:48 am*

A few mornings after the ball, the sun through the lace curtains was an anemic London gold, pooling on the carpet like spilled tea.

Chrissy curled on the settee in Grandmama Westfall's drawing room, reading the first page of a novel for the third time, her thoughts persistently snagging on the memory of a blue-eyed duke.

The house was quiet, most of the staff dispatched for errands, Grandmama herself absent at a charity committee meeting.

Only a faint ticking from the mantel clock, and the crinkle of pages as Chrissy fidgeted, suggested the place hadn't been embalmed.

The footman startled her by announcing, "His Grace, the Duke of Nomansland," as if a foreign dignitary had arrived rather than the only man in England she could not keep from her mind.

Nomansland entered with a rush that brought the outdoors with him, a breath of fresh air, looking more handsome than she remembered.

She hadn't known she could go so suddenly, so completely breathless. She stood at once, almost dropping her book, and tried for a smile that didn't betray the reckless ballet her heart was performing. "Your Grace. How unexpected. Is something amiss with Dinah or Abingdon?"

He nodded, but she noted the stiffness in his jaw, the way he hesitated before advancing further into the room. The great Duke of Nomansland, undone by the drab



drawing room of a working-class widow. She nearly laughed.

“I hope you don’t mind my calling,” he said. “I was passing through the neighborhood, and thought I might pay my respects. To your grandmother, of course.”

“Of course,” Chrissy echoed, unable to help the smile that flickered on her lips. “She is at St. Mary’s, but you are very welcome to wait for her. She will not be back for at least an hour.”

He hesitated again, as if this new information required a tactical recalibration. “I see.”

It would be absurd to offer him tea. They were alone, and his being there without a chaperone was almost as scandalous as...

as their conversation at the ball, perhaps.

It occurred to her that their discussion might be the reason he was there.

“Perhaps you would like a seat? If you are in a hurry, I can ring for a footman to deliver a note to Grandmama?—”

His smile, when it came, was slow and self-mocking. “No need. I’m not in any particular hurry.” He sat on the edge of the settee, posture betraying a tension at odds with his formidable frame. The furnishing groaned in complaint beneath him, or perhaps that was just her imagination.

She smoothed her skirts, doing her best impression of a woman entirely unruffled by the company of dangerous men. “To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure, Your Grace?”

Nomansland shifted, resting his elbows on his knees. “I suppose I ought to have prepared an excuse. I could tell you I was in the neighborhood, or that I wished to consult your grandmother on a matter of charity, but both would be unconvincing.”

She tilted her head, letting him see the mischief that danced in her eyes. “Perhaps you had Grandmama’s letters on your mind?”

His gaze narrowed. “Was it letters that tickled your curiosity? I’d thought a diary might have been found.” He studied her as though memorizing the details of her face for future reference.

Chrissy was not unaccustomed to being admired, but this was different—there was a hunger to it, a kind of longing that made her want to reach out and touch his hand just to see what would happen.

Instead, she folded her hands primly in her lap.

“If you wish, I could retrieve the letters. So you might enlighten me about the parts that confused me.”

He gave a soft, incredulous laugh. “This isn’t something we should pursue in your grandmother’s drawing room. In fact, Abingdon would have me shot if he learned of any such doings.”

She met his gaze, tried to match his intensity. “I’m not very concerned. I find I rather like the danger, sometimes.” She hadn’t meant to say this last part aloud, but the words lingered between them, daring him to answer in kind.

A long, charged moment passed. Then he looked away, rubbing the bridge of his nose with one hand, as if scolding himself for his lack of composure.

“I danced with you at the ball,” he said, changing tack so abruptly it nearly unseated her.

“And since then, I find myself unable to think of anything else.”

Chrissy swallowed. “I quite enjoyed the dance, as well.”

His lips twisted in a rueful smile. “I suspect it’s unwise, my visiting you here. But I could not help myself. After the ball, after... everything, I find I have no interest in the ordinary diversions of my set. I have even neglected my boxing.”

She smiled at this, picturing him sparring with some desperate young lord, his mind wandering to the last waltz instead of the next punch. The image delighted her. “I should confess that I have attended two other assemblies since, but none of them has been quite so memorable. I blame you.”

He looked up at her, and this time the hunger was unmasked. “I suppose I ought to apologize,” he said, but his tone made clear he was not at all sorry.

She took a measured breath, aware that the atmosphere had shifted from awkward to incendiary. She moved a fraction closer on the settee. “I think you enjoy seeing me nervous.”

“I do,” he admitted, his voice lower now. “But I enjoy it even more when you make me nervous, Miss Westfall.”

There it was—the opportunity, naked and undeniable, suspended between them. Chrissy leaned in, closing the distance with a reckless confidence she didn’t know she possessed. “I don’t think I have ever made you nervous.”

His eyes dropped to her mouth, then to the hollow of her throat. When he spoke, the

words were strained. “You do, constantly. You have no idea.”

She reached out, fingers brushing the starched cuff of his shirt, then lingering on his wrist. She felt the pulse, fast and shallow, beneath her thumb. “You are not yourself today,” she observed, more curious than afraid.

“I’m very much myself.” His protest was weak, and even he seemed unconvinced.

She slid her hand up his sleeve to his forearm, marveling at the solid muscle there. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were afraid of something.”

He let out a laugh, short and self-deprecating. “I am.”

She waited, unwilling to rescue him from his own admission.

He cleared his throat. “I’m afraid that if I kiss you, I will not want to stop.”

The room felt suddenly, impossibly, smaller. Chrissy realized her hand was still on his arm, and that his own had risen, almost reflexively, to cover it.

“Would it be so terrible?” she whispered.

He didn’t answer, not in words. Instead, he leaned in, his mouth just grazing the corner of hers. It was a hesitant, almost apologetic touch, nothing like the brazen promises he had made at the ball. He lingered there, breathing in her breath, as if gathering the courage for a second attempt.

But before he could, a sound from the corridor—a servant, perhaps, or the ghost of a chaperone—made him jerk away, his composure cracking visibly.

Chrissy, her head still spinning from the almost-kiss, watched as Nomansland

straightened, smoothed his hair, and tugged at his cravat as if he'd just lost a particularly bitter argument.

"I should go," he said, the words clipped and formal.

She blinked, disoriented. "But Grandmama?—"

He shook his head, rising from the settee in one fluid motion. "She will understand. Another time, perhaps."

He bowed, almost managing to meet her eye, and turned for the door.

Chrissy stood, her heart racing. "Will I see you at the Munsterley ball?"

His hand on the doorknob, he paused. "You will," he said. "But don't expect me to behave any better."

He slipped out, leaving the drawing room full of sunlight and emptiness.

Chrissy sat down, hands pressed to her cheeks, and tried to recall her place in the novel, knowing it would never seem as interesting as the story unfolding in her own drawing room.

The silence after Nomansland's departure was so profound, Chrissy half expected the drawing room to creak with relief.

She set aside her book, heart thumping, then stood and paced, replaying the near-kiss, the way he'd trembled, the abrupt escape.

Every muscle in her body was alive with indignation and desire, as if she were a violin that had been tuned too tightly.

She would not let him leave in such a state.

She strode to the foyer, intent on catching him before he made it to the street.

Nomansland was already at the door, one hand on the latch, his broad shoulders tense and defensive as a fortress wall.

He glanced back when she called his name, but didn't turn fully.

Something in his posture—the way he hunched, as if bracing for impact—ignited her stubborn streak.

“Are you unwell?” she demanded, skirting propriety entirely. “Or merely determined to make me the subject of a thousand dinner party anecdotes by storming away?”

He looked genuinely startled, as if he'd expected to be chased by a servant and not by Chrissy herself. “I—no. That is, yes. I mean—” He raked a hand through his hair, visibly at a loss. “I remembered an urgent appointment, Miss Westfall.”

“Liar,” she said, more amused than affronted. “You're behaving as though we've never been alone together before.”

Nomansland's eyes dropped to the carpet. “You are very—” He stopped, caught himself, and reset. “I'm not usually like this.”

She softened, slightly. “Nor am I. But I think I like you better this way.”

He laughed, a strange, broken sound, and finally looked at her. The intensity of his gaze stopped her cold. He spoke so quietly she almost missed it. “I'm afraid. Of myself. Of what I want.”

She stepped closer, refusing to let him retreat behind that granite facade. “What do you want, Nomansland?”

“You know very well what I want.”

## Page 8

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There was a moment—a charged, dizzy moment—where she thought he might seize her, consequences be damned.

Instead, he turned too quickly, his hip catching the edge of the table beside the door and sending a vase tumbling.

Water, flowers, and porcelain scattered across the floor with a spectacular crash.

Nomansland froze, mortified.

Chrissy burst out laughing, the tension dissolving into something bright and wild. She covered her mouth, but the giggle escaped, rippling down the empty hallway.

He looked at the mess, then at her, then at the door as if calculating which disaster required immediate attention.

“Leave it,” she said, still laughing. “Grandmama will enjoy the story.”

He managed a crooked smile, but his eyes were soft, almost vulnerable. “I’m truly sorry. I didn’t intend?—”

She shook her head, cutting him off. “If you apologize again, I’ll have to challenge you to a duel.”

He inclined his head, a real, if sheepish, bow. “Then I shall see you at the Munsterley ball. If you’ll still have me.”



She said nothing, only smiled, and watched as he slipped out into the sharp daylight. The door shut with a sharp click.

As if on cue, the sound of carriage wheels on the street signaled Grandmama's return. Chrissy peered through the window and watched her grandmother descend, maid in tow, both laden with parcels and the aura of having vanquished several formidable opponents at the charity committee.

Within moments, Grandmama swept into the hallway, peeling off her gloves and undoing the ribbons of her bonnet. "Was that Nomansland I saw departing in such a hurry?"

Chrissy stood in the center of the hall, still giddy and a little breathless. "It was."

Grandmama's gaze darted to the shattered vase, then to Chrissy, then back. "And what, precisely, did he break?"

Chrissy looked at the ruin of flowers and vase, the water spreading across the tiles. "Only the vase." She almost added, and my composure, but decided some things were better left unsaid.

Grandmama regarded her for a long moment, then nodded, her expression somewhere between suspicion and delight. "Well. I suppose that's preferable to the alternative. Have the maid clear it, will you, dear?"

"Yes, Grandmama," Chrissy replied.

The old woman swept off, humming light tune.

Chrissy stood in the empty hall, her reflection in long window beside the door slightly blurred. The house felt impossibly large, and the part of her that had thrilled

at Nomansland's closeness now ached at the empty space he'd left behind.

