



Not His Usual Style

(Diamonds of London #10)

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Category: Historical

Description: Can a forbidden romance be right even when the brain—and society—scream disaster?

Montague Elias—Grey—Mountjoy—9th Earl of Greystone—is a man who values order and calm over everything else.

Now that he's home from the war, he sets his mind to the responsibilities of his title, for that has always been his lot in life; there is no other option.

It doesn't matter that he has no feelings, romantic or otherwise, for his fiancée—the match was arranged when he was a youth.

Miss Victoria Amherst—or rather *Tori* to her friends—isn't what society would call a suitable lady.

Her father is a baron, and a jeweler of some renowned skill, but the family is barely clinging to the beau monde regardless, for that skill doesn't extend to his love of the wagering tables.

Since *Tori* is his secretary—both socially and professionally—she accepts a few invitations because she's tired of watching life pass her by.

It's time to hunt for a husband.

When *Tori* wanders off at a rout, she finds a stunning diamond necklace in her host's study that she recognizes.

Knowing it's been stolen, she enlists the help of the first man she sees—the Earl of Greystone—who could be right for her... if he were free.

Before he knows what's happening, the unorthodox woman has embroiled him into what will surely be the on-dit of the Season, but he's intrigued despite himself.

She might not be in his usual style and quite forbidden, and he might not be spontaneous, yet perhaps none of it matters... until the ensuing scandal takes on a life of its own.

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Mountjoy House

Berkley Square

Mayfair, London

Their engagement had been in place since he'd attained his majority, thanks to a deal struck between their fathers.

Some men would have been thrilled to know their futures were set, but not Grey.

Though he'd always felt trapped, there was nothing for it.

That had been drilled into his head since he was a young man.

He'd been engaged to this woman for the better part of twenty years, and now that he was about to celebrate his thirty-ninth birthday, the time for dragging his feet had run out; it was time to do his duty and marry.

The date had been set and was coming up faster than he'd anticipated.

The trouble? He appreciated Sarah as an acquaintance and a good friend, but they shared absolutely no romantic feelings.

In fact, she was in love with someone else, but since their fathers arranged the match—with hers still alive and insisting they go through with it—there was nothing either of them could do about their circumstances.

“Listen, Grey, what we really need is for you to fall in love with another woman.”

“What the devil for? I’m already engaged to you.”

Sarah briefly rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “If you fall in love with someone, then she can marry my man while you and I can marry. Then we’ll swap partners.”

“I don’t even know how to respond to that bit of insanity.” Grey felt the astonishment in his own gaze as he stared at her.

To be fair, Sarah was quite attractive. Her dark brown hair naturally curled so when she put it up, it was thick and luxurious.

Coupled with brown doe eyes, a heart-shaped face, and a petite figure, she was every man’s ideal, for she could easily be picked up and carried about, tucked beneath his chin in an embrace, and would make a lovely hostess.

But she just wasn’t for him. Was she in his usual style? Of course. Why wouldn’t she be? Throughout the course of his life, he’d often exclusively chased brunettes, thought them the prettiest of all women, but how could he marry this one when there were no feelings?

“If you’ll think on it with an open mind, you’ll see it could work,” she insisted with hope in her eyes.

“Ridiculous.” He shook his head. “Our nuptial ceremony is scheduled for the end of the month. It’s too late to back out now, and I refuse to be wed to someone to break those vows for someone else, no matter that there is an agreement neither of us want.

” Keeping the union was a way to show respect to his dead father and to honor his wishes.

“You are serious.” It wasn’t a question, but a frown turned her lips down at the corners. “You intend to make certain that we’re stuck with each other even though our marriage will fail miserably.”

That was probably true.

“I’m sorry but this is how it’s always been with us. We might as well make the best of it. At least we’re friends. That will help.” Did he truly believe that? Yes and no, but there was enough history of other such unions within the beau monde that he could assume that love might grow.

Except, her heart already belonged to another.

“Oh, Grey, I never thought you could be so cruel.” She interlaced her fingers in her lap and fixed her gaze on them while her frown deepened. “You wish to marry even though there are no feelings between us except friendship? In fact, I consider you more of a brother than a fiancé.”

“Why not? Many marriages in the ton are based on less than that.”

“Don’t be silly. It will never work.”

“I expect it will work a good sight better than us wedding yet having affairs with other people.”

A huff of frustration escaped her. “So then you mean to bed me, make me bear your children when we both know we’ll never have soft feelings for each other?” Her pointed chin trembled as a sheen of tears went into her eyes. “That isn’t fair to me or to you.”

Dear God, how did we arrive at this juncture?

He glanced at her from his position on a chair near where she sat on a matching blue and gold brocade sofa.

“Of course I know that, yet here we are. And we have a history together, thanks to us enjoying a long engagement.” Possibly far too long as it were.

If he’d stopped ignoring the issue, and they’d wed ten years ago, would there even now be love between them?

It was something they would never have an answer to.

Because Sarah and he had been engaged for years—since she was fifteen—he’d gone off to war, but she’d consistently written him letters to keep his spirits up, telling him everything about her life, her time away in Brighton for finishing school, how much fun she was having while enjoying London Seasons.

Of course, her being close friends with his younger sister helped, which is how she’d eventually met the man to whom she’d pledged her heart.

God, what a coil.

“Well?” she continued as she raised her dark gaze to his. “What have you to say to that?”

“I don’t know.” Grey rubbed his forehead where a megrim was forming.

“Honestly, I can’t force you to marry me.

I’m not an ogre. You could grow to hate me, and I don’t wish to damage our friendship.

” He fell silent, thinking seriously over his next words.

“But the sad fact is, if you fall pregnant with another man’s child, I will be forced to claim it as my own to prevent scandal.

I would grow to hate you because of that.

And you would die inside to see your children with another man raised as mine.

” What a grim prospect. “It’s an impossible situation, and one wherein neither of us will win. ”

She leaned forward. “So then break the marriage contracts.”

“Your father will have my head.” Her father was a marquess, and one with a rather notorious temper.

Rumor had it that he’d killed two people in separate duels in his salad days, while other gossip held he’d bullied her older sister into marrying the man of his choice merely because said man made eyes at her across a ballroom.

“Right.” Her expression fell. “And you’ll be out so much coin for breaking the contracts, plus your name will be dragged through the muck. You’ll despise that.”

“I would.” He nodded. “To say nothing of your reputation being destroyed.” That was the last thing he wanted for her. Regardless of their feelings for one another, they had been together for a long time.

“Not if you take full responsibility.” There was so much pleading in her eyes, he very nearly buckled under the pressure, yet the last words of his father when he lay dying echoed in his head.

Marry the gel, Montague. She'll do you proud as a countess. Already used her dowry to make repairs at Greystone Hall regardless. Got to follow through.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, but I shouldn't need to, and I don't want my name or title marred for something neither of us want.

" There lay the crux. And they were trapped.

"I survived the war to come home and be the Earl of Greystone. I refuse to battle negative public opinion and gossip for no reason. Plus, I wish to honor my father's dying wishes.

I've told you that numerous times over the years. "

"You have, and as I remind you every time, your father cared little for you or your sister. From everything you've told me, he was a tyrant without feelings. He held you to an impossibly high standard then beat you when you fell short."

"Now you know why I chose the war over staying home in safety." He wouldn't do to think about his past; his father was gone, the damage already done.

It was a conundrum.

"Yes, but you came home and still had a life to live. Toss your responsibilities. Who cares what society might say. Lord knows they've done you little favor in the ten years since you've had the title.

" Heavy silence brewed between them, and he truly thought she might burst into tears, but she took herself under control.

"Grey, please. I want to marry Philip. He's had my heart for the past three years. "

“I am well aware of that.” In fact, said man was a friend of his, and one who he assumed at one time might court his sister, but instead, he’d fallen for Sarah... who was already engaged.

She wiped an escaped tear from her cheek.

The emerald stone in the engagement ring he’d given her ages ago winked in the sunlight that streamed into the room through the window—another reminder of what held them bound together.

“We’re tired of hiding our relationship, tired of having to take measures to prevent pregnancy due to my being engaged to you. We want to start a life together.”

Though he understood her plight and her feelings, they had both been aware of their duties since they were youths. This was always going to be the outcome. There was no other way. “You should have thought about that before you began an affair with him.”

Her eyes welled with tears. “Everything isn’t black or white, you know.” Tears sounded in her voice, and he steeled himself from them. “Why must you be so difficult?”

“Because this is my life. This is what you and I have always known. It is our duty, what we both knew was our lot for twenty years.”

“It doesn’t have to be. Don’t you see? Choose your own path. The world won’t end.”

Grey shrugged with a grunt. “It sounds harsh, I know, but my father already spent your dowry. Our fathers struck a bargain, and your father received a piece of property in the agreement, one that he has already built a cottage upon.”

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The pain and angst in her eyes cut him to the quick.

“What if I don’t want that anymore?” Sarah left her spot on the sofa to maneuver herself across his lap with her legs hanging off to one side while his arms came around her.

When she met his gaze, it was as if she tried to stare into his soul.

He had to acknowledge to himself that at one time, when he was much younger, he was perfectly comfortable with knowing he’d eventually marry her, for she was a lovely person inside and out.

Yet the chemistry and connection he expected never materialized.

Had he had his own share of affairs over the years?

Of course. Had he developed connections with a couple of those women?

Yes, and none of those feelings were present between him and Sarah.

It was a good indicator that they just weren’t a good romantic match.

“You can’t honestly tell me you want this marriage.

It’s not fair to either of us, and do you want to spend our remaining years on this earth miserable together, knowing a union is all too wrong? ”

Wrong, right? Did it matter when his responsibilities to the title weighed far too heavily on his shoulders?

“You have a point, Sarah, but...” He hated seeing the disappointment in her expression, but what else could he do?

“Sometimes, if you want to be free and to actually live your life without guilt or resentment, you have to accept the scandal.” When she smoothed a lock of hair from his brow, feelings of protection and friendship came over his person.

Inside of that, there was only fondness but not love.

“Will you promise to at least consider breaking the contracts?”

“This is our duty.”

“No, it’s your duty, but why can you not see that there is more to this existence than duty?

Than responsibility?” She huffed and a look of annoyance passed over her face.

“Your father is dead. You owe him nothing.” When she laid a palm against the side of his face and turned his head so that their gazes met again, his heart dropped, for he knew he was constantly failing her.

“I value our friendship, Grey, but I won’t marry you. ”

“You must, love. The ceremony is planned, the wedding dinner has been set and supplies ordered. The minister has been secured. In six days, we will be man and wife.”

Some of the color leached from her cheeks.

“No. I love Phillip; I want to marry him, start a life with him. You have no idea what it feels like to be trapped like this, to be kept from every one of your dreams.” Sarah shook her head.

“Tell me, if you fall in love with a woman, would you truly demand that I marry you in her stead?”

“I truly don’t know. It’s never happened to me.

” Because he’d been careful; he’d known he would marry Sarah all his life, so he’d guarded his heart.

Had he lost out on the love of his life due to that?

Perhaps, but again, that was something else he would never know the answer to, and that was a good thing. No sense torturing himself over it.

“How would you feel if you’d given your heart to a woman and all you wanted to do was spend your time and life with her because she was your everything...

only to remember that you were due to wed a woman you didn’t love like that.

” She wore her soul on her sleeve as she talked to him.

“Imagine how your heart would break, day after day, to know she would never truly be yours because you decided to choose responsibility and a promise over love.”

“Frankly, it sounds like a miserable life.”

“That is exactly my point.” As she wiped away another tear, she managed to offer him a watery smile. “Promise me that you will think about what I’ve said.”

“I promise.” But there wasn’t much he could do about it. They were rapidly approaching the eleventh hour.

“Thank you.” She patted his cheek. “Don’t hold me to a prison sentence just because you’re afraid of scandal and gossip.” One of her eyebrows rose. “Or bucking responsibility.”

God, she knew him so well. Why couldn’t they cultivate romance between them?

How could they have been such close friends all these years and carnal love not be exchanged?

But he nodded. “I shall bear it in mind.” Then, because he needed the confirmation, he pressed his lips to hers in a kiss that held absolutely no heat, no electricity, sparked no desire of any kind.

Quite honestly, it was as if he’d kissed his sister...

and expected a smack for his ridiculous actions.

Seconds later, he pulled away. “Well, there is that, hmm? At least we’re consistent.

” They blinked at each other, and then laughed, for it was just as he’d suspected.

While theirs was a match made on affection and friendship and parental guidance, there was no desire or passion.

Then Sarah gave him a playful smack to his shoulder. “Don’t be an arse, Grey,” she

said as she moved off his lap.

“I’ll try not to be.” He stood, for she didn’t appear to wish to return to her place on the sofa, and neither did she call for a refresh of the teapot. “What are your plans for the evening? I can take you driving if you wish it.”

“Oh.” A red blush stained her cheeks. “That is a lovely offer but I’m doing the same with Phillip then we are going to attend the opera. I have a new gown for the occasion.”

“I see, but I’ll wager you look splendid.

” A lesser man would have been jealous of her blatantly touting her relationship in his face, especially since they would wed in six days, but he understood.

“Don’t be overly blatant about it, though.

Embarrassment is not something I wish to have my name attached to.

Neither of us need the speculation that there might be something wrong with me. ”

“Other than stubbornness?”

He pulled a face. “Touché.” And if he didn’t break the marriage contracts, would he need to endure that continuously when she continued to see the love of her life outside the bounds of their union?

“Don’t worry. I shall be discreet. After all, Phillip is a newly minted viscount. He doesn’t wish to have society’s gossips come down on him either.”

How would her father react knowing that his daughter had settled for a viscount over

an earl? Well, that was none of his business, and for the moment, he would still hold her to her promise. In six days, they would recite vows to one another, just as they'd always been told would happen.

“Have a lovely evening, then.”

“Thank you, Grey. I do hope something unexpected occurs for both of us that will set us on the paths we should be walking instead of the ones we were told we needed to.” Then, with a wave, she left the room.

For long moments he stared at the spot she'd just vacated and wondered how everything had gone so wrong? For years there had been a certain level of comfort and security in knowing his future had been mapped out. Now, nothing was going according to those plans.

Damn. What am I supposed to do now?

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Mayfair, London

England

Miss Victoria Amherst—Tori to her closest friends—sat in one of the comfortable leather, winged-back chairs in her father’s study, curled up with her legs tucked beneath her. As she consulted a leatherbound notebook in her lap, she glanced at her father.

“Once more, I feel the need to remind you that I am acting as your social secretary, Papa, so that means running through your schedule today.”

Again, because her father was a jeweler of some renowned skill to many of the rich and titled people within the ton , and he was somewhat absent minded, especially when working on a project.

Added to that fact, he was also Baron Irvington, which meant they were part of the beau monde , the very world in which he provided jewelry.

He waved a hand. “What does it matter? I am quite busy with the shop just now and don’t have the time to spare for society.”

“Be that as it may, you still have obligations.” Tori turned to a page in her notebook.

“Since it’s Monday, your week is clogged with client meetings.

There are three with potential customers who wish to design parures, and an

additional four with people for final looks and fittings.

On Wednesday you have two repairs for settings that have come loose. ”

“Yes, I’m aware of all of those.”

Because he had certain skills when it came to designing jewelry and cutting gemstones, he and his assistant had renovated the downstairs parlor into an office and showroom of sorts where he would meet with clients in a more relaxed setting.

The actual work on the pieces happened at their shop in a small, cul-de-sac just off Fleet Street, called Nightingale Lane.

It consisted of only two rooms, the front or fitting room where there were some displays made of paste pieces to entice customers into the shop, and it was where the clients were fitted for their new jewelry as well as picking those items up once finished, repaired, or cleaned.

Then there was the back room of the shop where the jewelry was actually made and assembled.

Metals were manipulated there, gemstones were cut and polished, sometimes backed with foils to make them appear more brilliant under candlelight.

Pearls were strung, cameos carved, and whatever else a jeweler needed to do.

Sometimes her father and his assistant would work long into the night on pieces because it was what they both enjoyed doing.

“Are you also aware of the societal invitations you’ve accepted for the week?” she pressed as she consulted her notes. “The most urgent of which is the rout at Lord

Dawson's home tonight?"

That brought his head up, and for a moment, he stared at her with one eye while his other was behind a jeweler's loupe. Then he apparently remembered he had the device strapped about his forehead and removed the leather strap, laying it on his desk.

"Right, and there is a reason for that." After fumbling through the items that littered his desktop—pieces of jewelry, books, various velvet lined boxes, a few empty teacups—he perched a pair of round, silver-rimmed spectacles on the tip of his nose.

"I've been meaning to speak with you about this very thing but somehow always become distracted. "

Tori chuckled. "What you find fascinating with gemstones is beyond me."

"Each one has different facets, like personalities, if you will, and when they are cut, it is even more obvious and beautiful. Just as you are among all the other women in the ton ." He grinned warmly at her, and for a moment, she remembered him as he'd been...

the loving father she'd known in her childhood, before gambling infected his blood and he'd lost most of the coin in their family coffers.

Before he became obsessed with his work in the hopes of rebuilding that wealth.

"Don't be silly, Papa."

"I'm entirely serious. You will turn nine and twenty later this year, and you remain unmatched."

She blew out a breath that ruffled the escaped strands of blonde hair on her forehead.
“Not this again.”

Ignoring her objection, her father continued.

“My darling, when you had your Come Out eight long years ago, you were a Diamond, and I loved that for you. You were an Incomparable. You had at least ten offers that year alone... but you wanted none of them. Traded every one of those titled men’s offers for the love of a no-name soldier. ”

A tide of hot anger rose in her chest. “His name was Louis, and you know it.” In some annoyance, Tori uncurled from the chair and thrust to her feet.

“He proposed, Papa. It wasn’t his fault that two months after that, when he returned to his place in the war, he was immediately killed in battle.

” The ache in her heart, though it had faded over the years, still managed to hurt and remind her of the loss.

She’d been a naïve young woman of twenty with the world at her feet.

It hadn’t mattered that society had lauded her looks or the manners her mother had ingrained into her; she wanted the nondescript soldier she’d met at a rout and then found herself engaged six weeks later.

It had been a short-lived relationship, but it had been her first love... her only love. After that, she’d vowed not to give away her heart again, because it was fragile and painful when it broke.

“I realize that, my girl, but you do need to marry. You’ve had a handful of Seasons yet have turned up your nose at every man seeking a courtship.”

“Because none of them interested me or caused my heart to flutter.” And if she didn’t change her stance on that, her heart would never feel those things again.

“Ah, holding out for a title.” Before she could protest, he looked at her from over the rims of his spectacles. “Perhaps you should consider my assistant, Mr. Fowler.”

“What?” Surely, he wasn’t serious. “Mr. Fowler is a mousy little man who is afraid of his own shadow half the time. He keeps himself tucked away in the shop, and, excuse me for saying this, but he has nothing to recommend him outside of his jewelry making skills.”

“But he adores you, and he’s already spoken to me about paying his addresses.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Absolutely not. I don’t care for him in that way.”

“You could if you give him a chance.”

“Papa, you know I love you, but in this I need to oppose your wishes.”

“You’re nearly on the shelf, my dear, and I want to make certain you are looked after in your future. Mr. Fowler might not be the most exciting or handsome of men, but he has a stable income, he’s a good man, and he will treat you well.”

And he is incredibly dull with no opinions of his own.

“I’m sure he will, but no thank you. When, or if, I enter into a relationship, I’ll do it on my terms. To my way of thinking, a man needs to be larger than life and willing to throw in his lot with a woman no matter what for however she needs him.

I’m afraid your assistant, if push came to shove, would prove a coward. ”

“That is quite a dim assessment of him. He is quite helpful as an assistant.”

“And there is nothing wrong with that. You can keep him, but as for me? A man will need to prove himself in a very unorthodox way before I’ll take notice of him.

” With a sigh, she consulted her notes once more.

“Now, back to your schedule tonight. Lord Dawson’s rout.

Remember, you like him well enough and the two of you can converse on the Roman pavement found not too far from his country estate in Devonshire. ”

“Ah, yes, he’s promised to let me tour it soon.”

Growing up with her father as a jeweler who’d been tapped to make pieces for some of the highest-ranking members of the beau monde , she knew much about jewels, metals, and how to tell real gems from fake—glass and paste—but her father’s tastes also ran to jewelry from the ancient world as well as any artifacts therein.

While that was lovely, her personal favorites came from France and Italy.

Especially those that stemmed from the royalty of both countries.

She had seen drawings of some pieces belonging to Marie Antoinette—allegedly—and she was anxious to see them in person.

There were so many diamonds that stemmed from that time in history.

How breathtaking would it be to see them with her own eyes?

“Then tonight would be perfect for you to remind him of that fact.” Making a

notation on her page, she looked at her father. “I’ve asked your valet to have your evening attire pressed.”

He nodded. “Dawson’s wife sent me a letter mentioning the clasp on one of her bracelets is loose. I’ll bring my tools.”

Clearly, he had missed the point of such an evening. Tamping down on the urge to huff in frustration, Tori said, “That is hardly the purpose of a rout, Papa.”

“Business and pleasure.” He shrugged and his attention turned once more to the papers on his desk. “Why not?”

This time she did huff. “I don’t want you going to the card tables, either. We are barely managing to keep this household running as it is.”

Guilt reflected in his expression. “I’ve mucked things up, haven’t I?”

It would be kinder to lie, but it did have an impact on her own future.

“You have, quite honestly. It makes things difficult.” Already, there wasn’t enough coin to offer a dowry, which limited her options, and since she was her father’s only offspring, the title of baron would go to one of her distant second cousins, wherever they were.

His eyes brightened. “You know, if you were to marry a rich man...”

A wave of hot annoyance rose in her chest as she snapped her notebook closed. “I shouldn’t have to pay for your sins.” That wasn’t fair, and she refused to offer her life, her freedom, her future, up for that sacrifice.

“While I agree in theory, the reality is far sadder and more sobering.”

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“No.” She shook her head. “That is where I draw the line. I refuse to marry a rich man just so you can use his coin to fund your gambling habit.” With that, she moved toward the door. “We are leaving this house tonight at seven o’clock promptly for the rout. Make certain you are ready.”

Then she exited the study while her chest shook with annoyance and a bit of anger.

Yes, she wanted the freedom to choose the man she would marry.

He would need to be extraordinary and not fit into the usual ton mold.

She didn’t want to be dictated to or ordered about, neither did she want to be treated as if she were an item to be collected—which often happened due to her looks—because men thought she hadn’t a brain in her head.

Marriage should be a partnership with equal footing, ideas, and decisions.

Did such a man exist in her world? Only time would tell, but she would not—in fact she would never entertain—the acceptance of a man with a vice like gambling as her father suffered from. It destroyed more than it helped.

Dawson House

Grosvenor’s Square

Mayfair, London

Tori nodded and smiled at the people in the group she chatted with.

There was a mix of both ladies and gentlemen, but their conversation was far from stimulating.

Instead, it consisted of gossip about some of the attendees as well as the weather and the fact that the autumn chill was rapidly approaching.

Why could they not talk about the horrible way veteran soldiers were still treated by the government and the populace?

Why could they not discuss possible solutions to that or the rampant abandonment of unwanted children?

Or how to solve the huge disparity between the rich and poor?

Or how someone should create a way to teach reading and writing to more people than the rich or the males.

For an ignorant population was one easily controlled.

Did anyone care about those topics?

Her father might have his faults, but he had been adamant that she have a chance to be educated and learn a few languages. With a soft smile, she bounced her gaze to him. He held court amidst a knot of men around his own age, laughing as they swapped stories from their youth.

At least he was happy and mingling.

After murmuring an excuse, Tori broke away from the group but not without a few of

the men offering either protests or wishing to fetch her a punch or champagne, which she politely declined.

She'd seen how their glances had lingered on her bosom instead of her face, and that meant they weren't worthy of her attention.

Besides, once the conversation turned dull, her mind started wandering and she needed something more thought-provoking to entertain her.

Those thoughts led her away from the drawing room and down the stairs to the lower level.

Perhaps she'd poke through her host's study or library to investigate his bookshelves.

Finally deciding on the library, she sneaked inside the room and waited for her eyes to adjust to the dim illumination brought forth by one candle that guttered in a silver holder on a table.

Clearly, this room wasn't meant to be used during the rout, and the solitude suited her just fine.

Sometimes, being around crowds and people grated on her nerves.

The sudden silence in this room after the noise from the drawing room was a most welcome relief.

Scents of leather, old books, and lingering pipe smoke teased her nose.

Those sorts of smells brought her comfort and soothed her frazzled nerves.

As she strolled in front of the shelves of books, she drew a gloved fingertip along

some of the spines.

By and large, the reading material was as dull as the conversation upstairs, but then, she suspected that was the fate of most ton libraries.

No one wanted to have even a whisper of scandal about them.

Cowards.

As she drifted to the last shelf, she despaired of ever finding anything of interest, but she climbed the treads of a wooden ladder, and on one of the top shelves there was an interesting carved wooden box that depicted renderings of the Fates complete with fruit trees and scrollwork.

Truly a beautiful piece and at least fifty years old, and since curiosity got the better of her, Tori propped the box onto the tread of the ladder above her then raised the lid.

“Oh, goodness!” Her whispered exclamation sounded overly loud in the space, and she quickly threw a glance at the still-closed door. “How did you come to be here?”

Inside, resting on a length of crumpled and faded black velvet was the most gaudy but impressive diamond necklace set in silver she had ever seen.

A large, teardrop-shaped diamond featured prominently at the front, flanked by several round and square cut diamonds on either side.

The gems sparkled like mad in the dim illumination, looking for all the world like preserved pieces of ice shining on a backdrop of darkened heavens, and from the construction of the piece, it could easily double as a tiara.

“Merciful heavens.”

But as she gawked at the diamonds, excitement twisted down her spine, for she recognized the craftsmanship and the baroque style of the piece.

And what was more, she knew this particular piece, for it had been written about in many newspapers and periodicals over the years.

There was intense speculation around the jeweler and collector communities that many pieces which had belonged to Marie Antoinette had gone missing following her execution.

Whether they were stolen by her contemporaries or smuggled away by servants, no one knew, but here she was, holding one of the missing pieces in her hand.

How did it come to be here in Lord Dawson's library?

Had he bought it at an underground auction, or had he stolen it?

She couldn't say, but it certainly didn't belong here, and as she turned the box this way and that, even in the low light she could see that the stones were genuine.

"Dear God, this needs to be returned to France." Just holding such a thing in her hand knowing of the provenance of the piece and the woman to whom it belonged was awe-inspiring.

"I am literally holding a piece of history." And what was more, it was quite a famous piece mentioned in the paper a few nights ago, for the necklace had been stolen from a jeweler in Mayfair, where it was being repaired and cleaned for auction.

The truth about how Lord Dawson had come by it wasn't mentioned, but the blurb in the paper did say that Bow Street was hunting down clues regarding the theft from the jeweler's shop, not what Lord Dawson had gotten up to. In that moment, she made

a decision that would no doubt change the course of her entire life.

After removing the necklace from the velvet, she returned the box to where she'd found it, then swiftly climbed down the ladder, went so far as to even move the ladder so no one would suspect the box had been moved.

What to do now? With a glance about the library, her gaze went to the double French doors at the rear, which led to the back gardens, and from there she could either escape into the shadow-drenched square or go 'round the house to the front and either summon her father's carriage or hire a hack.

Yet with thousands of pounds worth of diamonds clutched in her hand, that probably would spell disaster.

She frowned. Above everything, she needed to rescue the necklace and somehow see it back to the royal family of Louis XVI. Though the odds of doing just that escaped her at the moment, she was determined to see it through.

Then the unmistakable click of the door latch echoed through her consciousness, and she gasped as her heartbeat accelerated. Dear Lord, first things first. She needed to hide! But where?

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Good God, can this evening prove any more dull?

At the last second, Grey managed to school his features into his customary mask of politeness before anyone could call him out of his inattention.

Even though his fiancée stood dutifully at his side, and she was everything she should be, everything the beau monde expected of her, the sad fact was that Lady Sarah's eyes didn't light until she saw the man she would rather marry across the room.

Hellfire and damnation.

Cold guilt sat heavy in his gut where it clashed with the weight of responsibility.

Why was it wrong to want to honor his father's final wishes by marrying this woman?

This was what he had been born to; so had she.

They'd both known their duties from the moment they could think for themselves.

That was how the English beau monde society worked.

She leaned into him and whispered, "If you continue to scowl, people are going to start feeling uncomfortable, and it was your idea that we make a happy, united front."

"Right." With that reminder, he forced himself to grin, albeit slightly. He returned a few greetings and inquiries then his thoughts took over once more.

Their host of the evening, the rotund Lord Dawson, who also possessed thinning mousy brown hair and high collar points, swaggered about as if he were Prinny himself.

“I have recently come by quite a collector’s dream.

And I believe the piece is worth a king’s ransom, which is why I’d like to sell it at auction.

Would you like to see it before then?” he bragged to some of his fellows who clustered around him like sycophantic flies.

Of course, they all said they did with nodding heads as if they were marionettes.

Grey rolled his eyes to the frescoed ceiling as his thoughts continued to trot through his head.

Frankly, having a match arranged by their fathers was, by far, easier, but did that mean it was still a good idea?

Was he cheating himself by not going through the gambit of courting a woman, of giving his heart away to someone?

Did it matter?

Was he missing out on a life experience because of that?

Over the years, he’d had liaisons with various women—after all he wasn’t a monk—but none of them were serious because he was already engaged.

However, if he were honest with himself, knowing his fiancée wasn’t in love with

him—or even in lust—and she would never be was a bit of a blow to his ego.

He was an earl, damn it all to hell. Didn't that account for something these days?

And even though he knew beau monde marriages were hardly ever love matches, it made him a tad salty that Sarah didn't care more for him than a good friend.

Not for worlds would he admit to anyone—not even his best friend—that in his heart of hearts, he wanted to be liked for himself.

Beyond whom he was, beyond his title, beyond what he could do for someone or elevate them in society.

Of course, it didn't matter since he'd been engaged for nearly half his life, and she considered him little more than an ogre.

All of it together was beginning to crush his soul.

As he sent his gaze around the mass of guests in the drawing room, the walls felt as if they were moving in on him.

Sweat pasted the fine lawn of his shirt to his back, but he resisted the urge to tug at the knot of his cravat.

Leaning toward Sarah, he whispered, "I need some air and perhaps a few moments to myself."

Then, not waiting for her response and unable to deal with the crowds in the drawing room, he excused himself.

Not that she would mind overly much since she was making eyes at the man who

held her heart.

Jealousy stabbed through his chest. In a perfect world, his fiancée would look at him like that and perhaps he would do the same with her, but there were no romantic feelings between them, and there never would be.

God, I need a drink. Seeking out something stronger than punch or lemonade would help to make his existence more palatable, and he rather hoped Dawson had a decent sideboard in the library or even a study if one was available.

The moment he stepped into the library, he breathed a sigh of relief.

It was quiet here; the noise of laughter and gaiety from upstairs faded and wasn't such an assault on his ears.

And here, without so many bodies stuffed into one place, the ambient, cooler temperature was welcome on his skin.

After locating the sideboard, he immediately moved in that direction.

With a sigh, he poured out a double measure of brandy into a cut crystal glass and took his first sip while edging toward the set of French-paned doors that led to the small rear garden.

Darkness engulfed the area, but with the slight silvery moonlight, he discerned the outlines of ornamental fruit trees and various shrubberies that lined the brick walls around the garden.

The play of moonlight and shadows made it a magical scene where one could perhaps hide for a time and forget the cares of one's world.

Soon it would be the Samhain season, and he rather looked forward to the crispness in the air, the crunching leaves, the smell of smoke on the wind, the spooky feelings that would race along his spine, the presence of apples in the foods he would eat, as well as the soft flicker of candlelight in windows and in gourd lanterns children would carve for that day.

Ah, to be a child again without worries to weigh him down, or a life that was less than ideal.

He took another long sip from the brandy and welcomed the burn of the alcohol in his throat.

Of course, the advancement of the calendar meant that his wedding would have been accomplished by the time Samhain came 'round. Would Sarah grow to hate him as he'd predicted?

Would he feel the same for her after natural steps in life made themselves known?

Why is everything so damned complicated?

Oddly, a faint almost ghostly aroma of lilies and lemon wafted to his nose.

Delicate yet sophisticated, he held his glass a bit away so the brandy wouldn't taint that floral bouquet.

Where the devil was it coming from? Then the rustle of fabric alerted him to the presence of someone else, and a woman at that.

Turning, he caught sight of a figure moving through the gloom, keeping to the shadows in the room, and his chest tightened.

Damnation, but it was a woman! Dressed in a navy gown trimmed with hundreds of tiny clear glass beads that sparkled with her every movement, he gasped when she passed a candle.

Hair the color of platinum and gold, it glimmered in the dim illumination, but it was the gray-blue eyes, and the full lips curved downward in a pout that drew his attention...

seconds before his gaze dropped to a generous bosom framed by the low bodice of the spectacular gown.

“Shit.” He hadn’t meant to say that aloud, yet that one-word utterance sounded overly loud in the hushed silence.

The woman startled and gasped. She paused, staring at him as he did the same to her.

Then he realized she carried something that glittered and glimmered in the low candlelight. “What the devil are you doing in here?”

She gave him a quick glance. “Is this your house?”

“No.”

“Then it’s none of your business what I’m doing.” As she spoke, the woman came toward him. Surely, she wasn’t here for a tryst... “Please move. I need to exit the premises.”

Well, that answered one question. “Why?”

“I’m going home.”

“I don’t think so.” Grey stayed her with his free hand. “What is that you’re holding?”

“Again, it is not your business.” The woman wrenched from his grasp.

With a gaze narrowed on her, he drained the contents of his glass then rested it on a nearby shelf as she put her hand behind her back. “Did you steal something?”

“No...” When he cocked an eyebrow, she added, “Only because Lord Dawson stole it first.”

“What?” Did he refer to her claim, or was he questioning... everything?

She blew out a breath and gave him a look that proclaimed him a nodcock. Slowly, she held up the diamond necklace set in silver. “Do you recognize this piece?”

“Of course not. What am I, a jewel thief?”

“It would have been easier if you were.” The stranger shook her head. “This is the tiara mentioned in an article in The Times three days ago. It was stolen from a prominent jeweler’s shop. The jeweler had it on loan from the French ambassador.”

His eyebrows soared, for that he did know. The headline had caught his attention. “And said ambassador said that it had been stolen more than a month past, though. Why was the crime only reported to authorities and the press three days prior?”

“Uh...” Surprise flitted through her expression, and those damned arresting eyes rounded. “Truly? Where did you hear that?”

Grey shrugged. “Perhaps at my club. I don’t remember.”

Again, she studied him, and suddenly, he hoped she found what she was searching

for. Then she nodded. “Originally, this necklace had been stolen or lost during the revolution. And now I find it hidden in Lord Dawson’s study.”

That must have been the piece he was bragging about shortly before Grey left the drawing room. “So, you’re taking it why?”

“To give it back to the ambassador.”

“Is he still in the country?”

“I don’t know, but I intend to discover that.”

With some longing, he glanced toward the sideboard where the crystal decanter of brandy waited.

“Do you even know where he is? Or that the ambassador was telling the truth about the theft? Perhaps he’s in on it and wanted to sell the piece for a profit.

” What the hell was wrong with him? He did not need to embroil himself in this Drury Lane performance.

“Of course I don’t know that, but—”

“Do you have a vehicle ready to whisk you away?”

“No, yet I—”

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Why did he care to get involved? There was no immediate answer, only that she was gorgeous and that made him curious.

Beautiful women didn't skulk about a host's home, poking into places they weren't invited and then stealing valuable jewelry on an altruistic bent.

"You are aware that stealing will lead you to Newgate or another prison?"

"Yes, but only if you raise an alarm." She looked at him with eyes full of hope, long lashes framing said eyes, and a quivering bottom lip.

"Please help me. It's not right what Lord Dawson has done.

If he wants to sell it at auction and pocket the proceeds, that's theft as well.

This belongs to the people of France. After all, wasn't riches what the revolution was all about? "

"Among other things." It was damned interesting she implored his help without even knowing who he was. Then he frowned. "Why do you care?"

"My father is a jeweler. I know pieces and the value of stones. This." She hefted the necklace, and the diamonds resembled large drops of rain in the low light.

"Is priceless and a piece of history. I suspect it once belonged to Marie Antoinette, possibly given to her by her husband upon their wedding."

Well, shit. That intrigued him even more.

“Let me see if I remember that history.” Keeping access to the garden doors blocked, he crossed his arms at his chest. “Marie Antoinette married Louis XVI, the future King of France, on May 16, 1770, at the Palace of Versailles. The union was intended to solidify the Franco-Austrian alliance, a political move aimed at improving relations between the two nations.”

“Yes, yes, so you are clever at recitation. That proves nothing. Will you assist me or not?” A hint of annoyance wove through her voice.

That urged a half-grin from him. How... enchanting.

“I am not finished.” Feeling oddly tickled with the circumstances, he winked.

“At the time of their wedding, Louis was the Dauphin, the heir apparent to the French throne, and Marie Antoinette was the daughter of Holy Roman Emperor Francis I and Empress Maria Theresa. I remember my grandparents talking about the event. From what I can recall, the ceremony took place amidst elaborate celebrations, but it also faced opposition from some French elites and commoners who were wary of the alliance.”

The still-unknown stranger nodded. “Right, and despite the political significance of the union, the marriage faced challenges, including a seven-year period where it was not consummated. Of course, that fed many rumors and gossip.” Her expression suggested she didn’t believe those particular rumors.

“How can someone be married for that long and not succumb to desire or at least drunken curiosity?”

“Ha.” How ironic. Not consummating a marriage for seven years.

Was that something else he faced with his arranged and looming nuptials?

Yet he apparently had information she didn't know.

"It is said that Louis the XVI had a phimosis, which is a condition that prevents a correct erection and makes coitus painful. Eventually, he had surgery to fix the issue."

"Now that is interesting."

"Indeed. It's been said while the marriage initially served a political purpose and faced opposition from the French, the couple eventually developed a bond and had four children. Of course, they both took lovers, though her string of trysts was more impressive than his."

"That is sad, really. Perhaps their marriage never found love within it." She frowned as she trained her gaze on the glittering necklace in her hand. "I wonder if they thought they were constantly in a prison of sorts."

Well, hell. Of course she couldn't know the private, tortured thoughts he had been struggling with over the past months, but her words rang far too true.

"I suppose we will never know the parameters of their union. It is all speculation at this point." He shrugged.

"However, when the couple was guillotined in 1793 during the French Revolution, marking the end of their reign and the monarchy, I also wonder if they were both relieved to be put out of that particular misery."

A shiver wracked her shoulders. "It is incredible those events took place only twenty-five years ago." When she met his gaze, there were questions shadowing hers. "Do

you ever wonder, also, whether such a thing could happen in the world again?"

"What, a revolution?"

"Yes. I know the disparity between the rich and poor in England currently is a horrid divide, but do you believe the general populace would revolt against the rich and kill them all like what happened in France?"

"I suppose it's possible, but the people would need to come together and decide en masse that they wish to work toward a common goal.

Unfortunately, from my experience, there is far too much antipathy and laziness for that to occur again.

" He frowned. "Wars against another country? Possibly, but against something inherently wrong right in front of their noses? Not likely. It's far easier to blame others who are different for those wrongs than the people who created the problems to begin with. "

As shouts from somewhere within the bowels of the house drifted to their location, the woman before him gasped. Fear shadowed her eyes. "Do you think Lord Dawson has discovered the necklace is gone?"

"There is a good possibility."

"Oh, no. I thought I had more time." When she stuffed the diamond necklace into the bodice of her gown, no doubt held in place by the stays, Grey's mind suddenly jogged to a dark place where he was divesting this woman of said gown... merely to get at the jewels, of course.

Liar!

“It seems that anything remotely connected to the criminal element is always short on time.” Before she could escape, he slipped the fingers of one hand about her delicate wrist. Would he truly give her over to Lord Dawson?

She didn’t have the look of a thief yet there was a king’s ransom of diamonds nestled between her breasts.

“Let me go.” Frantically, she tugged at his hold. “Dawson is the criminal, not me.”

Until he could properly figure out the puzzle and decide if she was telling the truth, he would remain with her.

He met her gaze, yanked her a tiny bit closer to himself, and in the dim illumination, they shared a few breaths, and the heat of her worked to further separate him from his sanity and control.

Damn it all. The woman would be mugged or worse by herself, especially while carrying such precious cargo.

At least it would get him away from the dull rout upstairs.

“I’m coming with you. At least then you’ll be halfway safe.”

“What? That is insane. There is no need to put yourself in danger.”

Yes, indeed, he’d lost his mind. Perhaps it was the floral, lemon scent of her perfume, or perhaps it was the ethereal look of her in those shadows as if she had stepped directly from the midnight sky to bedevil him, or perhaps it was the lure and intrigue of her daring to take away an insanely valuable necklace of dubious provenance.

But whatever drew him, it was enough for him to lead her out of the library, quietly

close the doors behind him them, and then escorted her into the shadows of the garden beyond.

What they would do after that, he had no idea, yet the prospect of an adventure before the noose of a loveless marriage and responsibility to his title tightened about his neck. Where it would end he also couldn't say, but he looked forward to this little bit of madness.

Because perhaps I truly am a nodcock.

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Oh, dear Lord.

Tori's heartbeat hammered as she and the handsome stranger slipped into the garden.

She only knew him by sight, for she'd been in the drawing room when he'd entered with a woman who'd been introduced as his fiancée.

Why the Earl of Greystone would take an interest in the necklace allegedly belonging to Marie Antoinette, she had no idea, but he hadn't relinquished his grip around her wrist.

"Where are we going?" she managed to whisper as the earl kept to the shadows but didn't move far from the library doors.

Why of all nights did Lord Dawson remember he had this piece and want to show it off to friends?

And drat it all, had her father been the one to wish to see it if the conversation had got 'round to jewels? That was entirely possible, because he couldn't help himself, and he was unable to resist once the topic came to gems.

"I don't know yet, but I wish to understand what we're up against, so hush.

" As he spoke, he pressed her further backward into the clinging darkness until the brickwork of the house prevented continued movement.

"I'm going back inside—briefly to reconnoiter—but you need to promise you won't

run off. ”

She snorted. “I am not going to promise you that since I’m the one standing here with thousands of pounds worth of diamonds in my bodice.” In fact, some of the stones pressed into her breasts, and they were quite cold and oddly comforting.

When he flicked his gaze to her décolletage, heat rose in her cheeks. “Which was your decision. Perhaps you won’t do something so rash and irresponsible the next time.”

“Irresponsible? That is quite an assumption to make.” She glared at him. “I have a feeling you are a prick, Your Lordship.”

His eyebrows shot upward into his hairline, and she had the odd question of whether his chestnut hair was soft or coarse. “Now who is the one making assumptions? If you only knew what I have struggled with—still do—in my life, you wouldn’t be so quick to judge.”

“Ha.” As much as she wanted to put her hands back on his chest and perhaps explore that deliciously hard expanse of his form, she refrained.

Under no circumstances could she let her curiosity or his mystery distract her from her mission of theft.

“Just admit that what you said wasn’t very gentlemanly.

You know me not at all, have no idea of what motivates me.

” She pushed off the wall. Why was it so important that she tell him what kind of woman she was?

They were strangers, for goodness' sake. "In fact, I—"

"Good Lord, woman, stop talking!" Annoyance went through his command seconds before his arms came about her, and he covered her lips with his, effectively stemming her stream of words.

Surprise flew through her chest, both at the effrontery of this man and that the kiss had caught her off guard. But as kisses went, it was decent enough yet hardly an introduction and certainly didn't inspire passion.

Except... his lips cradled hers in a way that had her craving a more in-depth kiss, and the heat of him, the feeling of being trapped between the wall and his chest released a host of tingles through her lower belly.

And that tiny hint of brandy on his mouth oddly made her wish to explore further, to chase that intriguing taste.

What is wrong with me?

She raised her gaze to his as he looked at her, and she pulled back in an effort to read his expression.

Though it was slightly comforting to see the same shock in his eyes, it was also disconcerting that he didn't seem in the least bit guilty to have kissed someone who wasn't his fiancée.

With an almost inaudible sigh of regret, Tori thrust away the thought of kissing him back, merely to experience the feel of his lips on hers again.

This is wrong.

Was he the philandering sort, then? Why would he willingly kiss a woman while he was engaged to another?

Not knowing, and in solidarity for his poor fiancée who might or might not know of his wandering eye, Tori pushed him away then raised a hand and gave his cheek a good slap.

The sound of her glove hitting his flesh seemed overly loud in the silence of the garden.

Dear heavens, I've assaulted an earl.

Immediately, he stumbled back a few steps with a hand to his cheek. "What the devil was that for?" he hissed then moved them both further from the library doors.

"On principle," she managed to eek out.

"What the hell does that mean?"

How could she speak when the taste of him lingered on her lips and the warmth of his kiss left queer little tingles dancing through her lower belly?

Then she cleared her throat. Of course, she needed to explain.

"Are you not the Earl of Greystone?" Her chest heaved, which only made the diamonds press more urgently against her skin.

Surprise jumped into his eyes. "Yes, but I fail to see what that has to do with anything."

"It has everything to do with what just happened!" The whispered words were a bit

hissed as her aggravation grew. “Are you not engaged to be married soon?” One of her eyebrows rose in challenge.

“I am, but—”

She chopped the air with a hand. Her reticule dangled from her wrist. Why the devil had she not put the necklace into her bag?

Because he’d startled her and scattered her thoughts...

and continued to do so. Why did he have to smell so delicious?

Hints of citrus, sage, and the veriest note of leather teased her nose.

Would it be bad form to drift closer to him and give him a sniff?

Focus, Tori! “Yet you kissed me . Such a sacred thing should be reserved for your fiancée.” At least that was what she’d always thought.

“That is not for you to say. For that matter, trust me when I tell you that Lady Sarah will not mind.”

“I find that difficult to believe.”

“Why?”

“Why not? If I were engaged to a man of your looks and position, I would mind very much indeed that you were galivanting about, kissing other women.” Why did she feel the need to tell him that?

The heat of embarrassment went through her cheeks.

“Pardon the plain speaking. It’s a habit I’ve fallen into in recent years. ”

“Interesting, but since I know you not at all, I have no idea if you are telling me the truth, and if you are, I don’t suppose it matters.