She pressed her palm to her chest, just to be sure her heart hadn't gone skittering after him.

It hadn't. Not yet.

But she suspected, with a giddy certainty, that next time, she would be the one to run.

\* \* \*

Later, as the household reassembled itself and the drawing room was restored to its pre-scandalous calm, Chrissy found Grandmama in her favorite chair by the fire.

She had changed into a violet gown that flattered her regal carriage and set her white hair to shining.

She looked the picture of benevolent authority.

Chrissy poured tea with hands that trembled just enough to send a small tidal wave across the rim of each cup. She offered the first to Grandmama, then took her own and curled up on the ottoman at her grandmother's feet, just as she'd done as a child.

For a long time, neither spoke. The only sounds were the fire's snap and the soft tinkle of spoon on china as Grandmama stirred her cup. Chrissy stared into the empty fireplace, trying to make sense of the cold that lingered in her chest despite the warmth of the room.

At length, Grandmama spoke. "You seem troubled, darling."

Chrissy smiled, but her lips barely cooperated. "Only a little. The duke's visit

unsettled me.”

“Men of that sort are made for unsettling,” Grandmama said, not unkindly. “I met his father, once. The entire line is bred to conquer continents, or hearts, or both.”

Chrissy sipped her tea, grateful for the slight steadiness it lent her voice.

She hesitated before speaking, struggling to name the hope that had bloomed so wildly in her chest only to wither hours later.

“I thought we understood each other. At the ball, he was... different. He cared for me, I’m sure of it.

But today, it’s as if he scarcely remembered me. ”

Grandmama set her cup down before taking Chrissy’s and setting it aside.

She folded Chrissy’s hands in hers. The older woman’s fingers were cool and dry, the grip gentle but unyielding.

“Men often become quite foolish when they fall in love. Particularly men like the duke, who have little experience with genuine affection. Conquest, yes. Real feeling, rarely.”

Chrissy’s eyes widened. “You think he?—”

“I think he is very much afraid of you, dear.” Grandmama’s tone was frank, but softened by affection. “Which is why he will do everything in his power to prove to himself, and to you, that he is not.”

Chrissy thought about the way he’d fled, about the brittle apology, the trembling

when he almost—but didn't—kiss her. "But what am I supposed to do? It's as though I'm invisible. Or worse, like I'm only Dinah's little sister, or Abingdon's sister-in-law. Not myself at all."

Grandmama considered this, her thumb brushing a slow circle over the back of Chrissy's hand. "That is the curse of being young and in love, darling. You become both more yourself and less. It is a paradox, but one you must endure if you hope to come out the other side intact."

Chrissy nodded, digesting this. Then, she said, "Abingdon would never approve. He thinks the duke is too scandalous for me."

Grandmama snorted, not bothering to hide her opinion of the men in question. "Abingdon owns a gaming hell renown for being a house of pleasure. He's no less of a scandal than the other owners. But he feels he must protect you."

"And Dinah?"

"She only wants you to be happy. Though she would not object to your marrying a lesser noble with a castle in Scotland and a mild disposition." Grandmama's lips curved. "Perhaps the Rutherford boy?"

Chrissy made a face, then blushed at the childishness of it. "He is sweet. But he is not..." She trailed off, unwilling to finish the thought.

Grandmama finished it for her. "He is not Nomansland."

Chrissy buried her face in her hands, half-laughing, half-miserable. "Grandmama, what am I to do?"

The old woman cupped her chin, forced Chrissy to meet her gaze.

“You must decide what you want. Not what is expected, or what is safe, or what will please the family. But what you want.” Grandmama’s expression grew stern.

“And you must be prepared to fight for it, if necessary. Otherwise, you will spend your whole life wondering what might have been.”

Chrissy felt her eyes fill with tears, but she willed them away. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It is never easy. But it is simple.”

They sat that way for a while, the silence comfortable around them.

Eventually, Grandmama rose, smoothing her skirts.

“We must prepare for the assembly this evening,” she said briskly, as if the conversation had been about nothing more momentous than the color of the tea service.

“The Rutherford boy will be there, and I would not have you looking a fright. He’s been asking after you, you know. Much more suitable.”

Chrissy nodded, obedient on the surface. But as she gathered her things and readied for the evening, she felt the resolve in her chest harden, a small gem of certainty in a storm of confusion.

She would see the duke again. She would dance with Rutherford, and all the other boys, and she would smile and play her part.

But she knew, with a clarity that startled her, that no one—not Abingdon, not Grandmama, not even Nomansland himself—could dislodge the memory of that

near-kiss, or the wild, dizzying hope it had awakened.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:48 am*

The Munsterley ballroom was a fire hazard, Nomansland could tell at a glance.

A few hazardously placed candelabras, one careless elbow, and every peacock-feather headpiece would go up like kindling.

Even without the threat of combustion, the place seethed with more heat than the inside of a furnace.

Every person in the ton had squeezed themselves into a space designed for half their number, and the air was thick with perfume, ambition, and the static charge of gossip.

He paused in the entryway, surveying the battlefield.

The Munsterleys had gone for a Venetian theme, which translated to an abundance of gold, an overinvestment in masks, and a troop of footmen dressed in harlequin livery.

The effect was less Carnival di Venezia and more fevered debutante auction, but Nomansland supposed it didn't really matter.

The only thing anyone would remember was who danced with whom, and who was found later rutting behind the palm fronds in the conservatory.

He'd barely arrived when Abingdon materialized at his side, moving with the swift, predatory efficiency of a man who had spent his life managing unruly crowds. He clapped Nomansland on the back. "I'd heard you were coming, but I didn't believe it. Did someone drag you here at gunpoint?"

Nomansland grinned. “Even a man of my standing must occasionally remind society he is not, in fact, a reprobate. Munsterley sent an invitation with actual gold leaf. I’d have been remiss not to see what the fuss was about.”

Abingdon eyed him, skeptical. “You’re wearing a waistcoat that isn’t black. Have you decided to enter the Marriage Mart?”

Nomansland flicked a glance down the length of his form.

He wore midnight-blue superfine tailored within an inch of its life, a pale waistcoat shot with silver, and a white starched cravat so sharp it might draw blood if handled carelessly.

The effect was less fop and more prizefighter attempting to blend in, he thought.

His shoulders strained the coat in a way that made it clear he could snap most of the other men in the room like breadsticks.

The women, he noted, seemed to appreciate the aesthetic. He caught the gaze of at least three dowagers and a pair of young misses, all of whom attempted surreptitious glances and failed spectacularly. One had dropped her fan, which now lay abandoned on the marble floor.

Abingdon saw the same thing and snorted. “You’re a menace.”

“Says the man who once seduced an entire finishing school.”

“That’s different. I have a wife now to keep the wolves at bay. You, on the other hand, are the most eligible man in London, according to Dinah. There’s an actual betting pool on who you’ll choose. The odds on Lady Jane stood at four-to-one this morning.”



Nomansland didn't indulge the jibe. His eyes were already hunting, and when he finally caught the flash of blonde curls across the ballroom, his breath tripped.

It was not a visible stumble—no one would ever accuse Nomansland of so transparent a tell—but the tightness in his chest was enough to make him wish he could sit down.

Chrissy.

No, Miss Westfall, he reminded himself. He couldn't slip in front of Abingdon.

She was dancing, which was hardly unusual, but the man at her side was at least two decades older than she was.

His hair was greased to his scalp and his smile too wide, but Miss Westfall looked up at him with a polite, earnest smile that Nomansland recognized, the expression she reserved for situations in which she was utterly, irretrievably out of her depth.

Abingdon caught the direction of his gaze. "Absolutely not. Not her."

Nomansland didn't flinch, though the words landed like a slap. "Why not her?"

"Because," Abingdon said, voice rough with some emotion Nomansland didn't care to dissect, "she's my wife's little sister, and I've spent the last year keeping her out of the hands of men like—" He cut off, as if realizing the futility of the argument.

"Men like me," Nomansland supplied. "Let me guess. You'd prefer she marry the Rutherford boy. Or perhaps Pemberton, if his liver survives the season."

Abingdon looked as though he'd just bitten into a lemon. "Anyone but you."

The old Nomansland would have laughed, perhaps even agreed. But he was not the old Nomansland. Or if he was, he no longer found the joke so funny. “She’s a grown woman. And she can dance with whomever she pleases.”

Abingdon gave him a long, searching look. “You’re serious. I realize Dinah asked you to be the first to dance with Chrissy at our assembly, but you realize that was to make her look more desirable to the other men.”

Nomansland shrugged. “And being seen with me will have the same effect here.”

Abingdon’s mouth twitched, as if he might say something more, but then he shook his head and straightened his cuffs. “If you so much as make her cry, I’ll have you shot.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

Abingdon clapped him on the back again—hard enough to bruise—then melted into the crowd, presumably to find his wife and warn her of the impending disaster.

Nomansland turned back to the dance floor.

Chrissy was executing a turn with unexpected grace.

She had always moved with a kind of nervous energy, but here it seemed distilled into something bright and lovely.

Her gown was white with pale green ribbons, edged with the faintest shimmer of gold, and it made her look like the morning after a storm—fresh, unspoiled, and a little bit wild.

The music ended, and the dancers clapped politely. Nomansland watched as her

partner bowed and returned her to the chaperone cluster at the edge of the room, where Dinah waited beside Abingdon. Chrissy said something, and Dinah laughed, then turned a keen eye on Nomansland across the crowd.

He winked. It was not an accident.

He waited a moment, just long enough to collect a glass of punch from a passing footman and take a measured sip. The drink was abominable, but it settled his nerves.

The next dance was forming, a quadrille, judging from the formation of the dancers lining up, and he made his move, gliding through the crowd with the unhurried confidence of a man who had never once failed to get what he wanted.

He approached the Westfall ladies with a bow, his focus never wavering from Chrissy. "Will you join me?" he asked, extending his hand.

She hesitated. He saw it in the tremble of her fingers, but then she placed her gloved hand in his. Her skin was warm, even through the barrier of their gloves.

"You came," she said, her voice low and just for him.

He smiled, letting her feel the force of it. "I told you I would."

Her smile sent a shock of pleasure through him, and he led her toward the other dancers. They joined a set, and he placed her hand on his arm, savoring the feel of her so close.

The quadrille began. It was a merciless dance, all quick turns and calculated proximity, and he took every opportunity to draw her near. She kept up admirably, never once missing a step.

“You must tell me about Nomansland,” she said when they drew close enough to speak again. “It’s such an odd title.”