” Though he seemed a bit flustered, he didn’t lose control of his person.

Lucky man, him. She wished she could be as stoic, for giving in to emotions had often been her downfall.

“But to answer your previous question of why did I kiss you? Because you keep talking. It’s a character flaw, surely, to babble on like that when it’s clear you should be doing something else entirely.

” Aggravation was evident in his voice. “How the hell else was I to silence you?”

How, indeed. “Well, I, um, you could have asked, and—”

“I did ask, and you ignored the command,” the earl continued with his hands resting on narrow hips, which only called her attention to how flat his abdomen was beneath the waistcoat in autumnal colors and embroidery.

Her mind skittered to the thought that he would probably look delicious sans clothing...

He is not for you.

She nodded. “Possibly because it was a command. I am not a private in the military, Your Lordship. You would do well to remember that.”

For one lovely second, she thought he might grin, but she was destined for

disappointment, for while the corners of his lips twitched, that movement didn't materialize into a full smile.

"Fair enough." They stood staring at each other for the space of a few heartbeats.

Finally, he tugged at the knot of his cravat.

"I am Montague Mountjoy, the Earl of Greystone, by the way."

"I know. We have already established this."

"Wrong. Yours was an assumption."

"That you confirmed."

A huff of annoyance escaped him. "You may refer to me as Greystone or Grey."

"What a lovely name Montague is." It felt intimate and cozy on her tongue, but she didn't wish to stoke his ire by repeating it.

"Grey will suffice, thank you." Clearly, he wasn't in the mood to converse or even maintain a polite connection.

"It's too bad you don't like your Christian name."

"I never said that."

"You certainly act like it."

He huffed. Again. "Enough."

She nodded. “Since you have apparently forgotten how to act polite, my name is Victoria. Miss Amherst, rather, but my closest friends refer to me as Tori. I’m the daughter of Baron Irvington.”

Once more, he frowned. “Why the devil would you let anyone shorten your name so horribly?”

“Oh, I...” She shrugged. “I never gave it much thought. What is wrong with Tori? Is it not endearing?”

“It is not. At least to me, and there is nothing wrong with it on the surface, but it can’t hold a candle to the word Victoria. That has a beautiful and majestic ring to it. Elegant, really. If I were you, I’d tell those in your circle to start using your given name.”

Before she could respond or even analyze her reaction to those words, a loud shout from within the library had him pressing her backward against the wall of the house and further into the shadows.

“Damn it all to hell,” he murmured, and the warmth of his breath skated over her cheek.

“Who is it?” she asked in a whisper, but what she really wanted to do was melt against this man’s chest, and that was surprising for she hadn’t felt that way about anyone since her fiancé died.

Perhaps I’m merely overwrought.

“Lord Dawson, definitely, and someone else whose voice I don’t recognize.”

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When she strained to hear the conversation, her breasts brushed the earl's chest, and another host of tingles went down her spine.

Why was there any sort of reaction for him on her part?

He wasn't free and even if he was, the likelihood of a man like him choosing a woman of her station was laughable.

Why can't a woman choose the man she wants?

Shoving the errant and quite inappropriate thought away, she said, "I can't hear anything."

"It sounds as if they've moved out of the library. Perhaps someone has distracted them." One of his hands drifted to her hip, and she idly wondered what it would take for him to start exploring. Was that sort of distraction something he might have interest in?

Good heavens, Tori, enough. He's not for you. Stop this nonsense.

In this, she needed to follow her own advice. Such a thing was farfetched, and she had more pressing thoughts to worry about. As her heartbeat thrummed through her veins in an accelerated rhythm, Tori dared to lay a hand on his chest. "What now?"

"I don't know." As he backed away and put a modicum of space between them, the earl blew out a breath. He narrowed his gaze. "Give me the necklace." And then he held out a hand, fully expecting her to follow orders.

Thinking he'd definitely been in the military before, she wished to ask him about it, but now didn't seem like the appropriate time. "And what then?"

"It will be my insurance that you won't run away, because surely you're not stupid enough to pin a theft on an earl."

She narrowed her eyes. "As a matter of fact, I'm not stupid ever." Could she trust him? "How do I know you won't abscond with the necklace, especially after I've told you how much it's probably worth."

"Madam, are you mad?" He drew himself up to his full height. Even in the darkness, annoyance shot like daggers from the rich depths of his eyes. "I have no need for the necklace and neither do I care that it might be a piece of missing French history."

"It must be lovely to have such security. I wouldn't know, for my father has a penchant for gambling away much of the income he takes in from his jewelry business."

"Yes, well, some of us have more self-control than others." Anger shivered through his whispered tone.

"I spent five years fighting against Napoleon and his horrors. That time in my life was wasted, but at least I did my duty to England. I want nothing else to do with anything connected with France... except perhaps its brandy."

That sounded all too authentic. "Very well, but I wouldn't mind a pastry every now and again."

"Throwing her lot in with his was probably the best way out of this sudden mess."

Slowly, she drew the diamond necklace from her bodice and slipped it into his gloved

hand.

“Do you promise not to reveal that I was the one who stole the necklace?”

“I promise, but I have to know why you care about this thing anyway?” The diamonds glittered in the dim illumination and looked like water in his hand.

“I suppose I don’t like it that a piece of history is tucked away in some lord’s study either from greed or the urge to own something so valuable.” She frowned as she shrugged. “It’s not right, and it needs to be returned to France.”

“You realize that these diamonds were probably one of the reasons that prompted the revolution? Marie Antoinette never failed to flaunt her wealth, and she had no love for the peasants beneath her who toiled and labored to keep her on that damned elevated platform.”

“No, it was Marie’s own fault. The diamonds had nothing to do with it.”

“God, when you think about it, nothing good has come out of France for a long while. The rulers are constantly causing havoc, giving in to greed and corrupted power, and weren’t above using the people to further their own causes.

” A growl escaped him. “If you want my honest opinion? Take the diamonds and sell them. Go travel with the coin you make. Or use these blood stones for something that will make a difference instead of handing them straight back to some wealthy wastrel who won’t care or doesn’t need them. ”

“Wouldn’t that make me just as horrid as those rulers in France you can’t stand?” It was an interesting peek into his mind, and she suddenly wished she had the time to converse with him further. His fiancée must be a fortunate lady. The conversations they must have together!

“I am not one to judge. Once this bit of drama is over, you can do whatever you want. I won’t care a whit.”

That was... disappointing. “What do we do now?”

“I’m going inside to see what is happening. Let five minutes elapse and then you come inside as well, tell your father you’re ill and would like to leave early.” He shrugged. “Perhaps one of the men in attendance will rise to the occasion and offer to drive you home.”

“That would be easier if not scandalous. No doubt my father won’t allow it.” Why wouldn’t Greystone offer? “Perhaps I should find a chair in the retiring room to pretend to collapse onto to lend the story some authenticity.”

He snorted. “Do so in the library. That way I can return upstairs, say I found you lying there when I went in for a brandy, and that I was to locate Baron...?”

“Irvington,” she helpfully supplied.

“Very well.” The earl nodded. He tucked the necklace into a pocket near the tails of his coat. “And while you are upstairs, glean whatever information you can about Lord Dawson and his plans. If I encounter him, I shall do the same.”

“One question.”

“What?”

“Why are you taking this risk? For me? I’m a stranger.”

That brought on another fierce scowl. “I don’t know.

” Then he shook his head. “Remember, five minutes, then your arse needs to be fainting on a sofa in the library. And I’ve changed my mind.

Don’t go upstairs. Don’t find your father.

Just lie on a sofa. I’ll take care of the rest.” The authority of an earl was in his voice and bearing.

And it sent tingles of interest twisting down her spine. Was this his way of trying to protect her? To minimize the potential fallout?

Then Greystone was gone, leaving her standing in the shadows with her ears pricked to listen in the event that guests had entered the library.

As a cool breeze flirted with her skirting, Tori counted to sixty five times then she quietly and cautiously crept into the room, being sure to pull the door closed behind her.

Since it didn’t appear anyone had entered since she and the earl had passed inside, she scurried over the floor.

Seconds later, she dramatically arranged herself on one of the leather sofas, resting her head on a decorative pillow as if she’d managed to collapse there when her head pounded far too much for her fragile, female form to withstand one second longer.

By the time she had truly become immersed in her role, the sound of footsteps just outside in the corridor reached her ears.

She closed her eyes and threw an arm over them to further seem as pathetic as she could.

Then a familiar hand was on her arm and the owner smelled like pipe smoke and peppermints.

“Papa?” Truly, this was far too easy, but she hadn’t expected he would come so soon.

“Yes, yes, it’s me. Are you ill? I was informed by Greystone that he’d come upon a woman doing poorly in the library and it sounded like you, so I immediately came down to find out what ailed you.”

Well, that had happened quickly. “My head pains me.” But she made her voice small and pathetic as she looked at him from what she hoped were tired eyes. “I didn’t wish to disturb you while you were socializing, which is why I wandered down here, and I wanted somewhere quiet.”

“Understandable.” He patted her hand. “Greystone said he came upon you by accident when he went for brandy, but why did you come here?”

“I, um, couldn’t find the retiring room.” Then she flicked her gaze to the door, where Greystone had entered, and cool relief slid down her spine. Perhaps he could take up the narrative, for she felt that dissembling wasn’t her forte.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 7:55 am

Grey strolled into the library with Sarah at his side and his thoughts going in a hundred directions.

A half hour ago, he'd met a young woman who'd been interesting enough that not only had he chatted with her in a darkened garden, but he'd also kissed her on the pretense of shutting her up.

That hadn't been a lie fully, for he did need her to stay quiet, but also he'd wanted to kiss her.

And right now, he couldn't evict the way her nearly full lips had felt against his own or the warmth of her pressed into his chest as he'd held her trapped between him and the wall of the townhouse.

The knowledge that she was trying to smuggle out or outright steal a horrifically valuable diamond necklace only made her that much more intriguing.

He thought he could forget about Victoria once he was successful in navigating her out of the house, but the second his gaze fell upon her as she reclined on one of the leather sofas in their host's home, an odd sort of heated need slammed into him, and it was something he couldn't explain though he tried his best to hide it.

"Well, Miss Amherst, how are you feeling now?" he asked as he approached her location. In many ways, he wished Sarah weren't at his side, for there were specific questions he wished to ask this lovely stranger.

"Oh, Lord Greystone, I'm not sure." She struggled into a sitting position then

frowned as she bounced her gaze between him and Sarah.

To be fair, his fiancée wore an exquisite saffron-colored gown, but though she was quite lovely, her looks slightly paled when compared to Victoria.

“What is happening? Have they started dancing upstairs?”

“Not a bit of it, for there’s been a bit of a kerfuffle that has temporarily interrupted the rout.”

“What has happened?”

It was Sarah who answered. “It seems our host, Lord Dawson, has lost something valuable, and he’s losing his mind over it.

” With a curious expression, she peered at Victoria as if the younger woman was something to study.

“He is conducting a search of the house as we speak, so that has rather put a damper on the gaiety.”

“I see.” When Victoria frowned, she briefly bounced her focus to him before addressing Sarah. “I’m afraid my mind is a bit fatigued. Who are you?”

“I’m Lady Sarah, Greystone’s fiancée.” Shadows at the back of her eyes made Grey frown, but they were gone at her next blink.

“When he mentioned the problem upstairs and came to fetch your father, I came down with him to render assistance if you needed it. He’s not the most intuitive when a woman is in crisis.

” As she spoke, she cast a speaking glance at him.

“Women need other women during those times.”

“Noted,” he said in a low voice, for it was quite the criticism of him and their relationship.

Then he harrumphed in what he hoped was a good bit of acting.

No one would suspect they’d met without being formally introduced or even that he’d kissed this stranger.

Not romantically, of course, but it still mattered.

“If women wouldn’t succumb to hysteria or histrionics every time something went wrong, men wouldn’t need to pick up the pieces.

” God, it made him seem like a nodcock, but he needed to deflect attention from Victoria’s presence.

“That is quite rude and very arrogant of you to say, Your Lordship,” Victoria shot off, before she slumped against the decorative pillow again while her father patted her hand.

Lady Sarah huffed. “Good Lord, Grey, do something. Fetch a pillow and put it beneath her feet.”

“Yes, right.” With a grunt, he took a cushion off a nearby chair, then with a murmured apology, he lifted Victoria’s feet and shoved the cushion beneath them. “Someone should take her home.”

Baron Irvington finally decided to join the conversation. "I will do that."

When Victoria shot what appeared to be a frantic glance at Grey, he cleared his throat. "That can be arranged." For it made sense. Anything else would seem strange.

"Oh, that's not necessary, Lord Irvington," Lady Sarah said as she glanced between them. "It should be Greystone who conveys her home."

Both he and the baron protested.

She continued with a shrug. "Listen, Grey, it's no secret you aren't enjoying yourself here tonight, and Lord Irvington was having such a lovely time talking with friends he hasn't seen in years.

"She laid a hand on his arm. "Perhaps the baron should return to the card room while you do this small thing. After all, if Lord Dawson continues, the rout will turn sour rather quickly."

"Bah. Thank you for volunteering me for a task I have no interest in." It was all part and parcel of the acting he'd been forced to indulge in.

"Stop acting the ogre, Grey." Sarah perched on the curved arm of the sofa near Victoria's feet. "I beg your pardon, Miss Amherst. Here we are discussing your fate, and we haven't been introduced."

"It is quite all right." She let a hand flutter in response.

The baron nodded. "That is a good idea. I did wish to speak with another acquaintance here tonight, for he is having me repair a few pieces of a parure for him next week and we need to discuss the details."

“See, Grey? You’ll be doing the man a favor.” Sarah pressed on. As she spoke, she went around the room and lit a few candles to lend the space more illumination. “I’m Lady Sarah Burston, a daughter of the Marquess of Beckworth. That is the Earl of Greystone.”

Victoria nodded as her gaze slid to him. “Lovely to meet you both.”

Then the tranquil scene was once more interrupted when Lord Dawson burst into the room with a couple of his cronies. Tall, with a thick head of silver hair, he certainly had a presence about him, but it was the thunderstorm of his expression that gave Grey pause.

“Ah, there you are, Greystone. And Irvington as well. Good.”

“What did you need, Dawson? We are involved in a bit of a delicate situation.” If there was annoyance in his voice, he couldn’t help it. The whole thing was confusing yet exciting, but it made him feel more alive than he had in many years.

“I am looking for a thief,” the host said as he glanced about the room, ignoring both Sarah and Victoria.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Grey crossed his arms at his chest. “And frankly, why the devil should I care?”

“There has been a theft of an extremely valuable diamond necklace.”

He frowned. “From your private quarters?”

“Uh, no. It was... elsewhere.” Dawson snapped his gaze back to Grey. “It matters not, for it’s not where I left it.”

Color drained from Victoria's face, but she kept quiet.

"Ah, and why do you need me involved? And for that matter, how do you know the theft occurred tonight?" he continued, for seeing Victoria so vulnerable, a wave of protection came over him.

He would keep her safe for as long as he could, to say nothing of that very necklace weighing down the pocket in his tailcoat.

Dawson narrowed his gaze. "It must have been taken tonight, for I looked at the necklace only a few days ago." He shook his head. "Regardless, I am having a couple of Runners from Bow Street called in. I want them to inspect every person present at this rout."

"Oh, dear," Victoria murmured, and when she collapsed back against the pillow once more, Grey fully believed that wasn't an act. "I think I'm going to be ill," she whispered to her father, who was immediately concerned enough to pat her hand.

"Is that truly necessary?" Grey asked with a glance at Sarah, who shrugged. "Do you truly think one of your guests stole a necklace?"

"Well, it certainly wasn't me," Dawson shot off with a frown. "Regardless, you are the highest-ranking member of the beau monde in attendance tonight, so you can take charge of the investigation."

"Like hell I will. I was just on my way to summon my carriage. Miss Amherst has fallen ill, and her father has asked that I convey her home." When Dawson blustered, Grey stared him down.

"Do you think that I stole your necklace? As an earl?" He made certain there was a warning growl in his voice.

“Then I invite you to come over here and search my person.” He ignored the tiny gasp that came from Victoria.

It was a bold dare, especially since he was, in fact, hiding that very necklace, but he was anticipating that Dawson was a coward at heart and enjoyed making people fear him. And why the devil was he even doing this for a stranger he’d only met an hour past?

“That isn’t necessary, of course, Greystone, but I am still having the Runners called out. While you might be above reproach, some others here are not.”

“Do what you will, Dawson, but I won’t take part in it, for none of this has anything to do with me.

” Then he dismissed the man from his mind while Dawson’s contemporaries exchanged uneasy glances.

He focused on Victoria. “Miss Amherst, I’ll summon my carriage and then I’ll convey you home.

Irvington, will you come with us or do you remain here? ”

The baron cleared his throat. “I would like to stay on for an hour or so. Of course I’ll assist Lord Dawson in locating his necklace. From what I understand, it is quite impressive, and being a jeweler, I’m curious.”

I’ll wager you are, even more so once you discover your daughter is the thief.

“Fair enough.” Then, bouncing his gaze between Victoria and Sarah, he crossed the room, skirting about Dawson and his friends, to the bell pull at the front of the room, which he gave a hard yank. “I wish you luck in discovering what happened to your

missing jewels, Dawson.”

After clearly being dismissed, Dawson uttered a curse then left the room with his two friends following quickly on his heels.

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When a footman came to answer the summons, Grey asked that he have someone retrieve his carriage.

“I will need my conveyance. There is a bit of a delicate situation and Miss Amherst needs to be conveyed home post haste, but her father isn’t of a mind to leave just yet.

” The footman nodded and retreated from the room.

As Grey waited, he came toward the sofa where Victoria reclined.

In the candlelight, he was able to discern that her eyes were an interesting bluish-gray hue that put him in mind of storm clouds over the ocean or the skies between twilight and dark.

Damn, he could find himself lost for hours in those pools if he wasn’t careful.

“How are you feeling, Miss Amherst?”

“More poorly as the minutes go by, I’m afraid.”

Which probably wasn’t a lie considering the Drury Lane drama they were both enacting. He nodded. “It shouldn’t be long now, and you’ll be on your way home.”

Sarah drifted over to stand next to him. “Thank you for doing this, Grey. It’s quite heroic.”

He couldn’t help but grunt. Foolish, is what it was, but he couldn’t help himself.

Besides Victoria's looks, that kiss continued to bedevil him, and he wanted to know why. "Do you come with us?"

"Uh, I don't believe so. You can return and pick me up, but I would like to linger for a while and talk with friends."

Which basically meant she wanted more time with her lover. Not that he could begrudge her that since he intended on wedding her in a handful of days, breaking her heart and smashing all her dreams. "Very well." He nodded. "I'll come back 'round in an hour to collect you."

"I would appreciate that." Then she uttered a tiny gasp. "Oh, would you prefer me to go with you to protect Miss Amherst's reputation?"

Well, damn. He hadn't thought about that. "Nonsense. I'm engaged to be married in five days. Not even the worst dragons of society could find fault with me bringing a lady home, and no doubt her father will follow quite soon. Unless Irvington takes issue?"

The baron shook his head. "Of course not. I trust you, and my daughter isn't one to chase men.

She's had her heart broken and is good at hiding from anything society related.

"He laughed and clearly couldn't read the awkward air in the room.

"She only came out tonight because she wants me to circulate more."

"Ah." How interesting, and made Grey want to learn more about her.

"Very well." Sarah nodded. She rested her gaze on Victoria, who truly did appear as

if she were fading quickly. “I hope you bounce back tomorrow, Miss Amherst.”

“Thank you.” She glanced at her father. “Please, return to your friends. I’m sorry to interrupt your visit.”

“If you are certain, poppet?”

“I am.” She patted his sleeve. “I’ll be right as rain after a good night’s rest.”

“Very well.” The baron stood then leaned over her and kissed the top of her head. “I’ll see you at home soon enough.”

As soon as Irvington left the library, the footman returned.

“Your carriage is waiting at the curb, Your Lordship.”

“Thank you. I shall be out with Miss Amherst directly.” Nerves suddenly felt as if they were crawling over his skin, while sweat dampened the back of his thin lawn shirt. “Are you well enough to walk by yourself, or shall I carry you?”

Before Victoria could answer him, Sarah took charge. “You are a gentleman, Grey. Carry her. She looks as if she’ll collapse at any moment.”

What was she about, then? Surely, his fiancée couldn’t know that he’d kissed this woman, and he didn’t think he’d acted anything else than a stranger to Victoria since he’d entered the library.

Perhaps it was his mind overly strained, and he was hyper-aware of everything since he had the diamonds in his pocket.

“Very well. I shall come back for you as soon as I see her comfortable.”

Slowly, Sarah shook her head. “On second thought, don’t trouble yourself. I’m sure that someone can convey me home.”

He narrowed his gaze while Victoria watched the exchange with curiosity burning in her eyes.

Chances are that Sarah wanted a quick tryst with Phillip before she came home.

It was irritating, of course, but he refused to bid her nay in light of the fact they’d marry and he wouldn’t release her because he’d made a promise to his father.

“Fine. I will call on the morrow.” Then he went to the sofa.

“Let us leave, Miss Amherst. My patience for this night is rapidly declining.” It was nothing as he’d assumed, and he didn’t enjoy the feeling that he wasn’t in control of anything.

Not giving her a chance to protest, Grey slipped an arm beneath her knees and his other around her back, then he easily lifted her off the piece of furniture.

Immediately, the warmth of her seeped into him, and the scent of lilies and lemon teased his nose.

When she wrapped her arms about his shoulders, he was hard-pressed not to show a reaction.

With a nod at Sarah, Grey carried his armful from the room and then strode along the corridor toward the entry hall.

“Your Lordship, I—”

“Do not say anything,” he interrupted in a hissed whisper. “Not until we’re in the carriage.”

In short order, he gained the vehicle and was grateful that his driver stood near the open door.

With a mumbled thanks, he saw Victoria into the carriage and settled onto one of the well-squabbed benches.

He quickly followed, asked her for the direction of her father’s townhouse, then relayed the information to the driver.

Once the steps were put up and the door closed, he relaxed—slightly—against the back of his bench.

God, it was hard work playing into intrigue.

The conveyance rocked as the driver climbed up into this box then it lurched forward as the horses moved.

Victoria stared at him from across the narrow aisle. “It wasn’t necessary to carry me outside. I was perfectly capable of walking.”

“I am aware of that.”

“You also don’t need to keep hold of the necklace.” In fact, she stuck out a gloved hand and wriggled her fingers. “Please give it back to me.”

“Not just yet, I think.”

“Why not?” A petulant expression crossed her face, prompting a wave of heated

desire to slam through his veins.

“While I believe you are capable to absconding with this treasure yourself, I think you’re also intelligent enough to realize that with my rank, I can help you should you need things smoothed over or connections to assist you.

” In the gloom, he couldn’t keep his gaze from her mouth.

“Also, I should apologize for that kiss.” At least because it could have been so much better.

“Ha.” A snort of derision escaped her. “That was hardly a kiss and besides, you’re engaged to Lady Sarah. It meant nothing, of course.”

“Yes, there is that, but still, are you not a bit curious?” Was he? And why the devil did he ask her such an asinine question? There was no getting around the fact he wasn’t free.

“It doesn’t matter if I am.”

Christ, that made things even more tempting.

What was wrong with him? Desperate to escape his thoughts, he plunged on with the conversation.

“The fact is you are a lovely, striking woman who would be recognized on the street unless you take pains to hide your looks. You can’t just walk about with diamonds in your bodice. ”

“But I—”

“—it’s too dangerous, and London is dodgy after dark.” This interrupting her was becoming a habit. “Let me come with you, protect you where I can, at least until you—we—can decide what to do about the necklace once your father authenticates it.”

She blew out a breath. “I suppose that does make sense.”

“Good.” He relaxed a smidge. “For what it’s worth, you have some talent for acting.”

“Oh, thank you.” The giggle that escaped her throat only added to the need shooting through his veins. “It was a lovely change from my real life.”

And that made him even more curious. “I think you should take this theft seriously.”

“I am, which is why I stole the necklace. It’s not right that Lord Dawson has it.”

“Nefariously or did he truly purchase it at an auction?”

“Who can say? It doesn’t matter, because those diamonds are not anything that anyone in England needs to own. They belong to the people of France.”

“I admire your determination in this.” When he glanced out the window, he frowned, for they were approaching the halfway point in the journey.

It wasn’t that far from Dawson’s home in Grosvenor Square to her father’s home in Bedford Square, and damn if he was going to waste the time alone with her. Quickly, he moved over to her bench.

“What are you doing, Your Lordship?” Her eyes were round with surprise reflected in those stormy depths as the carriage passed a gas lamp.

Losing my mind, apparently.

Aloud, he said, “I want to see if my reaction to the first kiss was an aberration.” Then with an ease of odd familiarity, Grey tugged her into his arms as his lips found hers.

That spark he’d experienced from the kiss in the garden was still there, and in fact, the longer he moved over her pillowy soft lips, the more he wanted to continue to kiss her.

Why shouldn’t he give in to the urge? It wasn’t as if whatever was between this woman and him was permanent, for he would marry Sarah in a handful of days.

Besides, she had a lover; why shouldn’t he have the same?

Once Victoria was out of his system, he could go on and fulfil his promise to his father by marrying for his title.

Feeling more hopeful than he had in many years, Grey licked her sweet lips, nibbled at the corners, dared to draw the tip of his tongue along their seam, and just when she eased her palms up his chest, the driver rapped on the roof.

“Approaching the destination, Your Lordship.”

He pulled away with heavy regret. Not because he should never have kissed this woman at all, but because there was no more time to explore her lips or her body.

Damn it all to hell.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 7:55 am

Mayfair, London

As she entered her father's townhouse and gave over their outerwear to the footman, she told the fellow, who lived-in—and who slept in a tiny room beside the kitchen belowstairs—to seek his bed, Tori led the way through the shadow-filled corridors and up the stairs to the drawing room.

For the first time since she'd discovered the Marie Antoinette necklace, her thoughts were not on the jewels or their value.

Instead, every thought in her head revolved around the Earl of Greystone and how when he'd kissed her the second time, there was a return of the immediate heat between them, and what was more, he'd awakened feelings within her she thought had died with her fiancé years ago.

The long-case clock in the corridor just beyond the drawing room door chimed the midnight hour, which meant the one live-in maid had long ago sought her bed, no doubt thinking Tori and her father wouldn't return home for at least another hour.

She covered a yawn with a hand, and invited the earl to make himself comfortable. "If you wish for tea, I'd be happy to go down to the kitchens and fix it for you, Yo—"

"So help me, if you call me 'Your Lordship' one more time..." In the light of the candles burning in the silver sticks on the mantel, emotions she couldn't read shadowed the brown depths of his eyes, the color of melted drinking chocolate.

"Er, I mean, we are well beyond such formalities, don't you think? "

“Perhaps we are.” Did that kiss not affect him as it had her?

To him, was it just a matter of course and he thought nothing of betraying his fiancée like that?

But why did he enact that second kiss? If the first one was only to make her silent in the garden, why have the second at all? “So, about that tea?”

“To be honest, I could do with a drop.”

“Right.” Tori nodded. “I’ll be back in perhaps fifteen minutes.”

“No. I’m coming with you.”

She frowned. “That isn’t necessary. You don’t need to keep watch over me.”

“It’s not that.”

As she left the room, he followed, and though it was a bit unnerving, she was curious as to know why. “Then what is it?”

“I feel somehow responsible for you since we first met in that library, and since I do still have the jewels in my possession, I want to keep you in my sight until your father arrives home.”

As excuses went, it wasn’t that convincing, but she didn’t question it while she led the way downstairs to the kitchen.

“You needn’t stay. I’m capable to taking care of myself.

” Then the words he’d said to her in the carriage, that her looks were striking and that

she wouldn't be safe on the streets, came to mind. Did he truly think her attractive?

"While that might be so, you are stuck with me for the duration."

"Hmm." While the earl lit a candle in a tarnished brass holder that rested on the worktable, Tori moved a kettle onto the warm side of the stove, for a low fire still smoldered.

The cook had probably only vacated the house two hours prior.

The water would heat momentarily, and that meant she wouldn't need to ask the earl to refire the stove.

"Do you take yours with cream and sugar?"

"A splash of cream in the afternoon or evening, but when I'm taking tea in the morning, I like it without additions."

"I could see how you would take it straight, though I would have thought you might be a coffee man."

"There are times when I prefer that."

Had he gotten a taste for it in the military?

As the water came up to temperature, Tori pattered about the space, locating a tin of tea leaves as well as the container of sugar lumps and the carafe of cream which was kept in a cupboard of sorts with a slab of thick ice to maintain coolness.

She put those things on a tray, then added two cups and saucers.

“There are some cold cuts here if you’re hungry, or I can find some biscuits. ”

“Biscuits would be best. Thank you.” He watched as she measured tea leaves into the bottom of a squat, plain white porcelain teapot. “Where did you learn to make your own tea?”

“Well, Papa doesn’t keep a full staff due to his penchant for gambling away much of his profits from his jewelry shop, so it was essential that I learn a few basic tasks around the house.

I can do tea and put together a few bits and bobs in the kitchen, though cooking is a skill that has escaped me.

I burn more than I cook.” She shrugged. “I can also dress my own bed, launder unmentionables if needed—gowns and dresses require more learning—and I’ve even learned how to tighten the laces on my own stays when a maid isn’t available.

” The heat of embarrassment fired in her cheeks to admit such to this man, but there was nothing for it. That was the truth of her life.

“I’d imagine in sure circumstances, the windfall that could be acquired by selling the Marie Antionette diamonds would go a long way into improving your lifestyle, hmm?”

One of the silver teaspoons dropped from her fingers and clattered on the floor as she gaped at him in shock. “Are you accusing me of stealing the necklace for my own purposes?”

“I can’t help but think it’s a possibility.” He shrugged, and she wished he weren’t so damned handsome. In the low light, a few lines crinkled the delicate skin at the corners of his eyes and mirrored the corners of his mouth.

“How dare you.” She retrieved the spoon, and though she wanted to hurl it at his head, Tori calmly put it in the sink at the back wall.

“Yes, it would ease the strain of the household, but that necklace doesn’t belong to me and shouldn’t be sold to anyone.

It belongs to the current sitting King of France. ”

With a frown, he came closer, caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, and then peered into her eyes.

What he searched for, she couldn’t say, but she trembled in his hold even if her blood boiled with annoyance.

Finally, he nodded and released her. “Fair enough, and it doesn’t appear that you’re lying. ”

“I never lie.”

He snorted. “Everyone lies, especially to themselves, no matter the good intentions.”

In silence, Tori ferreted out the tins where the cook had stored tiny seed cakes and jam tarts from the day before.

She put a few different offerings on the tea tray then she lifted the steaming kettle off the stove.

Next, she poured the hot water into the tea pot, replaced the kettle, and then fit the lid to the teapot.

“Have you lied, Grey?” The shortened bit of his title felt foreign on her tongue, and

she would much rather refer to him as Montague, but she didn't know him well enough.

Yet.

For the space of a few heartbeats, he stared at her. Finally, he nodded. "I have."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." Shadows appeared in his eyes, and she couldn't help but wonder why.

"Would you carry this up to the drawing room for me?"

"Yes, of course." When he hefted the tray, she blew out the candle on the worktable and then followed him up the stairs.

Once he'd placed the tray on a low table in the drawing room, she settled on a sofa and then poured out a cup of tea as he sat next to her with a bit of space between them.

When their fingers brushed, heated tingles went up her arm to the elbow.

Had he felt that? But when she sneaked a glance at his face, he wore a mask of boredom.

Was it carefully learned and curated so as to not give away his emotions?

That was a slightly sad way of living one's life.

"You must be excited about your upcoming nuptials, hmm?" Tori asked as she put a splash of cream into her cup and then a smallish lump of sugar.

He grunted. “To be honest, I am not. It is merely another responsibility I must meet.”

“Oh.” The tinkling sound of her teaspoon hitting the sides of the porcelain cup seemed overly loud in the silence of the room.

“Well, she is a lovely lady, and you must be so proud that she’ll soon be your countess.

” Yet when they’d been in the library with her earlier this evening, they didn’t interact like a couple in love and ready to wed.

“I quite agree that Sarah is lovely and beautiful.” He sipped his tea. “As for being my countess, she knows what is expected of her.”

“That is such a dismal statement.” After she took a sip of tea, she frowned at him. “Can I assume yours isn’t a love match?”

“It is not, but we both know our responsibilities, so here we are.” He drained half of his cup in the silence. “I’m afraid that is the way of the beau monde .”

“How sad that is.” And how distracting his presence was!

The warmth of him constantly called out to her, while the scents of citrus, sage, and leather wafted to her nose each time he moved.

The remembered strength of him when his arms had been around her or when he’d carried her sent tingles of need tripping down her spine.

“Everyone should have the chance to marry for love.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You must be one of those fortunate women who have known

such. A real romantic, are you?”

“I did. Eight years ago, I fell madly in love with a young man. He was a soldier in the infantry. Louis Fortner, and he was simply the best of all men.” Since it had already been quite an emotionally confusing evening, tears welled in her eyes.

“He was home on leave, and when he proposed, I immediately accepted, and was so happy and proud to do so. Though Louis wasn’t overtly handsome, he was adorable and had a good spirit. ”

“What happened to him?”

She shrugged. “The same fate that took thousands of other men during the war. He died on a battlefield somewhere. Two months after he’d asked for my hand.

I was but a young woman of twenty, and to me at that age, it was the end of the world when he left it.

No more romance, no more looking forward to letters or a future. ”

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“Yet you didn’t think to accept someone else’s suit? Surely your father paid for Seasons to help you circulate within the ton .”

“He did, when there was coin to do so, and just this afternoon he told me that I had been an Incomparable in those early Seasons. According to him, I had offers.”

“Why did you take none of them? Your future could have been quite different than it is now. I assume you work with him?”

“I serve as his business and social secretary.” She nodded and then drained her cup. “As to why I didn’t accept any other man’s suit? Well, for quite a long time after Louis died, my heart was broken. One doesn’t put such a love behind them that easily.”

“Surely eight years is enough time, though.”

“It is obvious that you have never been in love... Montague.” If there was ever a time to utilize his given name, it was now, with such subject matter. “Love, when you find it, is a small miracle, indeed. You should hold onto it with both hands as tightly as you can, because it is also so fleeting.”

“I shall take your word for it.” One of his brown eyebrows rose. “Honestly, I am not certain love is for the titled in society, those with legacies or those who have made promises to the people who have gone before.”

“That is a horrible outlook, and my heart goes out to you as well as Lady Sarah. A marriage should at least have proper heated feelings for one another.”

With a grunt, he took the teacup from her fingers and then laid both on the table in front of them. “I don’t want your damned pity, Victoria.”

The sound of her name in his deep, rumbling voice tickled through her chest. “I wasn’t giving it. I simply find it sad you intend to wed without substance behind the union. What does Lady Sarah feel about that?”

“That is a private matter.” In that response, he was every inch the earl. “And what is more, I fully believe you are a coward, hiding behind grief.”

“It seems you didn’t leave your arrogance in the garden.” Not to let the insult lie, she verbally fought back, and in doing so, she felt a bit heated. “You are the same but hiding behind duty. Pot calling the kettle black, then?”

Shock reflected in his eyes then they darkened with the same desire that flooded her body since the moment he’d carried her into his carriage. “Awfully bold of you to prod a dragon, isn’t it?”

She snorted. “Do you think you are a dragon? Perhaps a bear or—”

“Christ, don’t blame me if you reap the consequences of irritating me.” Then his hand was in her hair—when had he scooted so close?—and he dragged her roughly to him, claimed her lips in a kiss with much more intent behind it than what he’d given her before.

Good heavens, this man is quite something!

Tori didn’t mind the heavy-handed treatment, for they had both passed a wild and heart-pounding evening, and he had taken on much responsibility because of her, but being in such an embrace?

It exceeded her wildest dreams and fanciful notions, completely obliterated the memories she'd had of exchanging kisses with Louis.

As her fingers curled into the lapels of his tailcoat, she returned his embrace as best she could, for she didn't plan on being as still as a lamppost this time 'round.

"Damn." As Greystone wrenched away, his breathing was as ragged as hers. His eyes were as dark as strong coffee now, but there was a certain hunger deep in those depths that made her shiver. "We cannot do this."

"I quite agree." Yet she didn't release her hold on him and neither did he move.

"I'll be naught but a scoundrel if I continue kissing you, yet I haven't felt such desire or heat in my engagement at all." Emotion graveled his words, and seconds later, he kneeled on the floor at her side.

"You and Sarah don't kiss?" That boggled her mind, for it was a lovely experience.

"Not much. She has other interests who aren't me." With a slight growl, he leaned into her, put his hands to her shoulders, hooked his fingers beneath the bodice of her gown, and then he yanked the upper portion of the garment down.

While her throat went dry, Tori shivered. Seconds later, he'd manipulated the laces of her stays enough that her breasts popped free of her clothing. No man had ever looked upon them before, not even when she was briefly engaged. "Oh, she has a lo—"

"Do shut up. If I'm going to sin, I don't want to be reminded of what my fiancée has done as well."

"So this is tit for tat, then?" That was somewhat disappointing.

“Yes. No. Right now? I’m not sure of anything except that you have captivated me since the library, and I need to know why or else evict you from my blood.”

“Oh.” Well then, in for a penny and all of that. Daring much, she grabbed his cravat and tugged him closer. “If we are telling the truth, I haven’t felt so... invigorated since I lost Louis. There is just something about you, past the arrogance, that I can’t figure out but wish to.”

“Well, then, since we have nothing but time just now...” Interest flickered in his eyes as he caressed her form with his gaze. “Let us see how far we both dare to go.” He took her breasts in his hands, and the warmth of his skin against hers made her gasp.

The more he massaged those globes, the more fires erupted in her blood, worked to further confuse her, but when he brushed the pads of his thumbs over her nipples, they immediately hardened into tight little buds, and wild sensation streaked through her body to lodge in her core.

“Oh!” Never had she experienced anything quite like this.

“Involving myself with an innocent is a properly bad idea,” he whispered as if to himself, but that didn’t distract him from continuing to tease her breasts.

“How did you know I’m an innocent?” Tori managed to pant out while pleasurable feelings coursed through her body.

“It’s difficult to explain. A man just knows, but the fact you don’t know how to kiss gave it away.”

“Oh, how deflating.” Did it matter how he’d found out, when every strum of his fingers on those sensitive tips ushered her closer to heaven? “And should a man who has no attraction to his fiancée truly need to insult the woman he’s currently

fondling?”

“Such a tart mouth you have. Another surprise about you.” The shock in his eyes was noticeable before he shuttered it behind a blank expression, but she’d gotten beneath his skin, for he applied himself to teasing and torturing her nipples all the more.

“This is wrong,” she gasped when he closed his lips around one turgid tip, and as he swiped his tongue along the surface of that nipple, she nearly lost her grip on reality. “No matter what you feel, you are pledged to Lady Sarah.”

“I am certain she isn’t worrying about the same just now, for she’s probably in her lover’s arms finding solace.”

“I’m so sorry...” Then her words dissolved into moans as she concentrated on what he was doing to her.

“It is the way of things,” he said in a low voice as he rolled her nipples in his fingers.

This was beyond scandalous, but she didn’t have the strength to bid him nay even if she’d wanted to... which she did not.

“Don’t assume you know me, Victoria. I know what is expected of me, know my responsibilities, and I will face them regardless of what that means for me personally.

It is what my father wanted.” The longer he worried her nipples with his teeth and tongue, the more unrelenting pressure built and stacked low in her belly.

The unfamiliar sensations left her adrift, stole away her breath. “Then that will make for a miserable life, and perhaps destroy yours and hers in the process.”

“What the hell would you have me do about it? I was born knowing this, engaged by

one and twenty. It is my fate.” With a hand about her nape, he drew her against him and plundered her mouth with another string of deep, drugging kisses while the other hand continued to roll and pinch one of her nipples until she was gasping for breath, drowning in a myriad of sensations she couldn’t quite keep ahead of.

Slowly, he drew up her taffeta skirting while nipping her overly sensitive nipples.

“You must leave off,” she gasped out, for if he didn’t, she would surely dissolve into a melted puddle on the floor. “I will not be used because you’re angry at your fiancée.” Even if it would mean a surcease of the lovely things he was doing to her.

“I’m not, but we’re a bit beyond that now, and I will send you flying before we’re done,” he said as he pushed her backward on the sofa and encouraged her legs to part.

The fabric of her skirting bunched about her waist, which put the lower portion of her body on full display.

“And besides, there is a strong connection between us that vexes me. I want to know why.”

“Desire or just the oddness of the evening, or a misplaced sense of protection.” She shivered in anticipation. “After all, you still have the diamonds.”

“I don’t know, but I need to do this, merely to remind myself that I’m still wanted by someone even if Sarah doesn’t.” He shrugged, and the shadows were back in his eyes. “It might be the only thing that will render you speechless.”

Tori snorted even as she trembled with anticipation. “Are you bragging, Greystone?”

He grinned, and for fleeting seconds, the gesture took years from his face.

Truly, he was criminally handsome when he forgot to be a prick.

“You can make that assessment in a bit.” The dratted man glided his fingers along her flesh made slick from his teasing her breasts, back and forth in a mesmerizing rhythm. “You’re all too ready.”

“For what?” Then it occurred to her that he wasn’t going to couple with her.

“This is a good time for you to be silent and enjoy.” He coaxed her swelling nubbin out of hiding, and rubbed it.

“Oh!” Perhaps she should slap his face for the effrontery and perhaps insult, but with each pass of those talented fingers, shivers of raw need danced over her skin, fracturing throughout her body into every nerve ending.

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Over and over, he worked that tiny bundle of nerves, and when she couldn't hold back a moan, he grinned. "What was that?"

"Do hush," she managed to gasp out and curled the fingers of one hand around his nape. How was it that he had nearly sent her over that edge into bliss with hardly a touch? "Yet you didn't ask permission."

Suprise went through his expression. "Do I have your permission to do unspeakable things to you?"

At least he remembered that he was, indeed, a gentleman even if this was so very wrong and a betrayal of his engagement.

Tori met his gaze, caught the knowing light in those dark depths, and heat stung her cheeks.

"It's not a crime to enjoy such a thing.

" And she wouldn't go to her grave never knowing the touch of a man beyond kissing.

"Good." Then he gripped her thighs and splayed her open. "Damn, I thought your breasts perfection, but this is even more so."

Anticipation battled with anxiety in her belly. "You plan to put your mouth on me... there ?" Tori buried the fingers of one hand into his hair, and oh it was thick and luxurious.

“Oh, yes.”

“But, I—” Her voice cut off in a squeak as he put his mouth to her button.

He chuckled and the vibrations sent her into another level of delight and wonder. “A wonderful way to interrupt your damn flow of words.”

“Dear God.” From the moment he employed his lips and hot tongue to her most sensitive, private parts, Tori slowly lost the last vestiges of her sanity.

“This... You...” She couldn’t catch her breath, for with each nibble, every nip, all the swipes and strokes of his tongue, she was hurled higher and higher into pleasure, into a world she was unfamiliar with and had never known existed, especially like this.

Wild sensation coursed through her body.

Tears unashamedly fell to her cheeks for everything was too big, too much, too overwhelming.

Never once did the earl shy away from his work.

He was a man bent on tossing her over the edge, and she hovered there, trapped, waiting with a frantic heartbeat for him to give her up into that dark void.

But he didn’t. Not even when she begged him. Repeatedly. “Greystone... Montague, please leave off! I can’t survive this!”

The dratted man kept her poised on the razor’s edge, pinning her there again with every penetrating stroke of his tongue, each calculated nibble, every new torment of suction on that swollen button until she squirmed on that sofa and prayed for some sort of relief.

She curled her hand into his hair alternately to shove him away and cease the exquisite torment, but also to hold him to her tighter, guide him to exactly where she needed him.

“Oh, oh, oh...” Her body shook; the relentless pressure in her lower belly built and coiled. Fearing she would break apart, Tori squirmed, but he gripped her thighs tighter to keep her in place. Would his fingers leave marks on her like this intimacy would leave impressions on her soul?

When he chuckled against her flesh, it was almost the end of her, but he kept on as if he were naught but a rogue.

“Montague!” Tears of wonder rolled down her cheeks. Her back arched of its own accord, which put her deeper into his care. “I am going to break.”

“That is the purpose of this exercise.” Then he followed the comment with a particularly strong bit of suction.

“Ah!” The dam holding back the mounting pressure within broke.

She shattered in spectacular fashion, fell into that black void full of the most wonderful bliss as her inner walls convulsed with a violent release—her first. A half-muffled scream left her throat, for it was so incredibly glorious.

Not having any more strength, she collapsed against the back of the sofa while her heartbeat galloped and her breathing shallowed.

“I thought you gorgeous before but after seeing you in the grips of an orgasm, you are beyond ethereal and made for sin, I’ll wager.” As he spoke, the earl stood. He removed a handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped his mouth and cheeks.

The compliment sent another round of tiny fires through her blood.

“Thank you.” For long moments, she enjoyed the after-effects from being thoroughly compromised then she roused herself and began to put her clothing to rights.

“That was beyond interesting.” And she couldn’t believe how quickly it had happened.

A flash of guilt went over his face. “I apologize for acting like a beast.” Without waiting for a response, the earl moved across the room to her father’s sideboard and liquor collection. “That wasn’t like me…”

“Think nothing of it, Grey. It was a lovely interlude.” Once her clothing was back in place, Tori rearranged herself on the sofa, leaned her head against the high back, and then closed her eyes, for it had been an extremely full and intriguing evening.

“I appreciate the new experience.” And would probably dream of it—and him—for many nights to come.

The clink of crystal against crystal echoed in the air as he poured out a drink. “It can’t happen again,” he said in a soft voice as if he was trying to remind himself of that fact.

“Of course not,” she said in response. “Take that vigor and apply it to your fiancée, Grey.”

“It wouldn’t make a difference. My relationship with Sarah is naught but a business transaction, arranged by our fathers.”

“She might change her mind about you, and will be a fortunate woman indeed.” Her words trailed off and she couldn’t remember the original subject matter.

With a sigh, she let herself drift off into a light doze.

The poor man. He deserved so much more than what life had given him.