He chuckled. “My grandfather was a favorite of the Queen, and performed some magnanimous duty for her. She insisted her husband bestow a title on him. Nothing but a dukedom would do, she demanded. The King was less inclined to such generosity, but a man must please his wife, mustn’t he?

Clearly, he looked for the least noble town he could find to let Grandfather know where he ranked in the King’s eye. Thus, the dukedom of Nomansland.”

Her laugh rang out and she clapped her hand over her mouth. “Forgive me, but…”

“I understand. My grandfather laughed about it often.”

They parted again, and when the steps brought them close she asked, “What did your grandfather do to impress the Queen?”

Nomansland let his smile grow. He had no idea what act had taken place, but his grandfather had a reputation as a generous lover. He wiggled his eyebrows at Chrissy and let her imagination take over.

She gasped. “Oh!”

She turned away as the dance required, and when she was back at his side, she said, “He must have been very good.”

Now it was Nomansland’s turn to laugh loudly. That was the interpretation he’d hoped for.

The quadrille ended in a flurry of bows and curtsies. Nomansland lingered, unwilling

to relinquish her arm. The quartet was shifting into a slower, more languorous waltz—the kind that turned every conversation on the floor into foreplay.

“Are you engaged for the next?” he asked.

“Several times over,” she replied, but her tone was mischievous. “But I suspect none of them would put up much of a fight if you insisted.”

He considered dragging her from the room, but decorum was a relentless mistress. Instead, he offered his arm and led her to the perimeter, where the air was at least a degree or two cooler.

They walked in silence for a moment. Nomansland was acutely aware of every brush of her sleeve against his, every time her shoulder grazed his bicep. She didn’t pull away, though he could see the flush still high on her cheekbones.

“You look very fine tonight,” he said.

She glanced up at him, eyes clear and searching. “You look... very yourself.”

He laughed, genuinely. “Is that good?”

“It’s dangerous,” she replied, and the honesty in her voice undid him a little.

They reached the end of the room, where a collection of statuary provided a modicum of privacy. Nomansland turned to face her, intent on saying something profound or at least memorable, but she beat him to it.

“Why did you run away last time?” she asked. The question was quiet, but the words were a dagger.

He hesitated. “Because I was afraid.”

She blinked, uncomprehending.

“I have never wanted anything I could not simply take,” he said, the confession leaving a bitter taste. “You... are different. I was not prepared.”

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Her lips parted, as if she might ask what he wanted, but she already knew. He could see it in the way she looked at him, open and unguarded, as if they were the only two people left in the world.

“Will you dance with me, then?” she asked.

“Every dance,” he replied.

He took her hand and led her back to the floor, where the waltz was already in motion. As they spun together, Nomansland felt the eyes of half the room upon them, watching, speculating, calculating the odds.

Let them watch. Let them place their bets.

For the first time in his life, Nomansland wanted something more than to win. He wanted to keep her.

And he would fight the entire ton, bare-knuckled and bleeding, for the chance.

Nomansland played the game well. At the close of the waltz, as the applause rippled and dancers scattered to partners and punch bowls, he released Chrissy’s hand but didn’t stray far.

He moved with deliberate slowness, cutting a path through the crowd that left no room for interlopers.

He saw, with wry amusement, the way lesser men clustered at the periphery, awaiting

their chance to pounce, but none dared approach so long as he stood at her side, an immovable wall of muscle and tailored cloth.

“Will you abandon me now?” Chrissy asked, a hint of laughter in her voice as she glanced up at him. “Or are you sworn to chaperone me through the entire evening?”

He offered his arm. “I’m told it’s a sacred duty, Or so your brother-in-law assures me.”

“Dinah said Abingdon is still convinced you are the devil incarnate.”

“Then we are well-matched,” he murmured, steering her through a sea of brocades and gleaming jewels. “For you, Miss Westfall, appear to have a talent for driving men to ruin.”

She colored, but only slightly. “I can’t imagine who would say such a thing.”

“I can, and they are all gathered under one roof tonight, armed with malice and lemon tarts.”

They made their way to the edge of the room, the hum of conversation swirling around them. Nomansland was acutely aware of every eye that tracked their progress, every sly murmur as they passed. He relished it, the way a boxer relished the sting of a good hit, a sign of respect, if not affection.

He claimed two glasses of sparkling wine from a passing footman and handed one to Chrissy. Her hand trembled as she took it, a detail that delighted him more than he cared to admit.

They stood close, so close that the faint scent of her, something floral and warm, cut through the haze of beeswax and expensive perfume. He let the silence stretch,



content to simply be, until at last she spoke.

“You seem at home here,” she said, tilting her head as if appraising him anew.

“It’s all sleight of hand. A talent for faking comfort where none exists.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

He turned to her, serious now. “Do you? I’ve spent years perfecting the art of making people see only what I want them to see.”

“And what do you want me to see?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

He considered, weighing honesty against discretion. “Everything. I want you to see all of it. The polish and the cracks underneath. I want you to see the man who can’t stop thinking about you, even when it’s wildly inappropriate.”

She blinked, surprised, but didn’t pull away.

He set his glass aside and offered his hand once more. “One more dance?”

She took it, her fingers clutching his with a certainty that almost unseated him.

Together, they rejoined the swirl of dancers, this time for a quadrille, which required a dizzying succession of steps, turns, and hand-changes.

Nomansland made sure every motion brought them into contact, whether it was the brief clasp of hands or the brush of her skirts against his leg.

“You’re showing off,” she said, eyes bright.

“It’s not my fault you make me reckless,” he countered.

At the next change, he spun her out and reeled her back in, closer than was strictly necessary. “You’re lighter on your feet than I expected,” he said, voice pitched for her alone.

“I had excellent training,” she replied, her breath fanning his cheek. “Dinah made me practice every morning for a month. She said I’d die of shame otherwise.”

“Dinah is a tyrant, but a prescient one. The ton has never seen anything like you.”

She flushed at the compliment, but there was pride in it, too. “You keep saying things like that. It’s unfair.”

“What is?”

“That you make it impossible to believe you’re ever insincere.”

He smiled, slow and deliberate. “Good. Because I never am. Not with you.”

The quadrille ended, but Nomansland didn’t release her hand. He pulled her gently aside as the next set began to form, then bent to speak into her ear. “You need a respite.”

“From dancing?”

“From being the center of the universe,” he said. “It’s a heavy mantle. Even Atlas took breaks.”

She laughed, startled and a little breathless. “And where do you propose I rest?”

He straightened, eyes holding hers. “Anywhere you like.”

There was a pause, long enough for a dozen meanings to accumulate between them, then she nodded, surrendering the tiniest bit of her weight to his arm.

“Lead on, Your Grace,” she said, her voice low and thrilling.

Nomansland did, guiding her out of the melee and into a side corridor lined with shadowy statuary. The music faded, replaced by the hush of their own footsteps and the echo of their hearts.

They reached a nook where a window overlooked the Munsterley gardens, the glass fogged with condensation and the cold night beyond. Here, they were alone.

Nomansland turned to face her, drinking in the way the moonlight played across her features. She looked up at him, equal parts nervous and expectant.

“Do you regret leaving the others?” he asked quietly.

She shook her head. “No. Not even a little.”

He reached out, trailing one finger along the line of her jaw. She shivered, but didn’t step back.

“I want to kiss you,” he said. “Right here, where anyone might see.”

She hesitated, only for an instant. “Do it.”

He did, and the rest of the world fell away.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:48 am*

Chrissy was soft under his hands, shockingly so, and Nomansland found himself drowning in the taste of her. She kissed like a girl who'd only read about it in books—fierce, fumbling, entirely unguarded. He pressed her back against the paneling, and drank in her gasp as he nipped at her lower lip.

Chrissy's fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer, as if she feared he might vanish should she let go.

The thought made him smile against her mouth.

He ran his hands down her sides, mapping every rise and fall, every shiver, until he reached the rigid boning of her stays.

He slid one palm between her body and the wall, spanning the small of her back, and drew her flush to him.

"Is this proper?" she murmured, though she made no move to stop him.

"Not even remotely," he replied, voice rough with want.

She laughed, a sound so wild and bright he could feel it vibrating in his bones. He kissed her again, harder, letting himself want her for the first time in living memory. The shock of it nearly undid him.

He pressed her hand to his heart. "Feel that?" he asked, and she nodded, wide-eyed.

"It's like a drum," she whispered.

“You do that to me,” he said, nuzzling her jaw. “No one else. Just you.”

She bit her lip, glancing down between them, then back up. “You’re trembling.”

He was, and it shamed him, but it also set him free. He wrapped both arms around her, hauling her up until her toes barely skimmed the ground. She clung to him, giggling into his collar, and he wondered how he could have ever been afraid of this.

“I want to ruin you,” he said, the words a secret oath. “I want to be your first and your last and every one in between.”

She shivered, either from cold or from the promise. “I’d like that. You promised to show me what my grandfather wrote about.”

He groaned, shaking his head in disbelief. “You are the most dangerous girl in London.”

“I hope so. Show me.”

He had every intention of doing so, but the corridor was too exposed, the risk of discovery too high. He set her down, smoothing her skirts, and took her hand.

“Come with me,” he said, and together they slipped down the hall, past gilt-framed ancestors and a suit of armor that seemed to nod approval.

He found an antechamber—empty, dim, and just private enough. He pulled her inside and latched the door with a soft click. The hush was immediate, broken only by the distant thrum of the quartet.

He backed her against the door, kissing her again, this time slower, taking inventory of every sigh and every yielding inch. His hands cupped her face, then slid down to

her shoulders, then to her waist, memorizing the shape of her.

She caught his wrist, pulling his hand up to her chest. “Here,” she said, guiding his palm to the swell of her breast, just above the edge of her bodice. Her skin was hot through the fabric. “I want you to.”

He obeyed, tracing the curve with his thumb, feeling the sudden, frantic beat beneath. She arched into his touch, her eyes fluttering closed.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

She opened her eyes, dazed but wickedly amused. “You’re a boxer. You could crush me with one hand. I think I like it.”

He nearly lost himself then. With a growl, he bent and bit her earlobe, then trailed kisses down the side of her throat. She let her head loll back, baring herself without hesitation.

“God, Chrissy,” he said, words muffled by her skin. “You taste like sin.”

She laughed again, but it faded quickly as he cupped her other breast, kneading gently, feeling the nipple harden beneath the layers of linen and silk. She dug her nails into his arm, not enough to hurt, but enough to make him want more.

“I want to touch you,” he said. “All of you.”

“Then do it,” she whispered. “Before I lose my courage.”