Sadness for him welled in her chest, but then sleep claimed her, and in her dreams, she could make certain he had the life he would need.

All thoughts of the Marie Antionette necklace were temporarily forgotten.

Hyde Park

London

Grey sat in his closed carriage watching the Mayfair world go by from the window. He was on his way to Hyde Park for two reasons—he needed to clear his thoughts, and that was where he'd been told Victoria had gone.

With nothing else to do, he retreated into his thoughts.

Last night, after he'd lost his damned mind and did wicked things to Victoria after only knowing her less than three hours, she'd fallen asleep on the sofa while waiting for her father to return home.

So, Grey had covered her with a blanket he'd found draped over the back of a chair.

Then he'd occupied another chair, finished his brandy, and kept guard until the baron had come home.

That hadn't been such a bad thing, for she was beautiful in repose, like an angel who'd lost her way, and damn, he didn't know what to do about her.

She just wasn't in his usual style, and he was engaged besides.

It was then he'd had to explain that Victoria had been snooping about Lord Dawson's study, discovered the diamond necklace, and then had absconded with it shortly before Dawson realized it was missing.

He told Irvington that he'd thrown his lot in with hers because she needed protection and help.

After that, he pulled the necklace from his pocket and presented it to the baron, telling him that Victoria suspected it might have belonged to Marie Antionette.

Irvington had promised that he would authenticate it and investigate its provenance if he could.

Once he had answers, he would summon Grey.

Then he thanked him for taking such good care of his daughter.

After that, there was nothing else to be done except take his carriage and return to his own home knowing his fiancée was in bed with her lover while he was wracked with guilt for what he'd done to Victoria.

Yet during the time when he'd had his hands and mouth on her body, eating her out and pleasuring her within an inch of her life, he'd been particularly alive.

It was almost as if he'd only been existing before he'd met her accidentally in that library.

Everything after that had been intriguing, captivating, exhilarating.

As if he'd stumbled upon her and she offered him the missing piece of himself he didn't realize he'd lost years ago.

It was odd and he couldn't explain it. All he knew was that the hunger she'd managed to ignite yesterday in his blood continued to burn.

He should be ashamed of himself, for he'd broken his engagement bond with Sarah and had left Victoria ruined...

slightly, but he wasn't. In fact, he hadn't gotten her out from beneath his skin at all.

He wanted her more now than ever, yet if he were to remain a gentleman and to keep himself above acting the rake or blatantly flaunting his infidelity like Sarah did, he needed to maintain space between them

Which meant he needed to clear his head.

His thoughts.

The damned stiffness in his prick.

Unfortunately, he was still curious about Victoria and the necklace, to say nothing of both of their fates since he'd been the one who'd carried the diamonds out of the house last night.

Complicating the matter was the fact that Dawson had no doubt summoned Bow Street last night. Were they even now scouring London for the stolen jewels? Would they interview everyone who was at the rout?

Grey shoved a hand through his hair as he sat ineffectually in his carriage then was obliged to retrieve his top hat that he'd knocked off.

As he put it on, he frowned. God, he needed to protect her.

Even if she said it wasn't necessary. He'd been the one to concoct the plan to remove her from Dawson's townhouse, which meant he was just as implicit in the theft as she was, for he'd not put a stop to it last night.

Perhaps it was impossible, but because he felt responsible for her, Grey had called at her father's townhouse earlier this afternoon but was told by the butler that Irvington was at his shop, while Miss Amherst had gone to Hyde Park to walk since it wasn't raining.

Which was why he was headed there now. He needed to see her, to know for himself that she was all right and that she didn't hate him for what he'd done last night.

By the time he alighted from the carriage at the north entrance, he was quite anxious to find her, and since he had no idea in which section of the park she would gravitate toward, he told his driver to return in an hour, for no doubt he would see Victoria home once he located her.

There was a crispness in the air that indicated the chill of autumn would soon be upon them, and while he welcomed the change in seasons, he dreaded it as well, for that would mean he'd be wed to Sarah, and the next phase of his life would get underway.

And how the hell could he survive having a wife who cared nothing for him except friendship?

As a gentle breeze played with his greatcoat that he'd left unbuttoned, he finally spotted Victoria near the deeper section of the Serpentine, and damn if his heart gave a queer leap of recognition.

Clad in a cheerful blue dress with an ivory pelisse on top and a bonnet that hid her glorious blonde hair, he recognized her instantly even if she looked nothing as she had last night.

As he approached the location where she stood near the edge of the water watching the various species of waterfowl glide on the surface, he saw that the satin ribbons decorating the straw bonnet matched her dress and jacket, but there was also a cluster

of white, silk berries on the crown of the headgear, nestled within a trio of ivory silk roses.

“Miss Amherst,” he said in a modulated voice so he wouldn’t startle her.

She glanced over her shoulder, and when she realized who he was, her eyes rounded, and a blush stained her cheeks. Was she remembering what they’d done last night? “Greystone.” With a look around the immediate area, she frowned. “What are you doing here?”

“I called at your home first but was told you’d come here.” He shrugged. “I wanted to see how you fared after... things from last night.”

The blush in her cheeks intensified. “Do you refer to the jewel theft or the scandalous activities that followed once I was returned home?”

Heat seeped up the back of his neck. “Both?”

With a sigh, she led him over to a wrought iron bench that faced the water but was a good ten feet away from the edge.

Once she sat, he settled himself next to her, but that was immediately a mistake, for like a siren’s song of old, her very presence called out to him with heat and that bakery scent and the knowledge that her plush lips practically begged to be kissed.

“When I woke at some point in the night, I was disoriented to find I was still in the drawing room, but on my way up to my room, I realized that my father hadn’t retired. I found him in the study where he has a private workshop.”

“Does that mean he was able to authenticate it?”

“I spoke with him briefly this morning before he went to his shop. It does appear the piece is old enough that Marie Antionette could have owned it, but he wants to remove a few of the stones from their settings to further examine them. Apparently, there is a written record of large, cut jewels stemming from that time period he’ll need to access and cross check.

And I believe there is also a list of jewelry that once belonged to Marie that might be in the archives at the British Museum.

He will check it too.” She slid her gaze to him.

“He told me there was a way of metalworking during her reign that would lend credence to my claim. After that, we can make plans.”

“It is forward movement, so that is a good thing.” When a black swan flew into the water, he frowned.

This would prove a problem soon, and the explanation would cause him embarrassment, but he didn’t care.

Any excuse to sit next to Victoria was its own reward.

“Did he indicate when he would know for certain?”

“He did not. This process can’t be rushed.” She stared at her hands that were clasped in her lap. “What will happen now, do you think?”

“I couldn’t say, for I am not privy to the plans, but I’m almost certain Lord Dawson has called in Bow Street to head up the search for the jewels and the thief.

” Who, of course, Grey already knew. “Dawson is imbecilic, which is why he’s lost

his head knowing the diamonds have gone missing.

It's a good certainty that he acquired them by illegal means. ”

“But with Runners engaged, it is just a matter of time, isn't it?” Finally, she lifted her head and met his gaze. A trace of fear was reflected in those blue-gray depths. “Will they come for me?”

“Not if I can help it.” Of course, with him being engaged to someone else, he couldn't take her under his protection...

unless she agreed to become his mistress, and even then, there was only so much he would be able to shield her from.

“I will protect you as much as I can, but in the meanwhile, you'll need to extend your acting skills to throw them off your trail. ”

She nodded. “What if they wish to speak with my father because he's a jeweler?”

That could prove more of an issue. “Let us not worry about that right now. However, you might counsel him as to the need for secrecy, especially if he wishes to keep the necklace safe.” When he glanced at the water again, the black swan had paddled almost to his end.

Shit.

“Good idea. He'll know how valuable those diamonds are soon enough, and he'll side with me in that they should be taken back to France.” Yet there were questions in her eyes, and he had a feeling what she wanted to ask. “Regarding last night...”

“Again, I apologize. What happened wasn't well done of me. I took advantage of

you, of your innocence, perhaps even of my position. Regardless of how much I wanted you, how you willingly gave me permission, I...”

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“Do hush, Montague.” She reached out and patted his hand.

“I merely wished to say that last night opened my eyes to so many things I’d never known.

” When she pressed her lips together while thinking, he knew an insane urge to kiss her.

“I had no idea my body could do the things you encouraged it to do, had no clue that such bliss existed, but I feel I must thank you for showing me such; I certainly wasn’t aware of that other side of life when engaged to Louis. ”

“What?” Shock plowed into him, and from the corner of his eye, he spied the black swan leaving the water. “He never bedded you before going back to war?” It was bad form to even discuss this, but since she’d introduced the subject...

“No.” Victoria shook her head. “Um, there was never time for us to be alone together. So many visits, especially following the engagement. Then he was gone with a kiss and a promise.” Sadness shadowed her remarkable eyes.

“There wasn’t time to let the engagement sink in or to revel in it or even plan a wedding. There was just... nothing.”

Feeling helpless in the face of her emotions, he dared to take her hand in his, held it, merely in support, or so he told himself. “I’m sorry. Sometimes life forces us down paths that have absolutely no joy in the journey.”

“Is that what you feel as your wedding day approaches?”

“A bit, but it is something I must do; I made a promise to my father as he lay dying.”
To his horror, his own emotions crowded his throat.

He couldn't allow them to show, to be vulnerable in front of this woman he wanted so badly to impress for some reason.

After clearing his throat, he said, “It is difficult, and sometimes, all I want is to be needed just for me. I don't suppose that will happen because that isn't how society works. ”

Before she could respond, the black swan approached with a melody of joyful honking as he made his way over the grass toward him. When Victoria shied away from the bird, Grey squeezed her fingers.

“Don't fear him. He's harmless if a bit annoying.” As the honking grew louder, he made soothing sounds to the bird until he calmed. “Hullo, Dapper. I'd wondered where you'd gotten off to.”

A gasp escaped her. “You have made friends with a black swan?”

“It's more like he made friends with me, so I named him Dapper because he is quite handsome.

” The bird kept dipping his head. Every so often, he would nip at the hem of Grey's greatcoat and the toes of his boots.

“Uh, you see, six months ago, I had come out here in an effort to clear my head. The river portion of the Serpentine was a bit frozen, and this gentle idiot had lingered too long in the water.”

“Oh, and the ice had formed about his legs, trapping him,” Victoria finished for him. When she reached out a gloved hand and Dapper nipped at her fingers, she snatched them back with a squeal.

“Exactly. I couldn’t let the lad suffer, so I went out to him, hacked away the ice with my pocket watch—while he proceeded to nip at my head and shoulders—then once he was free to paddle about or waddle about, he formed some sort of odd attachment to me.

” He shrugged as heat rose on the back of his neck.

“Now, every time he sees me here, he gets excited and rushes over to me for conversation and the occasional pet. Most times, he just stands or sits at my feet while we both watch the world go by.”

“That is adorable!” She turned her head and looked fully at him. “You’ve bonded with him.”

“Yes, I suppose I have.” When he drew his gloved fingers along Dapper’s sleek head, the bird shivered and issued a soft honk.

“From what I can gather, he’s a middle-aged swan, and I think he lost his mate.

He might be annoying and attention seeking, but that’s only because he’s lonely, so I’ll sit with him while I’m here.

Sometimes, it’s a challenge to return to my carriage since he’ll follow, but we manage. ”

Marvel and wonder slipped through her expression. “That’s so lovely of you to do.” She patted Grey’s thigh, and he nearly launched from the bench from that touch. “No

doubt you're a bit lonely as well, even though you live a life many envy."

How the devil did she know him so well? "Perhaps."

Eventually, Dapper returned to the water to glide along the surface with a contingent of ducks. At least he had friends to keep him company.

Then Grey stood and held out a hand to her. "I should probably escort you home. I told my driver to return in an hour. By the time we walk back to the entrance, that hour will have elapsed."

"You don't need to do this." Yet she slipped her fingers into his palm.

Heat streaked up his arm to his elbow. "I do, and I will continue to do so until you are safe, and the fate of the necklace has been decided." Then he tugged her into a standing position. "Please don't tell anyone about Dapper."

When she giggled, his world tilted. "I won't. It will be our secret."

"Thank you." After pulling her hand through his crooked elbow, he escorted her along the paths until they reached the arched entrance where his carriage waited. "And thank you for allowing me to share a part of the afternoon with you."

"You are welcome any time you'd like to pop over for a visit."

They didn't share any other conversation on the short ride from Hyde Park to her home in Bedford Square. When he saw her inside, he asked if the baron had returned from the shop. The butler said he wasn't expected back until dinner.

"Thank you. Could you bring tea to the drawing room for Miss Amherst? I'm sure she would appreciate the warmth of tea." He handed his greatcoat and top hat to the

older man then waited while Victoria gave him her pelisse and bonnet.

“Of course, Your Lordship.”

Once the butler departed, he then escorted Victoria up to the drawing room.

“Why are you suddenly so protective? As of yet, nothing bad has occurred,” she asked with a fair amount of annoyance in her voice.

“I realize that, but—”

She huffed. “You feel guilty after what happened last night.”

“Perhaps.”

“Don’t be. I was a willing participant.” She wandered over to one of the windows, and when she shivered, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms. “Please don’t mar what it was with excuses or regrets.”

“Right.” Why did he suddenly feel like a green boy in university, home for school holidays and with the first woman he’d lain with? Since she’d sat next to him at the Serpentine, he’d been swamped with desire, but surely a parting kiss wouldn’t be amiss.

Once the tea tray was delivered, he thanked the footman then went as far as to close the doors. Not ready to leave her company, he removed his gloves. Oddly enough, his hands shook. What the devil is wrong with me?

Victoria turned. Her gaze went to the doors then to him as he stood not far behind her. “Do you want me to pour out?”

“Not just yet.” Apparently, he’d lost control of his common sense as well as his manners, and daring much despite the temptation, he tugged her into his arms and held her close. Dear God, she felt so good against him in ways that Sarah could never be.

“What are you doing?” A shuddering sigh she uttered transferred to him.

“Honestly, I don’t know.” His response was a whisper.

“Fair enough, because since meeting you, I’ve been at sixes and sevens as well.” Her breath warmed his chin and cheek.

And he was in danger of being lost. “Then perhaps neither of us should think overly much.” Because he could, he fit his lips to hers. Each kiss fed the growing desire inside him and turned his blood to fire until he had no idea what was real and what wasn’t any longer.

“Grey, we can’t continue to do this. You’ve said it yourself.”

Dear God, he knew , but he couldn’t stop himself. “Then call me a rake or a rogue or a nodcock, for I can’t stay away.”

As he walked her backward across the floor, he prevented further words with another kiss.

Once her back connected with the wall to the side of the window, he shoved her arms above her head, holding her wrists with one of his hands.

Obviously, he’d taken leave of his senses, but he didn’t care.

She represented something he could never have, something that dangled in front of

him like a carrot to a donkey, and he wanted more.

Like a savage, he ravaged her mouth, kissing her over and over.

The feel of her soft body layered against his, the heat of her while he chased her tongue, the scent of lemons and vanilla urged him onward as he cupped the side of her neck with his free hand, drew the pad of his thumb along her jaw in an effort to tilt her head and deepen the embrace.

And it still wasn't enough.

"Ooh..." Victoria sighed in apparent surrender, and when he finally released her wrists, she put her arms about his shoulders, kissed him back, mimicked what he did to her until his blood caught fire and passion consumed his thoughts.

"What are you doing to me?" he whispered against the shell of her ear.

"Perhaps the same thing you are doing to me... or else I'm going slowly insane," she whispered back, and the heat of her words danced along his cheek.

"Life right now is confusing at best, and a tad unsavory, except with you." And suddenly it didn't matter, for in this moment, he knew exactly what he wanted. "Whatever it is between us, I haven't the strength to fight it any longer."

Come what may.

She stared at him with questions and longing in those blue-gray eyes, and she slowly nodded.

"I feel the same, and perhaps I'm selfish, for I know you don't belong to me outside of this moment, but I want it all the same.

” Then she was in his arms once more, his lips on hers, his hands seemingly everywhere, and he was swept along on the tide of pure feeling.

Needing more contact, Grey gathered handfuls of her skirting, and she offered no protest when he removed each layer of her clothing in less time than it took to draw two deep breaths.

Passion fairly crackled between them; Victoria shoved his jacket from his person with a little cry of frustration.

That made him grin, but he couldn’t properly gaze upon her nakedness until he was as nude as she.

The remainder of his garments fell to the floor along with his boots, littering the room as he slowly moved them toward one of the low sofas in the room.

God strike me dead, but I intend to couple with this woman who isn’t mine at all.

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“This is a horrible idea,” he whispered between kisses.

Tori drew her lips down the side of his neck.

Dear God, he was naked and she was in his arms!

“At times, Montague, horrible ideas are all we have.” When she drew her gaze down the length of his body, he shivered, and she rather liked that feeling of power.

“But sometimes, they offer the only solace.” This man would have been the perfect match for her, yet he wasn’t free, and if this was the only way she could have him, to know him intimately for a fleeting second, then so be it.

Lady Sarah would have to share with her, especially since if what the earl said was true and she had her own lover, this was tit for tat.

Wasn’t it?

“I have no argument with that logic.” The next time he kissed her, the hard, hot length of his shaft pressed urgently into her belly. “Do you wish to continue?”

“I...” She roved her gaze over his body, and there was much heat in her cheeks, for she never thought to be in this position unless it was with Louis.

“Bid me nay, Victoria, and I’ll leave you still an innocent.” Nothing but honesty reflected in his eyes. “I’m not that big of a cad to take you by force.”

Her heart trembled, and she nodded. “Yes, please continue, for I want you. And that is God’s honest truth.”

“You are so different from many women I’ve met.”

“Is that a compliment?” Though anticipation crawled through her veins, she let him lay her down on the sofa, much like she was last night, except this time, she lounged backward against the decorative pillow.

When her legs slightly parted, his gaze went down her body to linger on that most private part of her.

“Yes, quite a compliment.” He joined her on the sofa, and when he covered her body with his, she sighed. “You are as gorgeous today as you were last night.”

Had he ever said that to Lady Sarah? “Says the man who is much like a statue of a Greek God.” Tori slid her hands up his chest in an effort to explore at least part of his form, and when her fingers slipped through the hair there, he hissed in response.

“This is like nothing I’ve ever imagined.

” Her voice caught. “It’s far more than that, simply heavenly, truly. ”

A chuckle escaped his throat. “I’m happy to teach you anything you wish to know.”

One tryst wouldn’t be enough. “Good.” With a knee between her legs, he spread open her thighs and then settled in the cradle of her hips, and the weight of him was amazing. “Honestly, I want to learn... everything.”

“Ah, Victoria, how you tempt me.” Once more, he claimed her lips, and with each meeting of those two pieces of flesh, the desire and connection between them grew.

Perhaps this was merely a search for an outlet from everything that had happened over the past two days, but she didn't care.

As his hardened length twitched at her hip and she continued to explore his chest and back with her fingertips, Tori gave herself over to the moment.

"This is insanity," she whispered between bouts of kissing whatever part of him she could reach.

"I met you yesterday." Perhaps once he bedded her, the tension and throbbing need would leave her, and they could return to their previous lives.

Then she could concentrate on the necklace.

Yet even as those thoughts circled, she knew that taking this first step would send her tumbling down a path that would surely lead to heartbreak.

I will risk it for this experience.

A moan escaped her when he dragged his lips down the side of her neck. At her collarbones, he licked the hollow between them, and when she tried to caress him, he tsked his tongue. Catching her wrists in his hands, he once more shoved her arms above her head.

"Let me guide this coupling, show you how glorious intercourse can be," he said in a whisper as he palmed her breasts. "So damned perfect."

"I... Oh..." Tori curled her fingers into the pillow at her head.

"Grey, I..." Her back arched with every pass of his fingers.

Each time he rubbed them over her nipples, she shivered.

When he took one of those stiff peaks into his mouth, suckled it, worried it with the tip of his tongue, she moaned.

“I thought last night was wonderful, but this...” Words failed her, for the sensations he invoked in her were so overwhelming.

“This is only the beginning.” He chuckled into the crook of her shoulders. The longer he played with her nipples—stroking, teasing, sucking, biting—the more she was convinced she would just separate from her body and fly away.

At her soft cry from his exuberance, he quickly soothed the flesh with his tongue until she moaned and writhed beneath him.

“Please stop... No, don’t, I need more.” And she nearly expired when he began his torture all over again.

It still wasn’t enough. “Let me touch you,” she managed to gasp while resting a hand on his chest. “I need a distraction.” And if this was the only time she would have him, she wanted... everything.

“While that would be lovely, I fear your touch will only send me over the edge sooner, and I am trying to make this first time memorable for you and not embarrassing for me.”

“Are you always so stubborn?” As she spoke, Tori curled one hand about his nape, guided him to a nipple while she caressed her free hand up and down his arm.

A moan escaped him. “No doubt. Just ask Sarah. She’s always in a temper with me.” His attempt at a chuckle fell far short, for they both knew how wrong this was.

“Perhaps we should—”

“No. I need this as much as you do.” Grey glided a hand slowly down her body, between her breasts, down her torso, over her abdomen to bury his fingers into her curls. “Tell me you want me.”

“Can you not guess?” She sucked in a breath when he eased those digits along flesh slick with arousal.

“Oh!” A surprised cry was poorly muffled when he uncovered that tiny bud at her center that would make her world catch fire.

Memories of what he’d done to her last night came tumbling back, and that worked to build the excitement now.

“So damned tempting.” He kissed her lips while he continued to worry her button with varying degrees of friction.

“You are going to drive me to madness!” Her hips bucked off the sofa, which caused his engorged length to bump the inside of a thigh. “Grey, oh heavens.” She dug her fingernails into his shoulder.

He hissed, in either pain or a way to prolong spending, she didn’t know. “That is the point. I want to see you come again.”

“I won’t last long.” A moan escaped her. Tori pulled slightly away, breaking the kiss, but he continued with his torment.

“Fall for me.” He licked her bottom lip. “Fly.”

Before she could form words, she gasped and her body went taut. “Grey!” The

release rolled over her form, and temporarily, she felt as if she were flying through time and space while her core convulsed with contractions that sent wonderful pleasure through every nerve ending.

“Ah, Victoria, you were made for this.”

“Gammon,” she managed to whisper as he settled between her legs. She clutched at his upper arms in an effort to pull him closer. “It is you who has made me thus.”

“If only I was granted more hours to explore your body...” He rested the bulk of his weight on his elbows and stared into her eyes, but there was infinite sadness in his dark depths.

“Grey, is something amiss?” The concern in her whisper went straight to his stones.

“No, in fact it is all too right.” Yet the emotions didn’t clear.

Oddly enough, she understood what he felt, and it was impossible. With sunshine streaming in through the windows, anticipation buzzed through her veins. She rested her hands on his shoulders. “There is still a restlessness inside.”

“You’re certain? There could be consequences.”

She couldn’t be bothered with reality just now. For better or for worse, there was no going back from this. “Yes. I want you.”

“Wrap your legs around my waist.” When she did so, his shaft slid along her folds. He took her lips the same time he guided the head of his member to her opening. Slowly, ever so slowly, he penetrated her body but didn’t go so far as to claim her.

She pulled her head back and broke the kiss. “Grey?” Why did he stop? She couldn’t

keep steeling herself for the pain that never came.

He rested his forehead against hers. “How can this one thing feel so right but be so wrong at the same time?”