He slid his hands down, gathering her skirts and lifting them just high enough to find her stockinged thigh. She gasped, the sound muffled against his shoulder, and he grinned in triumph.

Her leg was bare above her stocking, the simple garter holding the silk in place. He stroked her thigh, relishing the contrast of rough calluses against perfect skin. She trembled, her entire body alive with anticipation.

“You have no idea what you’re asking for,” he warned, but she only smiled, reckless and beautiful.

“I want to know. Show me everything.”

He wanted to, desperately. But he forced himself to slow, to savor the moment. He leaned in, kissing her cheek, her jaw, the hollow at the base of her throat. His hands explored, mapping her body, committing every sensation to memory.

“Next time,” he said, “I want to undress you. Every layer, every button, every ribbon.”

She shivered, and he felt the heat rise between them. “And then?”

“I want to lay you on a bed,” he continued, “and taste every inch of you. I want to make you come apart for me, over and over, until you forget your own name.”

She made a small, hungry sound in the back of her throat. “That sounds like a challenge.”

“It is,” he said, kissing her again, this time with the full force of his need.

She met him with equal ferocity, her hands roaming his back, her body arching to meet his. He slid his hand up her thigh, finding the the heat of her quim. She gasped, hips bucking involuntarily.

He smoothed his fingers over her lips, gentle at first, then firmer as she urged him on.

She was wet and ready, the proof of her desire intoxicating. He circled her clit with his thumb, watching her face for every flutter, every gasp.

“Oh,” she said, voice thin and urgent.

He pressed his lips to her ear. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes,” she breathed. “God, yes.”

He stroked her, slow and careful, learning what she liked by the way her breath stuttered, the way her nails raked his shoulders. She clung to him, desperate, as if afraid he might stop.

He didn’t.

She came with a gasp, biting down on his shoulder to muffle the sound. He held her, supporting her weight as she shook in his arms. He kissed her face, her hair, every inch he could reach.

When she finally opened her eyes, she looked utterly undone.

He helped her right her skirts, smoothing the fabric with a gentleness that surprised even him.

“That was...” she began, but words failed her.

“Only the beginning,” he promised, kissing her forehead.

They stood for a moment in perfect silence, hearts racing, bodies pressed close. Nomansland felt a fierce, wild joy—a sense of having seized something vital and precious.



Then, without warning, the door swung open.

He spun, shielding Chrissy behind him. A man stared, wide-eyed, at the tableau, the duke, disheveled and clearly in flagrante, Chrissy, cheeks flushed and hair half-tumbled from its pins.

The man grunted.

A woman's voice behind him asked, "What is it? Go on in."

"The room's occupied," he told her. Mumbling a hasty apology, he retreated, closing the door again.

Nomansland stared at Chrissy, then she burst out laughing.

"We're ruined," Chrissy said, her expression nothing like one would expect from a scandalized miss.

He closed his eyes. This was exactly what he'd wanted to avoid. What was it about this woman that made him lose control? He was too intelligent to seduce innocents, much less get caught doing so.

"We'd better find your sister and get you away from here." He kissed her again, quickly and fiercely, then gathered himself. He offered her his arm, and together they walked back into the crowded ballroom, heads held high.

They found Dinah near the punch table, chatting with other chaperones. She spotted them at once, her eyes narrowing as she took in their appearance.

Nomansland leaned in toward Chrissy, whispering, "I'll make it right," then vanished into the throng before Dinah could do more than gape. He needed to distance himself

from Chrissy before the gossips could connect them with that anteroom, once the other couple began to talk.

He also needed to distance himself before Abingdon found out. There would be a confrontation one way or another, but hopefully not before Nomansland had the chance to propose.

“We must leave” Chrissy said to her sister.

“Are you unwell?” Dinah asked.

“I’m tired. I wish to go home now.”

“I’ll send a footman to find Abingdon. Sis you have a nice time?”

Chrissy sighed. “The best.”

As they walked through the crowded room, she noticed heads leaning close together, words being whispered. Eyes followed her. Had she been recognized? She’d hoped cowering behind Nomansland would have hidden her identity, but entering the ballroom on his arm would have confirmed any suspicions.

She must tell Dinah, but not until they were somewhere they wouldn’t be overheard.

The entry hall where they awaited Abingdon was colder than Chrissy expected. She pressed her back to the wall, breath fluttering in her chest, hands locked around the wrist of her gloves as though they might anchor her to the marble floor.

Other guests were leaving, too, and more than one group exchanged whispers and denigrating looks when they saw Chrissy.

Dinah hovered nearby, and Chrissy saw the moment realization struck her.

“It was nothing,” Chrissy said, voice thin. “Truly, Dinah, it was hardly?”

Dinah's hand shot out, gripping Chrissy's elbow so hard it pinched.

"You are flushed to your ears, and your hair is—" She plucked a curl free from Chrissy's temple, her own composure fraying as she spoke.

"This isn't from dancing too much. Never mind.

Tell me exactly what happened, from the beginning. "

Chrissy cast her gaze over Dinah's shoulder, desperate to escape, but there was nowhere to run. Laughter rang softly down the staircase from the ballroom above. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Tried again.

"We were in an anteroom. Alone." She regretted the honesty even before Dinah's eyes widened in horror. "Only for a moment! We thought?—"

"You thought what?" Dinah snapped. "That no one would notice the Duke of Nomansland absconding with my little sister?"

Chrissy jerked her arm away. "It wasn't like that! We only—" She bit down on the memory of his mouth, the way his hands had cupped her face as if she were breakable. "We were talking, and then?—"

"Someone saw," Dinah finished for her. "Who?"

Chrissy's mind raced, the moments a blur, the door opening, the flash of servant's livery, the footman's eyes round as shillings before he ducked away with a strangled noise. "I didn't recognize him, and I never saw her. But they ran off straightaway."

Dinah inhaled, pinching the bridge of her nose. "God save us. That's all it takes. In ten minutes, the entire ballroom will know."

Chrissy risked a glance at Dinah, whose jaw was so tight she seemed on the verge of shattering a molar. “I’m sorry,” Chrissy whispered.

Dinah turned, eyes fierce. “No, you are not. Not yet. But you will be if Abingdon makes a scene.” Her voice softened by a fraction. “We will get you home. Then we will figure out what comes next.”

They waited in stiff silence until the echo of heels sounded on the marble. Abingdon appeared, cutting a swath through the onlookers with the gravity of a man used to being obeyed. He wore authority like armor, and even the most persistent gossipers melted away at his approach.

His gaze fixed on Dinah first, searching her for signs of injury or upset. Then he looked to Chrissy, and the expression in his eyes—shock, disbelief, anger—made her wish she could dissolve into the floor.

He offered his arm to Dinah, but his other hand fell on Chrissy’s shoulder, firm and inescapable. “We go,” he said, voice low but steely. “Now.”

He propelled them out the door and down the steps, where their carriage already waited at the curb, lamps aglow.

Chrissy climbed in first, collapsing onto the velvet seat as Dinah followed, smoothing her skirts with trembling hands.

Abingdon entered last, the door slamming shut with a finality that left no doubt, they were prisoners of their own folly, hurtling through the dark toward judgment.

Inside the carriage, the silence was absolute.

Dinah stared out the window, her fingers white-knuckled on the edge of the seat.

Abingdon sat opposite them, chin tucked, eyes glittering in the lantern light.

Chrissy folded herself as small as possible, feeling the shame and the fear settle in her stomach like stones.

As the carriage jolted into motion, Abingdon spoke—once, cold and final. “Not a word. Until we are home.”

No one dared contradict him. The only sound was the rolling thunder of wheels over cobblestone, and the knowledge that, for the first time, Chrissy was uncertain what the morning would bring.

The carriage shuddered over a rut, pitching Chrissy against the velvet cushion hard enough to knock the breath from her. She gripped the strap above her window, knuckles pale and aching, and stared out at the black night.

Across from her, Abingdon’s profile was a statue’s, all hard planes and shadows.

His hands rested on his knees, fingers splayed, but the rest of him didn’t move.

Even when the carriage slewed sharply to the right, rounding a corner at a pace better suited to fire brigades, Abingdon merely flexed his jaw and stared straight ahead.

Dinah’s skirts rustled with every jostle.

Her own hands, usually so steady, now fidgeted with the clasp of her reticule, opening and shutting it with mechanical regularity.

She kept sneaking glances at Chrissy, but never for long—Abingdon’s silence was a force field, repelling any attempt at comfort.

The only sound was the horse's hooves, counting out the minutes to their doom. Even the city seemed subdued, with shops shuttered and pedestrians already home for the night. Chrissy tried to measure her breaths, counting heartbeats instead of lampposts, but it did nothing to steady her.

At last, Dinah broke. She reached across and squeezed Chrissy's hand, her grip fierce and cold. "It will be all right," she whispered, so low the words barely existed.

Abingdon's head snapped up. He didn't look at either of them, but raised his hand in a sharp, silencing gesture. "Not here." The words were soft, but they killed all hope of further speech. "We'll discuss it at home."

Chrissy shrank back, the weight of his disappointment heavier than the damp November night. She gazed again through the glass, and for the first time realized they hadn't turned toward Grandmama's but were instead careening west, toward Abingdon House.

Her stomach clenched. She wanted—suddenly and with the clarity of panic—to go home. But it was too late for that. She was hurtling toward a reckoning, and she was entirely unprepared.

When the carriage finally lurched to a halt, the lamps outside threw monstrous shadows across the street.

The footman yanked open the door before the wheels had even ceased turning, and Abingdon was out first. He offered an arm to Dinah but not to Chrissy, who managed to clamber down on her own, nearly tripping over the hem of her gown.

Inside, the entrance hall was bright, the chandelier ablaze in anticipation of their return. The necessary servants hovered in the periphery, their faces professionally blank but their eyes flicking, always, to Abingdon, awaiting instruction.

Dinah's maid stepped forward to take Dinah's and Chrissy's wraps, but Chrissy barely registered her presence. The world had collapsed to the sound of Abingdon's shoes on marble, and the echo of Dinah's voice as she tried, again, to whisper a reassurance,

"It will be all right. He just needs time."

Chrissy doubted it very much.

As Abingdon led them up the stairs, his anger radiating ahead like a heat wave, Chrissy wondered if she might vomit from nerves alone.

Dinah placed a hand on Chrissy's arm, her voice pitched low enough that it would not echo to the staff below. "Go to the guest room, Chrissy. We'll talk in the morning after Abingdon has calmed down. It's been a night."