“The fact you’re conflicted tells me you are a good man, and I’m the one who should beg Lady Sarah’s forgiveness.”

“For you, there is nothing to forgive. I pushed you into this.”

Poor man. “I am not the sort of woman to steal another’s man, so this has to be the last time you and I do anything like this.” She held his gaze. “Agree, Grey, you must.”

With a huff, he nodded. “Agreed. This is our one-off scandal.”

“And hope the gossips don’t get wind of it.” That would be devastating for them both, but him more so. “If this is the only time we come together, I won’t bid you nay. This is our time.”

She could nurse heartbreak later, if that was what would follow.

“Hold onto me.” He gripped her hips then with a forceful thrust penetrated her as deep as he could go, not stopping until he’d broken through her maidenhead and impaled her. “Dear God, you are so damned tight, good.”

A few tears prickled in her eyes at the quick burst of pain, but it soon faded as she wriggled her hips against his.

“I understand now why this act is something everyone wants, and why the dragons of society work to keep couples apart.” The potential scandal was worth...

everything, for it was amazing being joined together with him.

“Society can go hang.” As he nuzzled the crook of her shoulder, he pulled out, and with a powerful flex of his hips, Grey plunged back inside. “Amazing.” Awe threatened through his voice as he paused again.

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“Ah!” She dug her fingernails into his shoulders but eased her grip shortly after.

“That is indeed the word.” How would she survive this?

Then, with a bit of whimsy, she caught his earlobe between her lips and then lightly bit the flesh.

“I regret this being our only time, but it must.” For anything over and above this was dangerous to her peace of mind.

I can’t fall for this man who isn’t free.

“No more thinking.” He withdrew merely to thrust back inside. As they both moaned in appreciation, he grinned. As he stroked into her, teasing them both, ramping the desire between them, he kissed her, and in that embrace, he drew out the pleasure.

It was an otherworldly experience, and each time he stroked into her body, shivers of need sailed through her blood.

When Tori opened her eyes and found his gaze, she sighed in surrender.

There was something about this man that made her shed every inhibition she’d ever had.

In an ordinary day, she would never contemplate something so scandalous, even with a man she knew well, yet here she was, after meeting him last night, letting him do such delicious things to her body.

Pure madness, but pure joy. She slid a hand over his shoulder, up the side of his neck, and as she cupped his cheek, she glided the pad of her thumb along his bottom lip, leaned upward and pressed her mouth to his.

“I want more. Make it a good one, hmm?”

Grey didn't answer in words. Instead, he shifted his position slightly, and as she tightened her legs around his waist, he dug his fingers into her thigh and hip.

Over and over, he thrust into her, and this time he wasn't gentle.

Perhaps he, too, realized their time was rapidly coming to an end and he wished to give her the best of him.

The tactile glide of his shaft through her passage coupled with his grunts and moans of enjoyment helped to tug her beneath the overwhelming tide smacking into her.

On the heels of a growl, he leaned over her.

The friction on her button from the base of his shaft made her catch her breath, for it was so different than before.

Whimpering cries escaped her throat, and she hoped it wouldn't draw the servants.

Each time he pushed, her breasts bounced.

Oh, why wasn't there more time, for she wanted to feel his mouth and fingers on her nipples again.

“Grey...” Dear God, she might perish right here in her father's drawing room.

Deeper and deeper he drove. Tori clung to his shoulders in a bid to be closer to him.

Faster and faster his hips worked. She pressed her lips to the side of his neck.

Harder and harder his strokes rocked her, kept her trapped between him and the sofa, never wanting to escape.

Then she was done for. The dam inside broke.

Exquisite pleasure flooded her. Then her body stiffened.

Tears rolled down her cheeks for this was beyond anything she'd ever experienced, and when he slipped a hand between them to worry her sensitized nubbin, she shattered again.

He took her cries into himself with a hard kiss while the rapid flutter of contractions kept his length inside her.

He thrust once, twice more before he, too, went over the edge into bliss. "God, Victoria..." With a moan, he ground his hips into hers while his member pulsed and jerked. For a few seconds, he collapsed on top of her, and as she wrapped her arms about him, he released a shuddering sigh.

When she murmured words that made no sense, he rolled to his side, took her with him, and tucked her backside against his front. "Was this all you'd hoped it would be?" The whispered inquiry sounded overly loud in the sudden silence.

"I have no words." She laid her hands over his beneath her breasts as tears fell unchecked to her cheeks, for it was over far too soon. "It was beyond expectations. Simply beautiful."

“I’m glad it was remarkable.”

“It was.” A wad of emotion lodged in her throat.

And she would always remember him because he was the first man she’d been with in that way.

If a pregnancy resulted from this coupling, it would leave her in scandal and shame, but she wouldn’t care, because that babe would be a result of this joining.

A memento of this wonderful man who she knew nothing about but suspected, if they lived different lives, he would be her everything.

When he pulled away and then left the sofa, she nearly sobbed, for it was far too confusing to wade through her thoughts, but she’d known going in that this wasn’t forever. It wasn’t even temporary; they’d only been allotted an hour together.

He wasn’t free.

“I suppose you are going home?”

“In a bit. There is tea to partake in, after all,” he said with a grin as he tugged on his breeches and tucked his semi-flaccid shaft into the garment.

That was too bad, for she would have liked to explore that part of him, but that grin sent a tremble through her heart she hadn’t known since Louis asked for her hand.

“There is that.” With a sigh, Tori left the sofa—how could she ever look at that piece of furniture again without remembering both times with him?

—and she grabbed up her abandoned shift.

“My father had too much work from clients today, so he didn’t take the diamonds with him. ”

“Understandable, but bear in mind, the longer the delay, the more likely the noose will tighten.”

“I know.” After she donned her petticoat, she took her stays in hand, but before she could manipulate them herself, the earl was there, helping her into the clothing.

When he tightened the laces, his fingers lingered on her back long after he’d tied them, and a shiver went down her spine.

They didn’t speak, just stood there, she with her eyes closed to savor the remainder of the moments and him with his hands at her waist, waiting for something that could never come.

After a bit, he pulled her backward against him then pressed his lips to the top of her head. Seconds later, he released her, and they both completed their rushed toilettes in silence.

What did people do after a coupling not only had separated one from reality but had also managed to touch a soul?

Tori didn’t know, but her chest was tight, and her heart shivered as if it had just come alive after far too many years of being dormant.

Once she collapsed into a chair, she poured out a cup of tea for herself with a shaky hand.

When she took a sip, she couldn’t help but grin, for the liquid was lukewarm at best; they had been preoccupied for quite a while.

A pleasant lethargy went through her limbs, and it was just another reminder of what she'd shared with the earl.

“I hope you'll come to call one last time before your nuptials. ”

“Of course,” he said as he strode across the room then opened the door. “I want to be kept abreast of developments regarding your find.”

“Right.” She poured out a cup of tea for him and offered it to him as soon as he settled on the low sofa near her location.

“Well, I appreciate your visit today as well as your attention to detail.” Deliberately keeping her words generic but with a double-entendre for him in the event a servant was wandering the halls, she gave him a smile.

“You are quite welcome, Miss Amherst.” When he grinned back, trembles enveloped her heart, and for another few moments, all was well and she could forget that their time together had run its course. He'd helped her escape Lord Dawson's home with the jewels.

That was all.

Wasn't it?

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By the time tea ended, Tori said her goodbyes to the earl, and when he exited the drawing room, she drifted to the windows.

Since they overlooked the front of the property, she watched the closed carriage at the curb, and when Grey came into sight, her heart skipped a silly beat.

He certainly cut a commanding figure with or without clothes, but since she didn't have the chance to enjoy him while naked, she devoured his form with her gaze now.

So tall, a good several inches over her average height, and so strong.

The feel of his arms around her was like a ghostly touch.

And that sprinkling of hair on his chest she'd briefly been able to explore had been enough to drive her wild with desire.

But her favorite thing—so far—about him was the rumble of his voice when he spoke to her in a thrilling whisper, one that tickled through her chest and sent shivers down her spine.

Fortunate was Lady Sarah, to marry such a man and hear that voice for the rest of her life.

Though she didn't know exactly how old the earl was, she figured if he'd been engaged to Lady Sarah or a long length of time because of their fathers, he must be at least ten years older than her.

It wasn't that large of an age gap, but her certainly acted as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders when he thought no one was looking.

What did he struggle with that he hadn't told her?

Of course, why would he share anything with her when they'd only met a bit over twenty-four hours ago?

And why was he so determined to marry someone he didn't share any sort of feelings for?

At least that was what she assumed. When a woman spent intimate time with a man, she quickly learned subtle nuances about even the most emotionally controlled men.

When he half-turned on the street before he entered the carriage, he gave her a subtle wave, and that made her smile.

Greystone had had manners and etiquette ingrained into him from a very young age, but then, so had she, but probably not to the same extent as he.

Did he have brothers? Or perhaps he was the oldest, which was how he'd come into the title.

What were his thoughts about becoming the earl?

Did he rail against fate, or did he accept it as his lot because that was how he'd been reared?

Tori raised a hand and returned the gesture, then she left the room and moved toward the stairs. Her father would come home in a couple of hours, so she needed to make the best use of the time she had available.

At her room, she met her maid and ordered a bath.

Then, while that was being accomplished, she tiptoed into her father's room.

It took very little effort to locate the Marie Antionette necklace, for he'd placed it into a flat, rectangular-shaped box on his bureau.

After removing the jewelry, she took it back to her room.

Once the porcelain tub had been filled and the maid had included a few drops of rose oil into the water, Tori dismissed her.

Moments later, she slipped into the bath with a sigh of pure luxury.

The scented water rose over her chest as she reclined backward against the end of the tub, and she let the diamond necklace sink beneath the water as well.

Those diamonds were the distraction she needed in order to stop thinking about Greystone.

When she brought them over the surface of the water, they sparkled madly in the afternoon sunshine.

So many diamonds! If laid over a lady's neck, they would look impressive indeed.

The stone at the bottom that hung beneath one of the oval-shaped diamonds was in the shape of a teardrop.

If the necklace was flipped and the clasp manipulated to form a tiara, that jewel would sit at the top.

It was exquisite and expensive, and she almost envied Marie Antionette for having the opportunities to wear this piece.

Seconds later, a snort of laughter escaped her.

The bit of insanity left her almost immediately, for Marie Antionette was a horror and a scare of a ruler.

She had no compassion for those below her in rank, spent money lavishly and indiscriminately, and she held many vices.

Was there any question of why she was beheaded during the French Revolution?

More importantly, did that time in history change anything going forward?

She inspected the diamonds that dripped water, ran her fingertips along the gemstones, and wondered what it must be like to have the available funds to even purchase something like this, let alone have the confidence to wear such a statement piece. Whatever else Marie was, she certainly had that.

Perhaps that was part of her downfall.

After placing the necklace on the small stool that rested next to the bathtub, she sank once more into the warmth of the water.

What would happen now between her and the earl?

Knowing she would probably see him one last time when her father had finished his authentication of the jewels gave her a modicum of relief, but in the same thought, the realization that he would marry soon made her stomach knot.

If she had met him earlier would anything have changed? Would they have been allowed a relationship they didn't have the time for in this moment?

Don't be silly, Tori. He is not yours and never will be.

How horrid fate was to put a man in her path that had the potential to be perfect for her, but he belonged to someone else.

Not since she'd met Louis had she felt such a connection with a man.

Even more unfair was the fact that who he was would be wasted on the woman he'd take to wife.

Aside from his stunning prowess in carnal activities, she suspected he possessed a lovely soul.

And I won't be given the opportunity to see more of that.

There was no use in stewing or wringing her hands about the reality.

His life was much different than her own, and because he had a title, he labored beneath enormous expectations and responsibilities.

Whereas she had much more freedom to move about society, and truth be told, she would be happy enough living in the country, happily keeping busy with household chores, making certain her husband was the best version of himself, and perhaps being a mother.

And even that was uncertain now.

Closing her eyes, she let tears seep beneath her closed lids. Had she stupidly fallen in

love with an unavailable man after only knowing him for a day? Was that even possible? There were no easy answers.

Why was life so contrary?

Mountjoy House

Berkley Square

Mayfair, London

The moment Grey came into his house and gave over his outer things to the butler, he was informed that Lady Sarah was waiting for him in the drawing room.

“Well, damn it all to hell,” he muttered, and after thanking the butler with a nod, he slowly made his way toward the stairs.

Why did it feel as if he were climbing to his doom?

All too soon, he reached the drawing room, but he hadn’t had enough time to sort through his thoughts or his emotions before needing to see his fiancée.

“Ah, Sarah, it’s always lovely to see you.

” He had to force a bit of cheerfulness into his voice, for all he wanted to do was shut himself away in his rooms and have a think.

Her head came up from the periodical she perused in her lap. A smile curved her lips.

“Greystone! You’ve finally come home.”

“I had a few errands.” She didn’t need to know that he’d called on another woman.

And she certainly could never discover that he'd bedded said woman while engaged to her.

Even if Sarah had done the same. As if he were headed toward the guillotine, Grey moved slowly across the room as Sarah stood.

When she offered her hands, he took them into his own then brought one to his lips and kissed the back.

"What has brought you here this afternoon?"

"The need to see you."

"Oh?" When he tried to pull away, she hung onto his hand and led him toward the sofa where she'd been sitting. "Come sit with me."

"All right." Though she was his best friend—far closer to him than some of his male friends—knots of worry pulled in his gut as he sat beside her.

She patted his thigh, but there was no reaction to that touch as there would have been had Victoria done the same. "How did Miss Amherst get on last night after you escorted her home? I haven't heard any gossip from after Lord Dawson's rout, so I wanted to be sure to ask you."

What to tell her? He couldn't admit that he'd lost all control of his urges and his mind last night, which had led to intense kissing, exploration, and then the very rakish action of making Victoria hit release by his mouth.

As heat seeped up the back of his neck, Grey forced a swallow into his suddenly dry throat.

“She is well enough, I suppose. It was a terribly traumatic night, what with everything going on, and I have the feeling she isn’t comfortable in society.

” That wasn’t an untruth, for Victoria had more or less told him that during their talks.

“That poor young lady,” Sarah said as she shook her head. “Did you wait with her until her father came home?”

“I remained with her for about an hour, and shared tea with her. However, I suppose she truly was feeling poorly; she fell asleep.” He shrugged as if such things were expected from those who weren’t accustomed to the hours of the ton .

“I took my leave at that time after covering her with a blanket.”

“That was sweet of you.” Sarah’s gaze slid to his face. “I’m glad you were there to look out for her. I wonder what happened last night to make her feel poorly?”

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“Who can say? Perhaps one of the finger foods didn’t agree with her, or perhaps her stomach rebelled from the champagne.

” It was far too dangerous to continue this line of questioning, for there was only so much lying he could do before she found him out; they’d known each other a long time.

At the last second, he stopped himself from loosening the knot of his cravat.

“How did you spend the remainder of the evening after I left Dawson’s? Did the Runners arrive?”

The least he could do was find out how much trouble they would all land in.

“By the time the rout concluded—and it limped along for about an hour after you left—Lord Dawson was in quite the thither. He said loudly a few times that he was going to summon Bow Street, but I honestly don’t think it occurred last night. Possibly this morning, more likely.”

“That would probably have been the best strategy, for I rather doubt anyone would be present at Whitehall in the after hours.”

“True enough.” For the space of a few heartbeats, Sarah stared at him with questions in her eyes.

“And you were escorted to your father’s home safely, I would imagine?”

“You know I was.” She dropped her gaze. “Phillip graciously drove me there... eventually. We, um, didn’t go straight there after the rout.”

He rubbed his eyes with his fingers. “So I surmised.” And he didn’t wish to hear of her further infidelity, for that would make him compelled to admit to his own.

“In fact, we both felt the need to go to Hyde Park for the quiet after the chaos of the rout.” Her eyes widened while a pretty blush stained her cheeks. “It was quite... satisfying.”

Oh, God.

“I realize you aren’t remotely faithful to me or our betrothal, and I’m willing to turn a blind eye to that, but please, spare me the details between you and your lover.

” If the words were more harsh than he’d intended, he couldn’t help it.

She flaunted her relationship with Phillip, who was a viscount, yet he was being flayed alive by barbs of guilt for doing much the same with Victoria.

“The less we discuss it, the less are the chances it will become fodder for gossip.”

Was he already a laughingstock in the betting books at the clubs?

“I’m sorry.” She leaned into him, and he couldn’t help but put an arm about her shoulders. After all, she was a friend first. “I should have kept it a secret.”

“In some ways, yes, but I’m glad you told me. Somehow, it makes expectations and responsibilities easier to digest.” It also made his sins with the baron’s daughter easier to justify.

A frown tugged the corners of her mouth downward, and as he dropped his gaze to her mouth, he realized her lips weren't nearly as full as Victoria's, and her eyes, though trusting and soft as a doe's, weren't the blue-gray hue he wanted to see.

"Can I assume that you haven't changed your mind regarding breaking our engagement? "

"I have not." How could he explain his reasoning or his thoughts regarding the things that bound them when he couldn't sort them properly for himself?

Especially now with the complication of bedding Victoria?

"At this point, it is much like a habit. I have been engaged to you for nearly twenty years. I have always known it was the path I was meant to walk." None of that made it easier to swallow.

"Ton marriages are complicated, and ours will be no exception. You are free to make your own decisions within the union, be with your lover as much as you want, but you will need to stop such amorous activity for a year after our wedding, for obvious reasons." He was a heel to ask that of her, but he couldn't in good conscience give a bastard his name and title.

"Be advised that the gossips won't be kind to either of us. "

His thoughts went to Victoria. What was she doing right now? Did she regret what they'd done this afternoon? How was she faring? Had he hurt her in his exuberance to join with her?

"I know, but how can I be expected to give Phillip up just because you're being bullheaded about this engagement that neither of us wants?" In some agitation, Sarah stood up from the sofa in order to pace with her arms folded around her as if she tried

to comfort herself.

With a sigh, he nodded. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his head into his hands.

“When my father lay dying on his death bed, he implored me to keep this engagement intact. He said it was the best thing for me, that you would prove the perfect countess, and that he’d already used the dowry your father offered.

Made renovations to this townhouse.” God, what a mess.

“That he’d also had the cottage demolished on a small parcel of land your father gave as part of the wedding payment, so I was obligated to move forward with the union. ”

A gasp escaped her. “The darling little cottage my grandmother had grown up in with her four siblings in Kent?”

“Yes.” He nodded and raised his head to glance at her. “I’m sorry.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “I adored that cottage, had hoped that someday my father might give it to me so I could pass it down to my children.” She sniffled.

“There was always such a coziness there whenever I would visit, such peace. Once, I asked my grandmother why that was. She smiled and told me because the cottage was filled with so much love that it had seeped into the stone. And where there is love, there is contentment and calm. That a couple could go through many hardships in life, but if love was present, they could meet and overcome every one of them.” Sarah brushed at the moisture on her cheeks.

“I took those words to heart, grew up with them etched upon my soul. I even had them etched on the back of one of my lockets, because I wanted that for my own

life.”

“And instead, you found yourself engaged to a man you’ll never love, a man to whom you’ll need to bear an heir—if we’re both fortunate the first time—which will require coupling you won’t enjoy, and be forced to pretend for the rest of your life that this was what you wanted all along.

” A ball of emotion lodged in his throat, for his perspective was beginning to shift.

“I promised my father I would marry you because he thought the marriage would make me a better earl than he was, but now I’m obligated to go through with it because he already used the gifts your father offered.

” He almost sobbed, but caught himself in time.

“The coin was spent, and the cottage is gone; I can only give one back, and I’ll wager your father will refuse to void the contracts anyway.

The match will only make him look better in society’s eyes. ”

“But...” Her words trailed away as she cried.

He hated himself in that moment, but he had to hold the line.

It was the only thing he had left that connected him to his father.

“Breaking the contract will cost me a fortune. It isn’t a responsible decision on my part to bankrupt myself for the sins of my father.

So we will marry, and in this way, we can perhaps find a way to live out our days marginally happy.

” Yet after what he’d shared with Victoria, he suspected that wasn’t an option.

Could he forget her at some point? Yes, of course, but would she be indelibly stamped upon his soul?

In that moment, he couldn’t answer the question.

“Oh, Grey, how can you even think that is possible? Why must you be so unyielding?” Then, with more tears falling to her cheeks, Sarah ran from the room.

How the devil have I fallen into such a mire?

Cursing himself and the situation, he stood and went after his fiancée.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 7:55 am

Mountjoy House

Berkley Square

Mayfair, London

The longcase clock in the second-floor corridor had just struck two when the butler came into the drawing room.

“Your Grace, there are two men from Bow Street in the downstairs parlor. They wish to speak with you regarding an incident that took place two nights ago during Lord Dawson’s rout.”

And so it begins.

Grey folded his newspaper and then set it aside.

“Thank you, Sanders. I’ll be down directly.

” Once the butler left to presumably inform the Runners, he sighed.

It had been bad enough talking with Sarah last night and having her flee from him in tears because she couldn’t understand why he was holding to tradition and his father’s last wishes, but ever since that first time he was with Victoria, guilt had haunted him at the fringes of his existence.

However, coupled with that, for the first time in his adult life, he’d been given a

glimpse at freedom, and he was nearly mad to continue that feeling.

Except he wasn't free to pursue any of it.

It didn't matter that his fiancée was doing just that; he had a responsibility to his title, and he would see it through for his father's sake.

Yet that didn't alleviate the guilt or the need to be in Victoria's company.

As if she were a flame and he a moth, he wanted to keep flying into that light even though it would destroy him.

Eventually, he made his way to the downstairs parlor, and as soon as he came into the room, the two men sprang to their feet.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. I'm Greystone. What can I do for you?"

The first man, who was nearly as wide as he was tall, cleared his throat. Though he had a head full of thick black hair, the fact it was shiny and greasy from pomade immediately turned Grey's stomach. "I am Mr. Adams and this is Inspector Cordelle. We're from Bow Street."

"So I surmised," Grey said in a droll voice as he flicked his gaze to the inspector and quite dismissing Mr. Adams, who wouldn't matter in this investigation.

Unlike his counterpart, Cordelle was tall, lean, with slightly swarthy skin, piercing blue eyes, and thinning brown-gray hair. "Welcome, Inspector. How can I help?"

"Good afternoon, Your Lordship." The other man nodded. "We are here to ask you a few questions about the rout at Lord Dawson's home a couple of nights ago."

“Of course.” Grey gestured to the grouping of furniture. “Please, make yourselves comfortable, but I’m afraid I don’t know all that much.”

“That matters not. We are only trying to put together a timeline of events,” Mr. Adams said as he settled his bulk into one of the chairs. “What time did you arrive at the rout?”

Grey feared for the delicate legs of that piece of furniture as well as the brocade cushion. “I believe it was around nine o’clock that night.”

“Yet the event began an hour before that,” Mr. Adams pressed.

Annoyance stabbed through his chest. “There is no set time when a couple should arrive at a society event. Besides, coming later avoids the crush of people at the entrance and the tangle of carriages on the street.” Who was this man to tell him how to live his life?

The inspector nodded. “Fair enough. While you were there, did you mingle with other guests?”

“As much as I could force myself,” he answered with truthfulness. “I wasn’t in the mood to socialize that evening.”

Mr. Adams frowned. “Were you aware that during the course of the evening, a valuable piece of jewelry went missing?”

“I would have no idea. I spent most of my time in the drawing room listening to pompous men brag about their lives.” Which wasn’t a full lie, but it wasn’t the full truth either. It was rather fun to be evasive, and Mr. Adams was quite prickish. “What was it?”

“From what Lord Dawson has told us, it was a diamond necklace,” the inspector said as he cast a glance to Mr. Adams. “Quite valuable.”

“I see.” Grey didn’t much care, since he’d been the one to carry the item out of the house. He rested an ankle on a knee from where he sat in a chair that matched the one Mr. Adams rested in. “I could have sworn I heard someone say it was a tiara that went missing.”

Mr. Adams shook his wide head. “No, it was a necklace. Did you see it?”

“I did not. Did it have rubies in it or some such?” Damn, he didn’t know he could lie so easily.

“It does not,” the inspector said. “Just diamonds, mostly in oval shapes, set in silver.”

“Ah.” Grey nodded. “I’ll wager it was expensive which is why Dawson is twitterpated about losing it?”

“Quite,” the other man confirmed.

“Where was it taken from?”

“A decorative box in the study.”

Grey frowned. “If it was so valuable, why was it not locked away in a safe?”

“I would have no idea, Your Lordship,” the inspector said with a shrug. “But the fact remains the necklace is missing. And someone from the rout stole it.”

Mr. Adams took up the narrative. “We were told that you’d left the drawing room at some point. Is that true?”

“Yes, it is. I was bored and didn’t wish to drink the watered-down punch, and since I wanted quiet over the din in the drawing room, I sought solace in the library.”

The inspector nodded. “And that was where you met Miss Amherst, Baron Irvington’s daughter?”

“It was.” He nodded and tried not to show his alarm at bringing her into the conversation. “She was, uh, feeling poorly and had laid down on one of the sofas in the dimly lit room. Immediately, I returned to the drawing room to inform her father of the situation.”

From the way Mr. Adams smirked, it was clear he didn’t believe the story. “Did you speak with Miss Amherst while in the library?”

“Yes, of course. I asked after her health.” The health they’d fabricated after coming in from the garden where he’d first kissed her. “And when I discovered her name, I left to find her father.”

“Did she talk about the missing piece of jewelry?”

“Of course not. Why would she? She was in and out of a faint.” This line of questioning needed to end, not only for Victoria’s safety and reputation, but also because it was rapidly stirring Grey’s anger. “Do you think she’s a suspect?”

“It is a distinct possibility.”

“On what grounds?”

Mr. Adams shrugged. “She is a jeweler’s daughter. Her father likes the gaming tables. His pockets are nearly to let. Selling such a piece would go a long way into keeping their lifestyle intact.”

What an arse. Needing to distract them from Victoria's trail, Grey shot to his feet. "As I said before, I'm not certain I can help you with this issue, but I hope you chaps find the necklace. Where did Dawson acquire it, by the way?"

The inspector cleared his throat as he stood. "That is a bit unsure, but I don't believe he bought it through legal means."

"Ah." Which was what he and Victoria had surmised. "Well, we can't have that sort of thing out on the street, for it would cause in-fighting among thievery groups." As he spoke, he led them both to the door. "My butler will see you out of the house. Thank you for calling."

Mr. Adams frowned, and the gesture didn't help his looks. "But we aren't finished with our questioning, Your Lordship."

This man grated across his nerves. "I can assure you that we are. I'm not involved in this theft, and I would appreciate it if you would keep my name out of it. I'm sure you understand." God, it was also fun pulling rank on these two!

The inspector's face paled a trifle. "Of course, Your Lordship, but we need to ask one last thing."

"What is that?"

"Do you know the whereabouts of Miss Amherst? She is on our list to interview today."

"I do not." His frown deepened. "Why would you think I did?"

"Well, you drove her home from the rout, did you not?" One of his eyebrows rose in challenge.

“I did, and since you are determined to pry, I called on her the next day to inquire about her health, but that doesn’t mean there is anything between us.” And these two buffoons didn’t need to know anything else. “Do you not know where she is?”

Mr. Adams huffed. “We do not. She’s managed to elude us.”

“Or perhaps she is merely living her life, unconcerned because she is innocent.” He narrowed his gaze. Quite frankly, he hoped she stayed hidden.

“There is that, of course,” the inspector said with a nod. “If you do see her again, please contact us.” He handed Grey a calling card. “A thief is a thief, regardless of their standing in society or the reasons therein.”

“Of course. Enjoy the remainder of your day, gentlemen.” Grey crushed the card in his fist as soon as the Bow Street men left the room.

Damn it all to hell!

Back in the drawing room, he checked out the window to make sure they went back into a hired hack, and as soon as they were well away, he strode to a small secretary in one corner of the room, where he penned a quick missive, sealed it in an envelope, then impressed upon a footman the urgency of delivering it to the baron’s home and to put into Miss Amherst’s hand posthaste.

I have to warn her.

Hyde Park

Grey removed the watch from his waistcoat pocket—again—to check the time—again. Where was she? He’d asked her to meet him here at four o’clock, near the bench at the Serpentine where they’d talked before.

Had she already been collected by Bow Street?

When he returned the watch to his pocket, a young man passed him on the way to the bank of the river.

“Pardon me, Your Lordship.”

He nodded and didn’t think much about it, but the way the other man referred to his title—and how would he know?

—put him in mind of Victoria, and without regard to how it might look to bystanders, Grey followed the shorter man in the slouch-style cap and scuffed boots that seemed to be a size or two too large.

“Victoria?”

The young man turned his head, and as soon as their gazes met, and he fell into those blue-gray depths, he realized it was her but in disguise. “Hullo, Greystone.”

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“Well, damn.” God love her, she’d dressed as a young man who pretended to fish in the Serpentine.

She’d even brought a pole with a line and a hook.

His chest tightened and his heart squeezed for her inventiveness and willingness to play into the intrigue.

“You are amazing.” And what was more, she was even more attractive in those clothes.

He knew the serious urge to carry her off, and do wicked things to her, but they needed to talk, quite urgently.

“Thank you for noticing.” Amusement sparkled in her eyes but soon faded beneath concern. “I received your note.”

“So I assumed since you are here.” With a half-grin, he watched her pretend to “fish” as she put her hook into the water.

Across the river, the black swan—Dapper—paddled about and when he sighted Grey, he changed direction and came their way.

“Were you able to escape the house before the Bow Street inspector arrived?”

“I was, but that doesn’t mean he won’t return.

” When her kissable lips turned downward in a frown, he wished he could kiss her right there in front of everyone merely to distract her from the cares and concerns.

“Papa is at his shop in Mayfair and won’t return until near dinner.

They might come by his shop to talk with him. ”

Grey nodded. “Just keep to the story that you have no idea about the necklace or even pretend you don’t know what was stolen. Hell, invent some bit about seeing a dark-clothed man escaping through the library as you laid there while I was upstairs fetching assistance.”

“Oh, that’s a lovely idea. How fun!” She nodded, and only a fool would think her a young man with her golden blonde hair caught back and tucked beneath the cap.

“Where did you come by the clothing?”

“I rooted around a few trunks in the attic and came across these.” A tiny waver set up in her voice. “They once belonged to Louis. I remembered that he’d come by the house once in his uniform, but when we wanted to walk along Rotten Row, he didn’t wish for the attention.”

“I’m sorry. It must have been difficult for you to utilize the garments.” A tiny stab of jealousy went through his chest for a dead man who’d had her heart. Even in death, the man had more freedom than he did while living his life with his sham engagement.

Before either of them could reply, Dapper reached the edge of the Serpentine where they stood. With a series of happy honks and a bit of a wing flap, the swan came onto the grassy bank to nip at Grey’s boots.

“You are a fine bird, aren’t you, Dapper?” he asked the goose, and this time, he wasn’t as embarrassed as he’d been the first time. When he reached out a gloved hand, the bird nipped at his fingers, but the gloves kept him from harm.

“He is so handsome.” As soon as Victoria spoke, the swan edged over to her location with a series of soft honks and guttural sounds.

He bobbed his head and then, to Grey’s surprise, let her stroke gloved fingers along his long neck.

“You are quite fortunate to have such a friend and a protector, Montague.”

“Sometimes he is more annoying than is good for him.” But her praise warmed him.

“Did you know that swans—both black and white—mate for life? If their chosen mate perishes, they will not choose another.”

“That is interesting, and I can see the appeal.”

She nodded. “There are also a few more fascinating facts regarding swans I happen to have discovered over the years.”

“Oh?”

“From what I’ve read, the black swan represents the journey from darkness to light, or the process of transformation from an ‘ugly duckling’ to a graceful adult.”

“I suppose that makes sense, except the black swan will always be a black swan.” Though it was lovely to hear her theories.

“True. Black swans, despite their color, are seen as symbols of purity, beauty, and

elegance in some traditions. As well, some cultures around the world associate the black swan with good luck and prosperity, while others view it as a symbol of bad luck or misfortune.”

“Which do you believe Dapper is?” Damn, but he wanted to believe in good fortune.

“I won’t know unless I spend more time with him.” Her shrug had her arm brushing his. “Also, the black swan is found in fairy tales and folklore, often associated with love, romance, and overcoming challenges. Somehow, I like to believe that above all others.”

Oddly, so did he, and his chest tightened, for there were other things to discuss. “The two Bow Street men who came to my home today tried their best to have me name you as the thief, but I routed them, pulled rank on them.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t fearful.” She gave Dapper one last pat on the top of his smooth head then moved away from the bird a bit, letting the hook drag in the water. “I’m not certain I know what to do, in truth. Do you think that sooner or later they will know what happened?”

“How can they? Only you and I were there, and neither of us have told anyone outside of your father.”

She nodded. “And I pray he’s remained mum about it.”

“In any event, keep yourself and your father safe until we can move the piece out of London.” He frowned as Dapper moved away to graze on the grass at the side of the Serpentine.

“I shall do my best, but I thank you for throwing them off my trail.”

“Of course.” Grey cleared his throat. “By the by, where is the necklace?”

Her lips curved into a smile, and so much need shot through his length that he feared he might embarrass himself. “Sewn into my stays. I’m wearing them beneath this shirt.”

“Ah.” His mind jogged to dark places from the admission.

How much did he want to lie her down on the grass and put his hands beneath that shirt and explore those stays for himself?

Hell, at this point he wanted to spirit her away, far away, spend days in bed with her, ignore the world, and enjoy his life for once.

The only way he could do that was with her by his side.

Yet he wasn’t free to do that... unless he upset his entire life and block his own path. “What will you do now?”

“I’m not sure.” Victoria shrugged, lifting the oversized tweed jacket at her shoulders. “My father wants to see the necklace later this evening in his shop with the tools he has there so he can make a final assessment.”

That made sense. “And when he confirms provenance?”

“Plans will obviously need to be made. I refuse to let Lord Dawson get the necklace back in his possession because I’m convinced he acquired it by illegal means.”

“Agreed.” He nodded. “Yet I’m not comfortable that you alone are guarding such a valuable piece.”

“I shall be all right.” For long moments, she watched him, her fishing pole lax in her hand. “Will you and I meet again?”

“I would like to.” Every one of those words out of his mouth damned him.

He was a fool and a nodcock, and it was essentially playing with fire thinking he wouldn’t be burned.

Yet how could he give her up? “It’s risky, but there is a ball tomorrow night.

A friend of Sarah’s father is throwing it to celebrate our upcoming nuptials.

” Any moment now he’d cast up his accounts.

It was tempting fate to invite his lover to a society function that honored his engagement to a different woman.

What has happened to me?

“And?” Confusion flitted through her expression. “What has that to do with me?”

“Please come.”

She snorted. “I don’t have an invitation. I don’t even know if I have a ballgown, for there hasn’t been an occasion for me to wear one since I’ve avoided society since Louis died.”

“I’ll vouch for you,” he rushed onward before his courage gave out.

“You can come as my guest, and as for the gown?” He rubbed a hand along the side of his face.

“Go to Madame Finche’s dressmaker’s shop.

It’s near your father’s shop, a couple of streets down.

I know the modiste... don’t ask why.” Heat crept up the back of his neck.

“Tell her I sent you and that I’ll pay the bill.

Surely, she’ll have something already made but not claimed that she can alter quickly.

Tell her I’ll pay whatever she wishes to charge. ”

God, you’re pathetic, Greystone.

She frowned. “Why? That seems like far too much bother just to meet with me for a few moments.”

“I...” How could he explain what he didn’t know what he felt in this moment?

“I just need you at that ball, Victoria. Please?” His swallow was audible.

“Before this whole thing with the diamonds comes to a head?” Before I’m married...

How had his life come to this pass? When everything was suddenly muddled and confusing.

With a blown-out breath, Victoria nodded. “I’ll drop into the shop after I see my father this evening.”

“Good. Leave the fishing rod and come walk with me for a moment.” Then he

strolled with her away from the Serpentine as much as he could.

At a copse of evergreen trees, Grey encouraged her between the trees where they would be hidden by the branches.

Then, because he couldn't help it, he drew her close.

“Ah, Victoria, what a coil we've fallen into. ”

“All due to a stolen diamond necklace that Lord Dawson thinks to sell or bring him attention from society.” Her eyes flickered as she laid her gloved palms on his chest and gazed up in his face.

And she was all too adorable in disguise.

“Oh, I have a feeling society will give that piece attention, but that we will all be caught up in it.” Seconds later, he cupped her cheek, slid his fingers backward to trail over her nape, pulled her closer, then he claimed her lips with his.

Those two pieces of pillowy soft, warm flesh cradled his, welcomed him home, but to no place he'd ever been to before.

And he couldn't have enough. Damn he could lose himself in her, but as it was, he couldn't keep battling guilt with desire, for it would tear him apart.

With a growl of regret, Grey released her.

“Go. I will leave after some moments have passed, but be careful and smart.” And he needed his erection to settle.

“But—”

“No.” He shook his head. “Take a walk about the lake then go on to your father’s shop. Make sure you’re not followed. Don’t look back or make it obvious you expect to be followed.”

Her chin quivered, and he nearly fell to his knees in front of her. “And if I am?”

“Get somewhere safe and with other people. Send for me. I’ll come rescue you. No matter what.”

That was a promise he would keep, always. Damn everyone else.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 7:55 am

Amherst Jewelers

Nightingale Lane

Mayfair, London

Later that evening

The soft chime of a carriage-style clock in the tiny common room above her father's jeweler's shop announced the arrival of the six o'clock hour.

Tori had arrived an hour ago, where she'd changed her clothes and then had quickly visited the modiste Grey had mentioned.

While it had been slightly embarrassing to ask, the moment she dropped the earl's name, the modiste and her seamstresses fell all over themselves to have her measurements taken, sort through rejected gowns from clients, and then find one that would suit her coloring and the event.

To be fair, though her head was still spinning from the visit, the gown they'd selected for her was the most gorgeous garment she had ever put on.

In a gold color that shimmered with her every movement and breath, it would be guaranteed to draw all eyes to her at that ball.

She didn't care, for the only man's attention she wanted on her tomorrow was Grey's.

Theirs was an impossible relationship, improbable really, and in two days he would wed another woman, just as he'd always been meant to.

The chances were slim that she would ever see him again after that, for she still wasn't one to willfully put herself into society, and he would be on his wedding trip.

The thought of that sent a cold ache through her heart, but though she should be happy for him, the only emotion she could summon was sorrow, for he was her ideal in every way...

but she had met him too late. And honestly, she needed to let him go, because he wasn't hers, never was, regardless of the looming scandal between them.

A grunt from her father brought her out of her tortured thoughts.

She glanced at him from where she'd perched on a hardbacked wooden chair near his very cluttered desk that doubled as a worktable.

Tools of the trade littered the top, along with invoices and other paperwork belonging to his clients, slim boxes containing jewelry that needed either cleaned or repaired, a few books, glass bottles of cleaning solvent, and all manner of dirty teacups and saucers.

"Do you believe it did, in fact, belong to Marie Antoinette?" The sound of her whisper was overly loud in the quiet of the space. They'd shaded the windows as well as the doors in the shop and this room, and the doors were both locked in the event that Bow Street would come calling.

"It did." He glanced at her with a jeweler's loupe propped against one eye that magnified the settings and the interiors of the stones.

“I removed the central, dangling stone from the setting, and on the inside of the metal, there is the name of King Louis XVI with the date of May 16, 1770, which was his wedding date to Marie Antoinette.”

“That is incredible,” she breathed as she watched her father fit the teardrop diamond back into the silver setting. “To think that this necklace is almost fifty years old, and it’s right here as a piece of history.”

“It is.” Her father nodded. “Even one of these stones, if sold or pawned, would fetch at least a few thousand pounds, depending.”

As he worked, Tori’s heartbeat accelerated. “I should make plans to go to France.”

“Whyever for?”

“To obtain an audience with the King of France, Louis XVIII.” It felt so foreign to say that on her tongue.

The king was restored to the throne after Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo, and no doubt everyone in that country breathed a sigh of relief after that time in history was over.

Dear heavens, was it only four years ago?

Time both flew but remained stagnant at times.

“Think, Tori girl. Why would they take you seriously if you show up at the front gates of Versailles?” Slowly, he shook his head.

“Perhaps we should send out a letter first telling them of our findings and ask if they want the piece back. If they do not, they might have details on what we should do

with it.” With a shrug, he removed the loupe from his eye.

“They might wish to send a contingent for it themselves, since it is quite an impressive bit of France’s history. ”

Of course what he’d said was quite logical.

She blew out a breath. “We shouldn’t wait, though.

It’s too dangerous. Bow Street is closing in.

What if they arrest you or me?” The scandal would be horrific for her father’s business.

To say nothing of damaging her own reputation.

As of yet, gossip hadn’t touched her from the theft or her becoming the Earl of Greystone’s lover, but it was probably only a matter of time, for servants talked.

“Ah, poppet, try not to fret about that.” Her father leaned back in his chair. The springs in the old, worn leather chair protested the movement. “When the Bow Street fellows come calling, we’ll have a story in place to spin them, and rest assured, I’ll keep them away from you the best that I can.”

“You and Greystone are so protective of me. It’s rather flattering.” And made her feel loved, almost cherished.

One of his bushy eyebrows rose as he donned his half-moon spectacles. “Have you seen the earl since the rout?”

How to answer that? “A couple of times. He was worried about my health and

mindset after the rout, and he also wanted an update to the provenance of the necklace.” The longer her father rested his gaze on her, the more heat built in her cheeks.

“Is that the truth of it?” There was no judgment or censure in his expression, only curiosity and concern.

“No,” she managed to gasp out. With a frown, she transferred her gaze to her hands that were clasped in her lap.

“I, uh...” A sigh escaped her. “It is difficult to explain, I suppose.” And if she were honest with herself, she was frightened about what was budding between her and Grey, especially since nothing could ever come of it.

“You have known him for only a few days. Why is there such complication?”

Why indeed. Tears stung the backs of her eyelids, but she blinked until the urge to cry faded. “Because sometimes in life, you connect on such a deep level to someone else that it steals your breath and you can’t believe that you didn’t know of their presence in the world before.”

“Well, I have noticed something different about you since that rout, and since I know you don’t enjoy being out in society, I thought it might have to do with someone you met that night.” For long moments, he rested his gaze on her. “I suspect that person was the earl.”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“Yet I thought I heard a rumor he’s due to be married in a couple of days.”

“He is. It’s true, and I’ve met his fiancée. She is a lovely woman.” Whether or not she

was loyal to the earl, she couldn't say for certain, but even if neither of them shared love for each other, that engagement still held and those vows they spoke would be sacred.

"Yet if what you say is true and there is indeed something soul-deep happening between you and Greystone, why are you running from it? Are you afraid you'll be heartbroken again like you were when you lost your fiancé?"

"I think so, because I will truly lose the earl. There is no way around that." And no matter what was between them would just...

end. "Greystone is not free. I should never have let him kiss me that first time, but it was when I'd first found the necklace and was trying to escape the house...

" She swallowed hard as she shook her head.

"Then things happened, we talked, he was the one who got me out of that house with the diamonds. It doesn't matter, does it? " She really needed his advice.

"Nonsense." Her father huffed. "The earl is free until those vows are spoken."

"Oh, Papa, hush. That isn't how it works, and you know it.

" Tori briefly rolled her eyes to the ceiling while the guttering candle flame sent abstract shadows over the walls.

"I'm not the type of woman to steal another woman's man.

" No matter that said woman had her own lover, according to Grey.

"Even if I wanted to," she added, for how often did a person stumble upon someone

as perfect for them as the earl was for her?

And she hardly knew him at all! But there was something in her soul that said he was who she'd been searching for over the years.

"Fair enough but I suspect you have been with him in an intimate way, and—"

"Stop, Papa." She held up a hand to prevent further words. "I don't want to hear it. The last thing we need is to anger two prominent ton families. Your work might suffer because of it."

"My girl, have you learned nothing over the years since losing your fiancé?" When he shook his head, he gave her a mischievous grin.

"There are more important things in life... including the happiness of my daughter. I care not if I lose clients. It has been years since I've seen such animation in your eyes or seen you smile like you do when you talk about the earl. "

Oh, dear.

"Is it that obvious?" The heat in her cheeks continued to rage.

"To me? Yes, and I'm happy for you. To others? Perhaps not, unless they know you or him well." He stood up from his chair, came around the desk, and then when he stood beside her, he leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Don't give up just yet. Miracles do happen."

She snorted. "I think I'd need even more than that." With nothing else to do, she struggled to her feet. "But thank you for the talk. I need time to think, especially since I'm to attend a ball tomorrow night..."

“To meet the earl?” One of her father’s eyebrows rose in question.

“Yes.” Would she burn to a pile of ash right here? “It will be the last time I see him, and after that, I will need to be strong and watch him walk out of my life.”

“Ah.” He rested a speculative gaze on her. “I shall see you for dinner. Do you wait for me to finish up here?”

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“No.” Tori shook her head. “I have another errand to accomplish before I finally go home. Grab some bits and bobs I’ll need to go along with the ballgown.”

“A ballgown?” Worry immediately creased his forehead. “I don’t think there are enough funds to pay for something that extravagant.”

Another round of heat went through her. “Greystone paid for it,” she managed in a barely audible whisper. “It will be delivered tomorrow afternoon, and I know I should have turned the offer down, for it smacks of something he might buy a mistress, but—”

“Hush, love.” This time her father put an arm about her shoulders and gave her a hug.

“Every woman deserves to feel like a princess at least once in her life. I’m only sorry it’s not me to do that for you.

” When he grinned, some of her worry faded.

“You are made of sterner stuff than what you think of yourself. Wrap yourself in the romance, of the glamor of attending a ball, then when your coach turns back into a pumpkin, I’ll be here waiting with open arms to help you pick up the pieces. ”

“Oh, you are such a good papa.” She kissed his cheek and then crossed the room toward the door that led to a narrow set of wooden stairs. “Don’t be late for dinner!”

Thirty minutes later, with a few boxes and bags in her hands, Tori was ready to walk the two miles from the shops to her home, but when she nearly ran into a woman

darting out of a shop before it closed, she gasped when she recognized Grey's fiancée.

"Lady Sarah! How lovely to see you."