Chrissy stopped short. She wasn't sure what she'd expected—maybe a tongue-lashing, maybe Dinah's arms thrown around her in messy, weeping solidarity—but this gentle dismissal galled her.

She squared her shoulders, chin lifted high.

"I'm not a child." The words came out too loud, bouncing off the banister and the velvet drapes, and even Dinah flinched at the force of them.

Dinah's lips pressed into a line, but she said nothing.

From behind, Abingdon's steps thundered as he mounted the last stair.

He reached the landing, gaze sweeping from one woman to the other.



For a moment, he simply looked at them, the cogs of his mind visibly grinding as he debated what flavor of rebuke to mete out.

“I’m not a child,” Chrissy repeated, softer now, but steady. “And I’m not sorry, not really. I was caught kissing a man I care for. I’m not the first woman in London to do so, and I won’t be the last.”

Abingdon’s brows shot up, but something in his jaw loosened, just a fraction. “You care for him,” he repeated, as though testing the words for poison.

Chrissy felt the tears threatening, but she clamped down on them with everything she had. “Yes.”

“Are you certain he cares for you?” The question, gentle and brutal at once, struck her harder than any invective could. For a moment, the entire world narrowed to that query. Was she certain? Was she anything but a naïve fool who’d mistaken attention for affection?

She said nothing, because the answer was not as simple as she wished.

Abingdon stared at her, all the heat gone from his expression. When he spoke next, it was not with the voice of a lord or a brother-in-law, but of a man who had once been young and reckless himself. “You’re too inexperienced to be caught kissing any man like that. Especially not Nomansland.”

Chrissy flinched as though struck.

Dinah moved, stepping between them with a flash of silk. “Don’t you dare scold her. If you must be angry, be angry at the rules that made her so vulnerable. Or at yourself, for not protecting her better.”

For a heartbeat, all three were silent, the words hanging in the air like smoke. Then Abingdon's face darkened again—not with anger, but with something older and deeper, the kind of disappointment that leaves scars.

He turned on his heel, shoes tapping on marble, and strode away without a backward glance. A door slammed somewhere down the hall, rattling the sconces.

Dinah sagged, the fight gone out of her. She put an arm around Chrissy's shoulders, pulling her close despite the difference in their heights.

"You did nothing wrong," Dinah murmured, stroking Chrissy's hair. "He'll see it in the morning, once the rage has burned out."

Chrissy shook in her sister's arms, equal parts relief and devastation. "What if he's right? What if I was only... a game?"

Dinah pressed a kiss to her temple. "Then you'll survive it, because you're a Westfall."

They stood together at the foot of the staircase, two women against a world that measured their worth by the delicacy of their virtue and the weight of their dowry. Around them, the staff whispered and tiptoed.

Dinah's hand squeezed hers, a lifeline in the darkness. "Come. Let's wash the night off and go to sleep."

Chrissy nodded, letting herself be led down the corridor. A bit of doubt was creeping into her thoughts, and she fought to push it away. Was Nomansland such a skilled actor to make her believe he cared for her? Was she truly that naive?

She prayed for morning to come with a note from him declaring his eternal love.

Please, let his feelings be true .

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:48 am*

Nomansland's study had always struck him as the sort of room where a man could drink himself to death with style.

Even tonight, with just the light from a single candle, it was a place perfectly suited to melodrama.

Mahogany paneling, the reek of cigar smoke lingering from a previous night, and the solitary company of a bottle of brandy half-emptied and sulking on his desk.

He leaned back in the chair, filled with visions of the spectacle he'd made of himself at the Munsterley ball, or, more accurately, the spectacle he and Chrissy had made of each other. London's gossips would feast for months.

The clock in the corner—an absurdly grand thing with a face like a bishop and chimes that struck the hour as if announcing the coming of the Lord—ticked with the gravity of fate.

Nomansland counted each second as it slipped away, waiting for the inevitable, the visit that would settle everything or nothing.

He tipped the decanter and poured another glass. His hand shook—just a little, just enough to move the liquor in the glass. He watched the brandy swirl, amber and viscous, and considered his options.

He'd rehearsed the conversation a hundred times since he'd left the Munsterley's home, each version more disastrous than the last. Abingdon would demand satisfaction.

He would make threats, some empty and some not.

There would be talk of honor and families and the lifelong wreckage of a girl's reputation, all of which was entirely justified.

Nomansland knew himself well enough to accept the full catalogue of his crimes.

He had, after all, written most of it himself.

But what he didn't know—what terrified him, if he were being honest, which he rarely was—was whether he could say the right thing.

Whether he could give Abingdon, and Chrissy, and the entire damned world, the assurance they needed.

That he would do the right thing, marry the girl, make a model husband, and put the ghosts of his past to rest.

He doubted it. But he would try, and that had to count for something.

A gust of wind shook the windows, and somewhere below, the sound of a carriage door slamming echoed up through the house.

The front door opened and closed, not gently.

Nomansland didn't bother to move from his seat.

The next act was inevitable, and he would not give Abingdon the satisfaction of seeing him so much as blink.

He counted the footsteps on the stairs—fourteen, each heavier than the last. The

corridor outside the study was silent for a moment, then the knob twisted and the door banged open so hard it rattled the glass in the decanters.

Abingdon strode in, all champion of innocence and coiled violence. His hair was wild, his cheeks slashed red with rage, and his eyes, usually so calculating, were feral.

Nomansland set the glass down, but didn't rise. "Shall we dispense with the pleasantries?" he said, voice low and, he hoped, calm.

Abingdon didn't answer. He crossed the room in three steps, balled his right hand into a fist, and drove it into Nomansland's left eye with the precision of a man who had once boxed at Oxford and never quite outgrown the taste for it.

Stars exploded and blocked out the rest of the room for a good two seconds. Nomansland tasted blood where he'd bitten his tongue and then remembered to breathe. He slumped back in the chair, clutching the armrests.

When he could open his eye, he blinked up at Abingdon, the world fuzzy and doubled at the edges. "I suppose I deserved that," he said, trying and failing to sound wry.

Abingdon's chest heaved, but he stood over Nomansland, fists still clenched, eyes still wild.

"If you'd like another go," Nomansland continued, "I can stand up this time. Make myself a better target."

Abingdon shook his head, but the motion was more animal than human, as if trying to clear the taste of violence from his tongue.

He stalked away, paced to the window, then spun on his heel and glared at

Nomansland with such pure fury that he almost expected the glass to shatter from the force of it.

“You arrogant, reckless—” Abingdon could not finish the thought. He pressed his knuckles to his mouth, then let his hand drop. “You were seen. You were both seen,” he spat.

Nomansland nodded, accepting the truth of it.

Abingdon closed the distance between them in a flash, leaning down until they were nose to nose.

“Did you intend to ruin her?” he demanded. “Was that the plan all along? Get the little Westfall girl alone and?—”

Nomansland forced himself to meet Abingdon’s gaze, even as the pain in his face blossomed into something ripe and spectacular. “I didn’t intend?—”

Abingdon slammed a hand down on the arm of the chair, cutting him off.

“Don’t lie to me. She is my wife’s sister. I warned you to leave her alone. And you—” He said the word as if it were an epithet. “You knew exactly what you were doing.”

Nomansland wanted to argue. Wanted to explain, to say that what he’d done was not calculated, not even particularly rational, but driven by some terrible, uncontrollable need.

But Abingdon would not want to hear it. He would only want to be assured that the scandal could be contained, that the girl would be made respectable again, that Nomansland would do his damned duty.

So Nomansland took a breath, and let the pain settle him.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to compromise her. I...” The words tasted foreign and not a little sour. He groped for the right phrase, found none, and settled on the truth. “I care for her.”

Abingdon snorted. “You don’t care for anyone but yourself.”

Nomansland flinched, though not from pain. “You are wrong. I care for her. Enough to do what’s necessary. Enough to marry her.”

Abingdon’s laugh was so sharp it could have flayed a man. “Have I done something to make you hate me? Is this some sort of revenge, threatening to marry Dinah’s sister? You think I would allow you within ten feet of her again if I had a choice?”

Nomansland pressed a hand to his face, wincing as the swelling began in earnest. “Do you truly think me incapable of being fond of the girl?”

The silence that followed was not companionable. It was a knife fight in a dark alley.

Abingdon finally straightened, stepped back, and looked at Nomansland with a loathing so complete it might have frozen water.

“You will marry her,” he said, each syllable a gunshot. “And you will make her happy, or so help me I will see you broken. I don’t care if it destroys Sutcliffe’s. My family is more important.”

Nomansland met his gaze. “Done.” He raised his glass in mock salute.

Abingdon turned on his heel and stalked from the room, slamming the door behind him.



Nomansland sat in the silence, the brandy burning in his throat, the pain in his face blooming like a peony.

He should have felt victorious. Instead, he only felt hollowed out, as if the punch had reached right through to the center of him and found nothing worth the trouble.

He closed his eyes, letting the world slip away, and wondered what on earth he would say to Chrissy.

The clock ticked on, indifferent and inexorable.

Somewhere in the house, a door banged. Somewhere in the city, rumors spread like wildfire.

And in the study, Nomansland poured another drink, the first of many.

\* \* \*

The clock had just finished tolling three when Abingdon returned.

He didn't knock this time, but entered with the sullen inevitability of a debt collector.

His face was a study in exhaustion, lines carved deep by anger and a night spent wrestling his better nature.

He closed the door quietly behind him—a courtesy, perhaps, or a sign that whatever happened next would not need witnesses.

Nomansland stood by the window, the glass of brandy untouched in his hand. He could see his reflection in the glass, the swollen eye, the split lip, the bruises already blooming at the edge of his jaw. He looked like a man who had lost a fight, which

was only fitting.

Abingdon said nothing for a long time. He paced the length of the study, five steps to the bookshelves, five steps back, each circuit winding him tighter. Nomansland waited, letting the silence do what words could not.

Finally, Abingdon stopped, bracing himself against the edge of the desk.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he demanded, voice ragged from shouting or drinking or both.

Nomansland stared at the window, not trusting himself to answer.

Abingdon pounced, crossing the room in two strides. “Was it a joke to you? A game? You knew what would happen if you were seen—if she was seen—with you.”

Nomansland turned, setting the glass down with deliberate care. He didn’t sit.

“It was not a joke,” he said. “And it was not a game.”

Abingdon scoffed, but the sound was hollow. “So what, then? You fancied her and thought you’d take your chance before someone better came along?”

This time Nomansland’s voice carried steel. “No. I decided a week ago I was going to marry her. The rest—” He shrugged, wincing as the movement tugged at the bruised muscles of his neck. “The rest was clumsy. I’ll grant you that.”

Abingdon’s eyes narrowed, searching Nomansland’s face for any sign of mockery or evasion. Finding none, he barked a bitter laugh. “You’ve ruined her,” he said, as if announcing a verdict.

“Gossip will pass. I’ve said I will marry her.”

Abingdon’s hands balled into fists, but this time he kept them at his sides. “You’re a reckless bastard. You always have been.”

“Agreed.”

“And yet—” Abingdon looked away, wrestling with something unseen. “She seems to think you’re worth the risk. God knows why.”

Nomansland let the words hang, heavy as lead.

They stood in silence, the space between them charged with the unspoken knowledge of what men like them could and could not say aloud.

At last, Abingdon spoke again, softer now. “If you ever hurt her—if you ever make her regret this for even a day—I will see you in the ground. There won’t be enough left of you to bury.”

Nomansland accepted this with a nod. “I understand.”

He expected Abingdon to storm out, or perhaps throw another punch for good measure, but the other man just stared at him, the fight draining out of him by degrees.

“What will you tell her?” Abingdon asked, voice small.

“The truth,” Nomansland said. “That I want her. That I intend to make her happy, if it kills me.”

Abingdon grunted, a sound halfway between approval and defeat. “See that you do.”

He turned toward the door, but paused. “Do you love her?”

Nomansland considered the question, tasted the word on his tongue. It was not one he had ever spoken in earnest. “Yes.” He was surprised to find it didn’t hurt at all.

Abingdon nodded, almost imperceptibly, and let himself out, closing the door with a softness that belied every threat he had made that night.

Nomansland remained by the window, watching the streetlamps flicker in the pre-dawn gloom.

He knew what was expected of him now.

And for the first time, he found he didn’t dread it.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:48 am*

The bruising had settled into an impressive half-moon beneath Nomansland's eye—a trophy, in its way, of the previous night's negotiations with Abingdon.

He inspected it in the murky reflection of the carriage window as he rattled through the morning streets, contemplating whether the purple would clash with the lapis of his best coat.

He'd chosen the coat on purpose, the fabric was imported, the cut was severe, and the lapels, though a little foppish, announced to the world that he was a man who intended to be seen.

If ever there was a day for being seen, it was today.

He arrived at the Westfall address at a quarter past eight—indecent, but he figured that indecency was already his trademark. The house sat silent, and he feared he should have waited a few more hours. Although he hadn't slept, there was a chance Chrissy had and was still in bed.

He rapped twice. The door was answered by a housekeeper, a fortress of pale linen with a glare that dared even the Duke of Nomansland to argue.

She took in his person—coat, cravat, the shiner—then pursed her lips. “His Grace,” she said, without the faintest upward inflection.

“Good morning. I'm here for Mrs. Westfall. Is she awake?”

The housekeeper tilted her head, evaluating. “She is at her charities, as always. Do

you wish to leave a message?”

Nomansland blinked in surprise. What charity did she provide at this hour? “What about Miss Westfall?”

A beat of silence, then he said, “Not at home.”

He resisted the urge to seize the woman by her starched apron. “Not at home? Is she with Mrs. Westfall?”

“No, sir.” The housekeeper’s tone, while respectful, left no doubt that she was not impressed with dukes who pounded on doors before the decent hour. “Miss Westfall never came home last night.”

The words caught Nomansland off guard. “Where is she, then?”

“Abingdon House, with her sister.”

Nomansland ground his teeth, feeling the old, familiar spike of irritation. Of course Abingdon had swept in with the ruthless efficiency of a bailiff collecting rent, staking his claim on every possible avenue of controlling the scandal.

The housekeeper was still watching him, her hands folded neatly at her waist. “If there is nothing else, sir?”

He tipped his hat, the gesture perfunctory. “Thank you. You’ve been most helpful.”

She didn’t smile. “Very good, Your Grace.”

Nomansland turned on his heel and stomped back to his waiting carriage. He yanked open the door and flung himself inside, calling out to the coachman, “Abingdon

House. Take the long way round. I need to think.”

He spent the first three blocks staring at his reflection in the window, watching the swelling grow more lurid with every jostle. He was sure it was his imagination, but by the time they reached Oxford Street, the bruise had gone from a mere ornament to a full-fledged sideshow.

He tried to imagine how Chrissy would react—would she laugh? Would she pity him? Would she make a joke about his lack of defensive technique?

He imagined her doing all three at once. The thought made his chest ache.

He fidgeted with his cravat, certain his valet had tied it too tightly.

He cursed Abingdon with a litany of insults, then cursed himself for being so easily goaded.

By the time the carriage turned onto the desired street, he’d rehearsed his proposal a dozen times, each version more abysmal than the last.

He was not good at this. He’d spent a lifetime conquering, never courting, had never needed to ask for anything, much less plead for forgiveness or beg for a second chance.

He wondered, not for the first time, why fate had chosen this moment—this girl—to test the limits of his capacity for humility.

He pressed a hand to his eye, felt the throb of the bruise radiate outward, a perfect metaphor for his state of mind.

The coachman brought the carriage to a halt in front of Abingdon House.

Nomansland stared up at the facade, grim and forbidding as ever, and drew a breath deep enough to set his ribs creaking.

He reached for the door handle, then paused. “Here goes nothing.”

And, with all the confidence he could muster, Nomansland stepped out to do battle for the only thing in the world he was not sure he could win.

Chrissy’s heart.

When the door opened, he asked, “Is Miss Westfall at home?”

Thomson pulled the door wider and allowed him inside.

The entrance hall of Abingdon House was designed to humble, and it performed its task admirably. Nomansland smothered a laugh as the butler received him with the kind of chill reserved for debtors and fornicators.

“If you’ll follow me, Your Grace,” the man intoned, then led Nomansland past the library and billiard room, to the drawing room at the back of the house.

The room itself was oddly intimate, something he hadn’t felt there before. Early light softened the outlines of everything, throwing gentle shadows over the Chippendale chairs and the silk-covered settee. And there sat Chrissy.

She wore a simple morning dress, pale blue, cinched at the waist with a ribbon the same shade as her eyes.

Her hair, usually a riot of curls, was subdued today—a neat braid pinned at the nape, a few wisps escaping to catch the light.



She looked younger than he remembered, and infinitely more breakable.

For one paralyzing second, Nomansland stayed just inside the doorway, pinned to the spot by the weight of what he'd come to do.

Chrissy looked up at him, her hands folded tight in front of her, the knuckles white. She stared at him, and the silence stretched, awkward and absolute.

He coughed into his fist. "Miss Westfall," he managed, the words absurdly formal given the parts of her body he was familiar with.

She didn't smile. "Your Grace."

He crossed to the center of the room, each step measured and slow. He had rehearsed a speech—several, in fact—but the moment he met her eyes, every version vanished. He was left with nothing but the truth, and the truth was a knife.

He bowed, which felt silly but necessary. "I owe you an apology. For last night. For everything. I behaved disgracefully." He hated the weakness in his voice.

Chrissy blinked. "I was there too."

He pressed on, determined to confess every sin. "I've made a mess of things, and I'm sorry for it. If I could undo the damage?—"

She cut him off, voice steady. "You can't. No one can."

He nodded, once. "Then I suppose all that remains is for me to do my duty and ask you—" He stopped, the words tangling. "You know why I'm here."

A faint flush crept up her cheeks, but she didn't look away. "I do."

He hated how clinical it sounded, how much it resembled a business transaction instead of a proposal of marriage. He forced his words through a throat gone tight. “I want you to know that you have a choice. I will do whatever you ask. Even if it means stepping aside.”

Her eyes widened, incredulous. “Is that what you want?”

He was silent. Then, finally, “I don’t know what I want. That is—I do know. But I have no right to want it.” He laughed, short and bitter. “God, this is not how I imagined this.”

Chrissy shifted her weight, the skirt of her gown whispering against the settee. “How did you imagine it?”

He looked at her, really looked, and the rest of the world collapsed. There was only the girl in blue, and the gulf between what he deserved and what he hoped for.

He inhaled, slow and deliberate, then started again.

“Forget all that for a moment,” he said, and crossed the last few steps to stand in front of her. He reached for her hands, hesitated, then took them gently in his. Her fingers were cold, but the contact steadied him.

“I was wrong. I’ve always thought of you as—” He searched for the word.

“Dazzling. Unreachable. But the other night when I came to supper, something changed. You smiled at me, and it felt like the first real thing I’d seen in years.

I’ve spent so much of my life pretending not to need anything, and then you—” He broke off, shaking his head. “You make it impossible not to need.”

Chrissy's breath caught, just audible.

"I don't know what love is supposed to feel like," Nomansland admitted, voice low.

"But I know I will never be happy again unless I can spend the rest of my life seeing you laugh. I want to learn all of it—what makes you angry, what makes you happy, what makes you blush. I want to be the man who deserves you, even if it takes me the rest of my days."

The silence was thick and holy.

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

Chrissy's eyes filled, and the tears trembled there, bright as gems. She nodded, then found her voice. "Yes," she whispered, then louder. "Yes. Of course I will. I love you, Nomansland."

He pulled her in, and the first kiss was careful, cautious, a benediction. But she reached up, pressed her palm to his cheek, and the caution vanished. The second kiss was full and hungry and, finally, perfect.

He didn't care about the bruise or the servants or the fact that, at that moment, Abingdon was probably listening from behind a hidden door with a loaded pistol in his coat. All he cared about was the girl in his arms and the certainty, at last, that he would never let her go.

They broke apart only when the clock on the mantel struck the half hour, the sound impossibly loud in the small room.

Chrissy smiled, and the world righted itself. "We'll have to tell the others."

Nomansland grinned, reckless. “Let them wonder a but longer.”

He kissed her again, just to be sure.

They found the settee by instinct, not design—two bodies drawn together by the magnetism of relief and hard-won happiness.

It was big enough for two, but neither Nomansland nor Chrissy seemed inclined to observe the conventional boundaries of personal space.

She perched at the very edge, hands fidgeting in her lap, while he sat close enough that the heat of her was its own private sun.

She couldn't stop grinning. It was a ridiculous, ear-to-ear thing, and Nomansland found himself mirroring it without effort. He watched her, drinking in every flush and dimple, wondering if it was possible to become drunk on the sight of a person.

Chrissy spoke first, voice low and conspiratorial. “If you're going to be my husband, you'll have to teach me all the scandalous things in those letters.”

Nomansland laughed, the sound erupting unguarded. “I intend to. Every single day, if you'll let me.”

She reached for his hand, threading her fingers through his. Her skin was still cold, but the grip was strong, confident. She leaned into him, her head resting on his shoulder, and let out a contented sigh.

He turned to face her, unable to resist. “Are you sure?” he asked, and for a moment his vulnerability was naked. “I am—well, you know what I am.”

She kissed the corner of his mouth, a whisper of contact. “You're mine,” she said,

with a certainty that startled him.

The room was soft and safe, the world outside temporarily irrelevant. Nomansland let himself relax, truly relax, for the first time in years. He slid his arm around her waist, drew her gently closer, and kissed her again—slow, careful, and increasingly improper for a house where walls had ears.

This time, when he pulled back, her eyes were bright and shining.

“Will you do that every morning?” she asked.

He pretended to consider. “I’m told breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

She giggled, and the sound was so pure that Nomansland wondered how he’d ever survived without it.

He was about to reply—something clever, or maybe something profoundly stupid—when the drawing room door swung open.

Dinah entered first, hair in a riot from a hasty pinning, her gown a simple morning dress. She was followed by Abingdon, whose expression could have cowed an entire regiment.

Nomansland and Chrissy sprang apart, but not quickly enough to hide the evidence of their affection, the proximity, the intertwined hands, the flush on both faces.

Nomansland, ever the tactician, didn’t release Chrissy’s hand.

Instead, he squared his shoulders, as if daring anyone to try to separate them.

Dinah froze mid-step, eyes darting between the two, her mouth an O of shock

and—Nomansland thought—delight.

Abingdon was slower, more deliberate. He took in the scene, the closed space between betrothed, the shared gaze, the fact that his sister-in-law had just been thoroughly kissed.

No one spoke.

Chrissy broke the silence, her voice half-laugh, half plea. “Oh, Dinah—please be happy for me. I think I might burst.”

Dinah looked at Abingdon, then back at her sister. She tried for stern, but her face crumpled, and she let out a wild, scandalous giggle.

“Of course I am,” Dinah said, and in a blink she was at Chrissy’s side, wrapping her in a breathless embrace. She squeezed Chrissy, then turned and did the same to Nomansland, who tolerated it with dignity.

When she stepped back, her cheeks were wet with happy tears. “You are a menace, Nomansland. But I suppose we can tolerate you, now and then.”

Nomansland inclined his head. “I’ll try not to let you down.”

Abingdon, meanwhile, hovered in the doorway, arms crossed, face unmoved. He regarded Nomansland with all the severity of a magistrate sentencing a criminal.

After a pause that threatened to tip the moment into farce, Abingdon uncrossed his arms, walked over, and, to everyone’s shock, pulled Chrissy into a one-armed hug. Then he offered his hand to Nomansland.

Nomansland took it, the shake firm and final.

Abingdon's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "Welcome to the family," he said, and it was clear to all present that no further words would be required on the subject.

They lingered together, the four of them, in a rare peace, as sunlight edged across the drawing room floor and the world outside began to wake.

It was not the ending Nomansland had expected. It was better.

He looked at Chrissy, and in her eyes he saw every day that would follow: laughter, yes, and sometimes pain, but always together. Always hers.

He squeezed her hand, and she squeezed back.

Outside, somewhere, the city teemed with rumors and judgments and the endless machinery of society.

But here, in this small, sunlit room, nothing could touch them.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:48 am*

A bingdon't country estate, Park House, was built to intimidate, not seduce.

The main staircase could have accommodated a cavalry charge, the ceilings were so high that every footfall came back as a tiny, shocked echo, and the entry hall was populated entirely by portraits of people who had either discovered continents or killed someone in a duel.

If one were to be married off into the upper crust of England, thought Chrissy, it might as well be into a family that had enough ancestral scandal to make even Shakespeare speechless.

After the wedding breakfast, after the fuss and the speeches and the endless toasts, the house emptied out with a hush so absolute it felt deliberate.

She stood on the marble landing, hands resting on the cold banister, staring down at the black-and-white tiles below.

For a moment she was a statue in her own right—until her husband's footsteps, heavier and more certain, broke the spell.

She felt him before she saw him. The tension in her spine dissolved, replaced by a different kind of awareness, the sense of being watched, appraised, claimed. She braced herself and turned, meeting his gaze at the top of the stairs.

He wore the same shade of blue that had so undone her in London, but the lack of light turned his eyes a sharper, almost dangerous hue. His jacket was off, his shirtsleeves rolled, and the bruising under his left eye, courtesy of Abingdon, had



faded from livid purple to faint yellow.

He crossed the space between them in three long strides. “I thought I’d lost you to the west wing. It’s been known to eat guests alive, you know.”

She tried for a smile, but nerves got in the way. “I was only—” She shrugged. “Getting used to the idea that this is mine now.”

His eyes softened. He offered his arm, and she took it, feeling the dense warmth of his body through the linen. “Walk with me?”

She nodded, and together they moved down the corridor, past gilt mirrors and the impassive stare of the family ancestors. The house was preposterous, but Gabriel moved through it as if it were an extension of himself, as if, by the force of his will alone, he could make the place feel like home.

He led her into the first of the smaller salons. Here, the scale was human, a low ceiling, a bright rug. There was a tray of sparkling wine and two glasses, and an arrangement of yellow roses that glowed in the light from a window.

Gabriel gestured to the settee, then poured them each a glass. He handed one to Chrissy, and when their fingers brushed, he lingered, tracing the edge of her knuckle with his thumb.

“To us,” he said, voice lower than before. “To a very long and interesting life.”

She raised her glass and managed, “To us,” then drained half of it in one go.

He watched her drink, and the look in his eyes made her want to hide, or possibly throw him onto the carpet and climb on top of him, depending on the moment.

She set the glass aside, hands trembling slightly.

He smiled, noticing. “Are you nervous?” he asked, not unkindly.

She met his gaze, cheeks hot. “Yes. I’m not sure what is expected of me, Nomansland.”

“Nothing is expected of you,” he said, and the certainty in his tone settled her more than anything else had.

He set his own glass down, then moved to sit beside her, close enough that their knees touched.

“Well, one thing. Call me Gabriel. Other than that, I only want you to be happy. And to occasionally let me kiss you senseless. But mostly the first thing.”

He reached out, cupped her face, and kissed her—soft at first, testing, then deepening as she leaned in, letting herself be caught up in the undertow. He tasted of wine and something darker, and for a moment she was lost.

When they parted, she found herself half-reclined against the cushions, Gabriel’s hand braced on the seat just behind her head. He looked down at her, and there was nothing of the conqueror in his expression—only an almost boyish longing, as if he were afraid she might vanish if he blinked.

She ran a finger along the edge of his collar, memorizing the texture of linen and the heat of his skin beneath.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what to do next,” she confessed, voice barely above a whisper.

He laughed, not at her, but with her—relief and desire braided together. “Would you like me to show you?”

She nodded.

He rose, holding out his hand, and led her from the salon, past more silent portraits, to the bedchamber at the far end of the house.

The bedchamber itself was so enormous it might have doubled as a ballroom in less ambitious homes.

The ceiling soared, a domed expanse painted with clouds and gods who looked on with mild disinterest at the doings below.

The furniture was all dark wood and velvet; a massive four-poster dominated the room, swathed in layers of blue and gold.

At the far end, a fire crackled in a marble hearth, and vases of flowers—roses, tulips, hyacinths—crowded every flat surface, their scent heavy and intoxicating.

Seeing her glance at the ceiling, he chuckled. “My ancestors never did anything by small measure.” He closed the door with deliberate care, then turned to her. For a moment they simply looked at each other, the gulf between old life and new measured in feet rather than years.

He stepped close, lifting her hand to his lips. “You are the most beautiful thing in this entire house. And I intend to make you the happiest woman in England, if you’ll let me.”

She blushed, but held his gaze. “That is a tall order, Your Grace.”

He grinned. “Good. I like a challenge.”

He drew her gently to the edge of the bed and sat, pulling her onto his lap. She giggled at the sudden shift, then stilled when his arms came around her, strong and sure.

He kissed her again, deeper this time, and her heart seemed to slip its moorings. She let her hands wander, finding the shape of his shoulders, the curve of his jaw, the soft line where his hair met his neck.

He undid the fastenings at the back of her dress with deft, patient fingers. Each one was a tiny declaration, a promise that he knew what he was about and would take all the time she needed. When the bodice loosened, he paused, waiting for her to decide whether to move forward.

She did. She shrugged the sleeves from her shoulders, the fabric whispering down her arms. Gabriel watched, reverent, as more of her was revealed—first the pale skin of her clavicle, then the delicate rise of her breasts, pressed together by the stays beneath.

He traced the hollow of her throat with his lips, working his way down until he reached the laces of her stays. He made quick work of the ties, loosening them enough that she could breathe—really breathe—for the first time since morning.

She exhaled, and he laughed, kissing her bare shoulder.

The chemise beneath was soft, almost sheer, and her nipples pebbled against the linen as the cool air found them. Gabriel grazed them with his palm, slow and deliberate, and the jolt of sensation made her gasp.

“Is that all right?” he asked, voice thick.

She shivered. “Yes. More than all right.”

He explored further, running his hands over her waist, her hips, learning the landscape of her body as if it were a map he intended to travel for years. He kissed her neck, her shoulders, the edge of her jaw; he buried his face in her hair and breathed her in like she was the air he needed.

She lost track of time, of everything but the heat between them and the rush of her own heartbeat.

When he slid the chemise from her shoulders, she resisted the urge to cover herself. Instead, she looked him full in the face, daring him to find her lacking.

He did not. He gazed at her as though she were a work of art, something rare and dangerous and precious. He cupped her breast, thumb circling the nipple until she arched into his touch.

He lifted her as easily as if she weighed nothing, and set her gently in the center of the bed. The sheets were cool at her back, but she did not feel cold. She felt alive.

He stood above her, undressing himself with less ceremony. His shirt, his cravat, his trousers, each discarded with a casual grace that made her ache to touch him, to discover whether the muscles of his arms were as solid as they looked.

They were.

He lowered himself to the bed, bracing his weight on either side of her. He kissed her, tasting her from lips to chest to belly, each inch an adventure.

She fumbled at the waistband of his drawers, laughing at her own ineptitude, and he covered her hand with his, guiding her as she pushed the fabric down.

What she found—hard, hot, urgent—made her heart stutter. She wrapped her hand around him, tentative, and Gabriel made a noise so primal it thrilled her to the core.

He kissed her again, this time with his whole body, pressing against her until she could feel every ridge and line. His hands moved between her legs, finding the slickness there, and he groaned against her neck.

“Tell me if I hurt you,” he said, his voice rough.

She nodded, but did not want him to stop.

He slipped a finger inside, slow and careful, watching her face for signs of discomfort. Instead, she found herself straining toward him, greedy for more.

“You’re perfect,” he whispered. “So perfect.”

He worked her with his fingers, building pressure until she thought she might shatter. The fire, the flowers, the sensation—it all blurred together into one bright, impossible now.

When he finally entered her, it hurt—a sharp, quick pain—but he soothed her with kisses, with words she could not fully hear, and the pain faded, replaced by a fullness, a rightness, as though she had always been meant to have him there.

He moved slowly at first, letting her adjust, then faster as she wrapped her arms around him, holding on as if the world might tilt and send them flying.

She felt the pleasure build, crest, crash over her like a wave. She moaned his name, and that was all it took to send him over the edge.

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:48 am*

They lay together, tangled in sheets and sweat and laughter, the room bright with morning even as the day slipped toward dusk.

He propped himself on one elbow and looked down at her, hair wild, eyes gentle.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She smiled, feeling more than all right.

“Better than all right,” she said.

She reached up and traced the faded bruise on his cheek, her touch featherlight. She kissed him, because she could, because she never wanted to stop.

Outside, the house stood as it always had—imposing, cold, full of ghosts. But inside, in this room, it was warm and bright and entirely theirs.

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Chrissy woke to the sound of her own heart, loud and erratic as a bird trapped in a parlor.

For a moment, she couldn't remember where she was.

The light was too bright, the sheets too fine, and the weight across her waist was heavier and more solid than any coverlet she'd known.

Then Gabriel stirred beside her, nuzzling the bare curve of her hip with the unselfconsciousness of a man who'd made a habit of sleeping tangled up with someone else.

Or, perhaps, a man who had never wanted to, until now.

She tried to keep still, but a giggle escaped her as his breath tickled the sensitive skin at her navel. He looked up, eyes clear and mischievous.

"You're awake," he said.

"It would seem so."

He propped himself up, sheets pooling low across his hips.

Her gaze flickered there and stuck, taking in the broad shoulders, the chest mapped with muscle and the faintest dusting of hair.

She had always thought of him as dangerous, but this close—this naked—he seemed almost vulnerable.

The lines of his face were softer without the armor of cravat and coat; the dimple in his cheek deepened when he grinned, which was often, and almost always at her.

"You're staring," he said.

She felt herself flush. "I thought I was allowed."

He laughed, low and delighted. "You're allowed anything you like, Chrissy."

She reached out, tentative, and touched his chest. He shivered—not from cold, but from her.



Emboldened, she let her palm wander, marveling at the texture of him.

The smooth slide over bone, the unexpected resistance of hair at his sternum, the sudden valley where old bruises had faded but not quite disappeared, they all fascinated her.

Gabriel watched her, eyes half-lidded and hungry. He did not rush her, only followed her hand as it traced the line of his rib, then down, to the band of muscle at his abdomen, and lower still.

She hesitated at the sheet, unsure whether to breach that last bit of modesty.

He helped, drawing her hand under the covers. His cock was already hard, thick and impossibly hot beneath her palm.

She curled her fingers around it, shocked at how alive it felt. It pulsed against her grip, and Gabriel groaned, head tipping back.

“Is that all right?” she asked, genuinely concerned.

He caught her wrist and brought her hand up to his lips, pressing a kiss to the inside. “More than all right,” he said, and then, because he was incapable of resisting a challenge, he added, “Are you sure you’ve never done this before?”

She grinned, reckless. “You’ve forgotten the letters my grandmother kept.”

He grinned right back, the edge of it sharpening as she stroked him, slow and curious. She watched his face, cataloging every change—the way his lashes fluttered, the muscle in his jaw ticked, the way his breath sped up when she squeezed just so.

She drew back the covers, wanting to see him. He let her, leaning into her touch, utterly unashamed. His cock was beautiful, if such a thing could be, and she marveled

at the contrast of it—so smooth, so impossibly sensitive, compared to the rest of him.

She bent, pressed her lips to the head, and tasted salt and heat. Gabriel made a sound so startled and feral that she nearly laughed, but she was too fascinated.

“I read about this, too,” she said, before licking him again.

He caught her hair in one hand, guiding her gently. “You’re going to kill me,” he murmured, voice ragged with disbelief.

She found the rhythm that pleased him best, watching his reactions, greedy for every twitch and gasp. She wanted him to come apart, to know she could do that to him.

He held her off after a minute, hands gentle but insistent. “If you keep doing that, I’ll disgrace myself. I want to be inside you when I come.”

He pulled her up, kissing her with a need that left no doubt as to his intention. He then rolled her onto her back, settling between her thighs. The memory of pain from earlier made her stiffen for a heartbeat, but he sensed it and paused.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

She shook her head, and it was almost true. “Not enough to stop,” she whispered.

He slid inside, careful and slow, and this time she was ready—more than ready. There was pain, yes, but it was dulled by the pleasure of being filled, completed. She wrapped her legs around his waist, greedy for more, and he obliged, driving deeper with every thrust.

The room was filled with the sounds of their bodies, the slap of skin, the staccato of breath, the helpless gasps she couldn’t stifle. Gabriel set a punishing rhythm, sweat slick on his back, his hands braced on either side of her.

He reached down, thumb finding the place where her pleasure spiked, and circled, gentle at first, then rougher as she bucked beneath him.

She came apart, the orgasm crashing through her, blinding and total. She screamed, a sound that shocked even herself.

Gabriel groaned, following her into oblivion, and for a moment they were one thing, not two.

They collapsed together, boneless, both laughing and gasping.

He tucked her under his arm, nuzzling her temple. "I think I love you more every time," he said, voice dazed.

She kissed his chest, tasting salt and triumph. "I intend to hold you to that."

They lay together, silent but for the fire and the distant toll of a bell. After a while, Gabriel stroked her hair, lazy and content. "Tell me something," he said.

"Mmm?"

"Would you like to try everything your grandparents wrote about?"

She smiled against his skin. "I'd like that very much."

"Then we have our work cut out for us, Duchess."

She giggled. "I'm not afraid of work."

He rolled her on top of him, eyes alight with mischief. "Let's start now," he said, and she did.

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They must have drifted off, because the next thing Chrissy knew the fire had reduced itself to a glowing ember, and Gabriel was snoring—softly, but with the dogged persistence of a man who had never before allowed himself the luxury of sleeping through a day.

She lay beside him, her head on his arm and her hand splayed across the naked expanse of his chest. Every part of her ached in ways both anticipated and not, but the pain was softened by the memory of what had caused it.

She shifted, and Gabriel's arm tightened, pinning her with the possessiveness of a large predatory animal that has just discovered cuddling.

“Are you awake?” she whispered, uncertain whether she wanted to disturb him.

He grunted, and then, with a supreme effort of will, opened one blue eye. “I am now. And I am better for it.”

She laughed, pressing her nose to his shoulder. “Do you always sleep so deeply after...?”

He cracked a smile. “After what? Say it, Chrissy.”

She hid her face, mortified. “After that.”

He rolled, trapping her beneath him. “After making love to my wife? It would see so. Apparently, it is exhausting and delightful in equal measure.” He kissed her cheek, the corner of her mouth, then nipped at her ear. “You’re blushing again.”

“I can’t help it. My entire body is on fire.”

“Your entire body is made of desire. And it’s glorious.” He rolled onto his back, pulling her along so she sprawled over him, a blanket of skin and tangled hair.

They lay like that for a while, listening to the quiet of the house—the muffled footsteps of servants in the distant halls, the far-off clang of a bell, the murmur of birds in the tree outside the window.

“Do you want children?” she asked, suddenly, before she could lose her nerve. “I mean, of course an heir, but do you want many children?”

“I should think so. I’ve always wanted a houseful.” He paused, then grinned. “We could start today, if you like.”

She pinched his side, and he yelped.

“I believe we already have,” she chided.

He kissed her again, this time gentle and slow. “I want children. I want a family. I want you, always, Chrissy. I never thought I’d say any of that and mean it. But I do.” He looked at her, sober for once.

She nodded, her throat tight.

He traced a finger along her spine. “You look like a goddess. A very sleepy, very well-loved goddess.”

She snorted. “I’m a mess. My hair?—”

“Is perfect.” He bit her shoulder. “Stay like this. Forever.”

She wriggled down, resting her chin on his chest. They fell into a companionable silence, hands drifting in lazy circles across each other’s skin. Chrissy felt a wave of

satisfaction, deeper than any she'd known. "Gabriel?"

"Hm?"

"You will keep teaching me?" Her voice was shy, but her eyes were bright with challenge.

He propped himself on one elbow, looming over her with an expression of pure mischief. "If you're a willing student, I'll be the most diligent tutor in England."

She rolled her eyes. "You'll have to compete with my memory of Grandmama's letters. Grandpapa was very descriptive."

"Was he, now?" Gabriel's hands found her hips, gripping with just enough force to hint at his intent. "Then we shall see who is the better educator."

He flipped her, so she straddled his lap. She felt his cock stiffening beneath her and smiled, delighted at her own power.

"Am I allowed to be in control?" she asked, experimentally rolling her hips.

He groaned, hands anchoring her in place. "You're allowed anything, Chrissy. Absolutely anything."

She leaned forward, kissing him—first his lips, then his throat, then down his body, retracing the path she'd learned earlier. She loved the way he arched into her touch, the way he surrendered to her as easily as he had claimed her.

When she took him inside her, slowly, deliberately, it was less an act of conquest than a gift. She could see how much he needed her, how much it mattered that she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

They moved together, finding a rhythm that was equal parts tenderness and hunger. She set the pace, adjusting as she pleased, and Gabriel let her, worshiped her with his hands and his mouth and the dark, reverent things he whispered in her ear.

She came again, harder this time, and when Gabriel followed, the sound he made was so raw and honest it nearly broke her heart.

They collapsed, limbs tangled, both laughing and a little astonished.

“I think I’ll die of happiness,” he said, voice muffled in her hair.

She grinned, wrapping herself around him. “You’re not allowed. You have to show me everything, remember?”

“I will. Everything you want. Forever.”

She believed him.

Later, when he slept, she lay awake, watching the steady rise and fall of his chest. She had not expected to love him so much, so quickly. She hadn’t been certain she would love anyone at all, in the way that left her defenseless and full of joy.

She traced his profile in the dim light, memorizing every detail.

She was the luckiest woman in England.

And she would never, ever surrender him.