Surprise lit the other woman's eyes beneath the brim of her bonnet trimmed with expensive ribbons and silk flowers. "Miss Amherst. What an unexpected delight. Where are you headed?"

"Home. I had some shopping to do, and it's only two miles so I thought to walk."

"Oh, goodness me, no." Lady Sarah shook her head "It will grow dark long before you arrive home, and that isn't safe." She linked her free arm through Tori's. "You'll ride in my carriage."

"I shouldn't—"

"I'll accept no arguments," the lady said with a shake of her head. Once at the shiny black carriage, it began to rain, but the golden crest of a marquess was evident in the setting sun. "Please give my driver your address."

As Tori did so, she didn't know which marquess was Lady Sarah's father, but knowing he was one was enough to put knots in her belly.

Such a powerful man wouldn't wish to be defied in his choices and orders, which was probably another reason why Grey was still engaged even though there were no real feelings there.

With a sigh, she sat on one of the well-squabbed benches as Lady Sarah climbed in behind her and alighted on the opposite bench. "Thank you for the ride. I appreciate it."

“No bother.” The other woman waved away the comment while the driver put up the steps and then closed the door. “It gives us a chance to talk.”

“Right.” And the knots of worry pulled tighter.

“How have you fared since the night of Lord Dawson’s rout? I trust you aren’t still feeling poorly.”

“Oh, I’m much better. Thank you.” She glanced out the window when the conveyance lurched into motion.

“That is good to know, but your cheeks are a bit flushed. I worry that you haven’t sufficiently rested since that night.”

When Tori trained her gaze on Lady Sarah’s face, it was to find her looking back with interest and speculation in her expression. “I’m doing well enough, but I must say that was quite a hectic and upsetting evening.”

“It was. So much was going on, what with the theft of such an expensive necklace.” Lady Sarah poked through some of her own bags on the bench next to her then once more glanced at Tori. “Did Greystone call on you to check on your health the day after?”

“He did.” It was best to stick to the truth as much as possible.

“I wasn’t home, in fact, so he caught up with me at Hyde Park.

We chatted for a few minutes at the edge of the Serpentine before he offered to bring me home.

” Not for worlds would she admit to what happened once she did, indeed, arrive

home. Even now it put heat into her cheeks.

“Ah. The earl has quite a good heart, and he’s becoming quite adept at taking you under his wing, so to speak.” There was no animosity in the other woman’s voice, only odd gratitude.

“Yes, well, His Lordship has a sense of taking care of people, I think. You can feel it from him when talking.” Or at least she could.

“That is true.” Then Lady Sarah flashed a disarming smile. “Might I ask you a personal question?”

“Of course.” Though fingers of anxiety played up her spine.

“I spoke with Grey yesterday, and I must say that I’m proud of him for caring enough to see you home and looked after until your father arrived home.

Or rather until you fell asleep.” She tilted her head slightly and rested that warm brown gaze on Tori’s face.

“And after he met you at Hyde Park, he shared tea with me. I was quite interested to note that he seemed genuinely happy for the first time in years.”

Oh, dear.

“That is to be expected, isn’t it? After all, he is marrying you in a couple of days.” Why did saying the words aloud send such shivers of pain around her heart? She had no claim to him, and what they’d shared was only a fling.

Wasn’t it?

“I’m not certain that is the reason. He and I have been friends for a long time.

Since we were engaged for years, our families had cause to spend loads of time together, but never once have I seen Grey so...

unfettered, I guess. Usually, he is weighed down by responsibilities and worries and expectations from his dead father, but yesterday?

His grin was easy, and his eyes actually held a sparkle. ”

“Perhaps he just knows this upcoming marriage will be a good thing for him.”

Lady Sarah snorted. “I rather doubt that.”

“Well, then it will be a good thing for you.” Tori shrugged.

She didn’t want to discuss the wedding, for every word seemed to rasp roughly over her skin and through her mind.

“You’ll be his countess, and you are so lovely, he’ll be proud to have you on his arm as you welcome society into your home.

” As much as she tried, her voice still broke on the last words.

Hastily, she turned her head to the window so the other woman wouldn’t see her distress.

“The two of you will make a beautiful couple, and might I offer congratulations to you.”

Odd sniffing sounds came from Lady Sarah, and when Tori looked her way, it was in

time to see her dab at the corners of her eyes with a lace-edged handkerchief.

“I apologize,” she said and offered a watery smile. “Perhaps I’m emotional due to the upcoming wedding. And you’re right, Grey is a wonderful man. I should be happy and grateful he’ll be my husband.” Yet her eyes welled with more tears.

Tori remembered that the earl had told her Lady Sarah had a lover and that there were no romantic feelings between her and him.

That still didn’t change the fact they would marry in two days.

Yet it appeared that either the lady was, indeed, overwrought and overwhelmed as a bride should be so close to her wedding day, or it was absolutely something she didn’t wish to do.

Either way, none of it was Tori’s concern. “Please don’t cry. All will come out well.”

Lady Sarah blew out a breath. “Do you truly believe that?”

It was all very cryptic, and she couldn’t be sure what they were actually speaking of in the moment. “We must believe that, because if we don’t... Well, I’ll wager none of us wish to contemplate that. Life will certainly drag out endlessly.”

“I suppose it can’t grow any worse.” Despite her tears, Lady Sarah’s eyes shone with hope. “We must have faith.”

Tori remained silent. I think we are beyond that. The rest is up to fate.

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Mountjoy House

Berkley Square

Mayfair, London

Grey pinched the bridge of his nose and willed the budding megrim to fade. Once more Sarah had popped in for a visit, and though he welcomed her presence, it was the subject matter that caused him undue anxiety.

“Mr. Hoffer has been engaged as minister for the morrow. In his letter, he says he’ll arrive here an hour before the ceremony with a clerk in tow.”

“He seems a nice enough man, and he is articulate. Or at least he was the last time I attended Sunday services,” Sarah said with a bit of a frown. “Did you promise that he could attend the dinner afterward?”

“I did.” God, here they were discussing last-minute details for the wedding ceremony on the morrow as if both their lives weren’t going to come crashing down about their ears.

“I’m rather fond of the fact that we chose five o’clock in the evening for the nuptials instead of the morning.

There is something satisfying about defying the matrons of society in that small way.

” Additionally, they could move directly to the wedding night and have it out of the

way and not need to worry about it later.

Her smile was weak at best. “I wouldn’t exactly call that defying society, but I suppose one must take small steps at first when heading toward scandal.”

“Perhaps.” Distracted, Grey glanced at the list written in his leatherbound notebook.

He didn’t sleep well the night before due to worry about Victoria.

That kiss in Hyde Park yesterday hadn’t been nearly enough, and now it was just past one o’clock this afternoon.

Had she been pounced on by Bow Street? Had she and her father been hauled to Whitehall for interrogation and processing for Newgate?

Where was the Marie Antionette necklace now?

“Grey?”

“Hmm?”

“Woolgathering?” One of her brown eyebrows rose in question.

“I suppose. Did you say something?” Had Victoria visited with the modiste he’d suggested, and if so, what sort of gown had she selected? Excitement buzzed at the base of his spine, for he couldn’t wait to see her tonight at the ball.

God, I’m such a nodcock and quite possibly a cad.

“Yes. I was telling you about the gown I’m going to wear for tomorrow.

It's ivory and gold brocade with a bit of a train, and my mother insisted on a long nearly sheer veil to the toilette that is bordered with lace.

"She shrugged but didn't seem all that keen about the garments.

"It will be attached to a crown of autumnal flowers."

"That sounds lovely. You'll make a beautiful bride." At least that was the truth. Sarah had pleasing looks; the guests would think fondly back on the ceremony for years to come. Too bad the whole mess was about to turn his stomach.

"Thank you. I will enjoy wearing the gown." Yet there was a catch in her voice he couldn't ignore.

So he plunged ahead, as if the foundation of their union wouldn't bother him.

"As for the wedding trip. The tickets for the ship and the paperwork for lodging along the way were delivered this morning by my man-of-affairs. We will travel to France and then journey through the country to the south where we'll spend a couple of months enjoying the seashore.

Finally, we'll continue the trip until we arrive in Rome where we will pass the Christmastide season, and then return to England in mid-February. "

Alone and with each other. It should have been a trip steeped in luxury and romance, but instead, he suspected they would both be consumed with grief and regret.

"It should be lovely this time of year there. Perhaps it will even prove sunny, which is more than I can say for England in the autumn," Sarah said with a nod, but she didn't look at him. "You have done well in the planning, Grey."

“I tried to take your interests into consideration.” In a different world, perhaps, they would have been the typical couple in love as they traveled through France and then to Rome, touring through churches and ancient sites or enjoying the food.

Yet nothing about this was perfect. It was far from it.

In fact, everything was crumbling down around him.

“I appreciate that.” Finally, Sarah trained her gaze on him, and in those fathomless brown pools of her eyes, there were a thousand questions as well as a thousand sadnesses. “I accidentally came across Miss Amherst yesterday coming out of a shop in Mayfair.”

“Oh?” Why the devil did his pulse accelerate at the mention of Victoria’s name? “How does she fare?” As if he didn’t already know.

“She is well. The bloom of health one could say with lovely color in her cheeks and bright eyes.” His fiancée shrugged. “Who is she to you?”

Damn it all.

What was there to say? It was his turn to glance away. “No one. She’s no one to me except a young woman I assisted through a bit of an issue stemming from the rout.” Feeling compelled, he met her gaze. “I took her home a couple of times.”

“Yes, she mentioned that, but you are a liar, Greystone.”

“What?” His chest tightened with anxiety.

“I can see it in your eyes. There’s more life in you than you’ve ever shown around me.” Sarah searched his face for God only knew. “You’ve been in a lovely mood

these past few days, ever since that rout. Is she the reason?"

Was she?

"I, uh, wouldn't know. Perhaps I'm merely anticipating our nuptial ceremony." Yet even as he spoke those words, cold dread tickled down his spine.

"Don't be like that. I have known you far too long for you not to be honest with me." Sarah tsked her tongue, but there was no anger in her voice. "Have you bedded her?" She moved from the chair she'd occupied to sitting beside him on a low sofa. "Be honest. I won't be angry."

With his chest still tight, he regarded her with all seriousness.

Finally, he nodded and tugged at the knot of his cravat.

"Yes, I've bedded her. Only once." Well, once in the traditional sense.

That didn't count the bit of scandal he'd gotten up to when he sent her over the edge with his fingers and mouth.

How the hell could one bedding change his life? He'd been with women over the years. Hell, he and Sarah had come together years and years ago, only to discover there was no passion between them, but doing the same with Victoria? Life shattering.

"Oh." Instead of the expected lecture or fury, a slow smile went over Sarah's face. "Can I guess that you and she get on well together, then?"

"Yes." The word felt as if it were tugged from a tight throat while heat went up the back of his neck. "Quite frankly, I don't know what to do."

Her eyes twinkled. “I think you do, but you’re too stubborn to listen to your heart.”

“My heart?” Grey snorted in a bid to cover his true feelings. “What does that have to do with it?”

“Don’t be an arse. You’re in love with her.” A chuckle escaped her. “That’s, it, isn’t it?”

He frowned. “How can that be possible? I have known her less than a handful of days.”

“Love is love. It doesn’t have a calendar or schedule. There is no countdown or a clock.” Sarah’s smile widened. “It just comes when it comes and chooses who it wants. And that is what makes it so glorious.”

Surely, that wasn’t it. “What a ridiculous notion.” What he felt for Victoria was lust and desire only, wasn’t it?

Yet how did he explain the feeling of peace he had when in her company or the way she brightened his day each time he saw her?

Or the hope that filled his chest whenever he thought about anything having to do with her?

“This is exactly what I mean.” She shook her head. “You are being bullheaded. Sometimes life is just... more than what we see on the surface, what we allow those closest to us to witness.”

“Do stop, Sarah.” He held up a hand and sent a glance of longing toward his sideboard where the crystal decanters of spirits waited.

“Can you blame me for thinking like this? This is reality, it’s where I live.

” Unfortunately. “I don’t have the luxury for romance or fancy.

I have responsibilities, duties, promises that I made to my father—”

“—who is dead, Grey. He’s gone. You owe him nothing.” Her eyes implored him to understand. “He won’t have his feelings hurt. He won’t even know that things have changed for you or between us. There is nothing tying you to this.”

“Except the fact that my father already used the dowry gifts your father gave him in exchange for this union. Not to mention that your father will have my head. He’ll bury me within the ton .” God, that man had always terrified him.

“No, he won’t. Not once I talk to him, but I need you to make a promise to me that we won’t marry. That breaking this engagement is completely your fault. It’s the only way to get out of this.”

His frown deepened. Annoyance rose in his chest in a hot tide. “So that society will think I’ve been unfaithful?”

“Haven’t you?” One of her brown eyebrows rose in challenge.

“Yes, but you have been that long before I ever was, and I was only that once.” Yet it had been a defining moment in his life. “I’ll wager you’ve been with the incomparable Phillip far more times than that.”

“I have.” Her expression softened, and he was jealous of what she had with her lover. “Ultimately, that is so sad.”

“What is? The truth? If so, I quite agree.” On all points.

“No, the fact that you’ve only bedded Miss Amherst once. I thought you more virile than that,” she said with a knowing look in her eyes.

“Do shut up, Sarah.” But he couldn’t help but grin.

For a few moments, they were completely in agreement then her eyes misted with tears. “I apologize for being a watering pot. It’s been a difficult few weeks.”

He gave her his handkerchief. “Wedding jitters. Nothing more. We’ve known this day was coming, and we are both out of time.”

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“No, Grey. It’s much more than that.” When she laid a hand on his leg, there was no more reaction on his part than the support of a good friend.

She stared at him with a soft, mysterious smile curving her lips.

“I’m going to tell you a secret that I only just had confirmed a couple of days ago.

” She pressed her lips together. “I’m increasing. Nearly three months along.”

The silence that followed the announcement was so thick it could have been cut with a knife.

“What!” In shock, Grey sprang up from the sofa and gawked at her. “What the hell were you thinking, Sarah?” If his voice was too loud, he couldn’t help it. Betrayal cut through his chest with the accuracy of a sharp blade. “How could you do this to me? On the eve of our damned wedding?”

Her eyes rounded. Tears shimmered in the dark depths. Slowly, she rose to her feet. “Please remain calm.”

“How can I? This changes everything. It puts me into a horrible position and turns everything on its head.” He shoved a hand through his hair as the magnitude of her announcement continued to sink in.

“The thought of giving a child who isn’t mine my name?

” Shaking his head, he glared at her. “I’ll do it for you, of course, to avoid the gossip,

but it cuts to the quick, Sarah.

I warned you repeatedly, impressed upon you how important this union was to me and my title. ”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” The blush in her cheeks spoke to her high emotions, but he steeled himself against her tears.

“Phillip and I were careful, but what’s done is done.

I need you to follow your heart, Grey. Let me go.

” Her words faltered. “Cancel the contracts. Risk the scandal because I love Phillip and he loves me. We want to be a family. A real family without hiding.” She closed the distance between them and laid a hand on his chest. “He wants to be the father to this child without you being forced to claim it as yours.” As she spoke, her words came faster.

“We’ll wed quietly in the country, well away from London so the gossip will be minimal, as will the scrutiny. ”

“And then what?” He fairly shook from fury. How was it Sarah had everything she wanted and yet he was shut out from knowing the same?

She shrugged. “You’ll be free to pursue Miss Amherst.”

“No.” Grey shook his head. “She is the daughter of a jeweler.”

“And a baron,” she reminded him.

Not knowing what else to say, he rubbed a hand along the side of his face. “More

than that, there are rumors circulating that she's in the thick of a theft."

"Well, isn't she? I suspect she was the one who stole that necklace," Sarah said in a barely audible whisper.

"Yes, but so am I." Heat rose on the back of his neck. "The authorities will make an example of her, but they won't touch me, merely because I'm an earl." And he couldn't bear that. It wasn't fair, and he had vowed to protect her.

"Which bothers you more? That's she's well below you in rank or that you won't be punished as she would be if caught?"

God, his chest was so tight with both worry and jealousy. "Both?"

For the space of a few heartbeats, Sarah watched him, dabbed at her tears.

"I have known you a long time. You have a good heart, and you do so much for others. You truly care for people, and that is so beautiful." She pressed her lips together while holding his gaze with hers.

"You are already a better earl than your father was, but beyond that, there is a craving within you to have the life you've always wanted, and I think that includes love, which isn't present between you and I. "

"Yes, but—"

She shook her head. "It's time for you to finally do something for yourself. Does it truly matter that Miss Amherst isn't high up in the ton, that she's trailing scandal, that she could care less about society?"

"No, but how can I offer for her, ask her to be my countess, when she hasn't had any

training, has no interest in what makes the beau monde move?”

“Do you know that for certain?”

“No, but—”

“People can surprise us.” When he remained silent, Sarah continued. “Did she steal those diamonds for a nefarious purpose?”

“No, she’s very civic minded.”

“Then that is all to the good.” She huffed.

“If these small excuses are your only argument, you are more of a nodcock than I thought.” With a sigh, Sarah put her arms around him.

Though he flinched, for his emotions were quite raw, he eventually took solace in the support and held her as well.

“Love is difficult to come by in our world. Real, true love that changes us from the inside out and gives us hope to continue despite the challenges.”

“I don’t know if that is—”

“Do stop interrupting me,” she said with censure in her voice, and suddenly he knew what Victoria had felt like when he did that to her.

“The odds of anyone in our world finding love, and by accident, is rare. At best, those in our positions can expect a warm friendship in a marriage, but having love at the beginning? It’s a miracle.

Don't discount it and don't shove it away in the face of tradition or responsibility. ”

“Fairy stories, nothing more.” Yet the words gave him a modicum of hope. Stupid, silly hope, but it was there nonetheless.

She heaved out a sigh. “Responsibilities and duties will either continue on, or you can change them for the better. Love is fleeting and it won't wait.

Hang onto it. Chase it with everything you are.

Don't let it get away, because it might be a once in a lifetime thing, and at the end of your life, do you want to regret knowing you turned your back on love because of your damned title that doesn't care anything about you? ”

The silence that brewed between them was once more thick and heavy. He drew in a shaky breath God, why was this so difficult? “You assume I'm in love with Victoria.”

“Don't be an arse, Grey. Even a blind man can see you're besotted with her.

” She slipped a hand up his chest to hold his shoulder.

“You need to have a long talk with yourself, come to accept some hard truths. Society will forget about this on-dit and move onto the next in good time, but at least you'll be happy. ”

He shook his head before he could give life to possibilities. “You just want Phillip.”

“I do. No offense to you, but you are my best friend—not my lover or the keeper of my heart... the father of my child.” Her eyes were moist as she stared up at him. “Let me have that so you can have the same.”

“I...” What was there to say? It was all so impossible.

“Consider this,” she said as she fiddled with the fall of his cravat. “Miss Amherst might already be with child.”

There was that. “I only bedded her once.”

“It doesn’t matter, and if it does, then bed her again. Perhaps it will help your decision. And improve your temperament.” Her grin was quite cheeky.

Truly, he wanted nothing more than to find himself in Victoria’s arms. He shoved the thought away. “If I don’t, I’ll disappoint you, then you’ll hate me. There is no clear choice.”

Her huff of frustration warmed his chin. “There is but you refuse to entertain it.”

Could he? Should he? What would happen if he threw everything to the wind and followed his heart.

“I...” He swallowed hard. “I promise to think about what you’ve said, and I will let you know my decision after the ball.

” When her expression fell, his chest ached.

“It’s the best I can do since no matter what I choose, my life is going to be forever altered. ”

“I appreciate that, and it will, so make certain you’re at least happy and content in that scandal.” Then she patted his chest. “I have full confidence in you.”

“I wish I did.” For he was quite a mess just now.

“You’ll arrive there sooner or later. Is Miss Amherst coming to the ball tonight?”

“Yes. I invited her... as a chance to see her one last time... before I’m forced to give her up.” The ache moved to his heart and squeezed hard.

Sadness reflected in Sarah’s expression. “Oh, Grey, I hope you find your courage.”

“Why?”

“Because you are adorable with love in your eyes.” She patted his cheek. “Until tonight.”

Why did it already feel like he’d lived a thousand lifetimes since this morning?

Portland House

Fitzroy Square

The soft pitter patter of the rain on the roof of the carriage couldn't soothe her anxious feelings, and perhaps there was good reason for that.

Earlier in the day, she had held serious discussions with her father, and it was decided between them that the best thing was for her to depart for France tomorrow after the ball.

Especially since Bow Street would no doubt pay them a visit tomorrow as well.

She'd neglected to bring Montague into the conversation, for it didn't matter the state of her heart; she had her mission, and he was to marry.

None of it had changed despite what they'd shared between them.

"Worried about the journey to France?"

"Partially, yes. It's quite frightening, and I'll have a maid with me for conversation.

" She sighed. "And you'll be with me as well.

That is something." Her dear father had managed to secure tickets on a ship to go across the Channel for tomorrow, boarding at six o'clock in the evening.

After that, they would hopefully meet with the ambassador and secure travel arrangements from that point.

“Well, someone needs to protect you and that necklace.” He shook his head. “And since our ambassador is already there, perhaps we can have an audience with him, and he’ll help our way into seeing the king.”

“It would prove most helpful, yes, but for right now, I intend to enjoy myself at this ball.” As the carriage inched its way forward toward the house, she gazed out the window.

“For what it’s worth, you are quite lovely in that golden gown.”

She allowed a smile as she pulled the edges of her satin lined ivory cape tighter about her shoulders.

“Thank you. I feel a bit like royalty in it.” The gold silk featured tiny clear glass beads and equally tiny golden spangles all over the whole of the garment, and the low bodice was lined with gold-dyed lace.

“It’s the most expensive thing I’ve ever owned.

” To say nothing of the pearl earbobs that dangled from her lobes and the crushed diamond encrusted combs in her hair that helped to secure her elaborately dressed upswept style.

Short sleeves hung just off her shoulders, and that took a bit of acclimation.

A matching reticule and golden embroidered slippers completed the ensemble.

When the gown had been delivered earlier that day, exquisite fine lawn

undergarments had been tucked into the box along with silk stockings and long gloves that went to her elbow.

“The earl must think quite highly of you if he didn’t mind the expense of a whole toilette.”

Heat slapped at her cheeks. “I don’t know about that. He wanted to see me tonight, and perhaps if I’m fortunate, he will ask me to dance.”

“Oh, I’ll wager he will indeed.” Her father winked. “And then some.”

“Do stop.” Yet the warmth in her cheeks remained.

Tonight, she would enjoy herself with the handsome earl, and she would block everything else from her mind.

Montague was her ideal in every way, but he was engaged to be married on the morrow.

This would be their last night together, and knowing that sent an ache around her heart that was so acute, it stole her breath.

Why couldn’t we have met sooner?

Not that it would have done much good, for he’d let slip shortly upon their first meeting that he’d been engaged to Lady Sarah for many years.

The carriage was nearly to the offloading point.

Knots of worry pulled in her belly. “Oh, Papa, I’ve done something far too stupid and have fallen in love with Greystone.” It was good to have admitted it, but it certainly

didn't make her feel any better.

A man who wasn't free.

"Love is never silly, my darling girl."

"I'm feeling wretched, so pardon me if I don't believe you." Perhaps a broken heart was the payment demanded for knowing an intense love even for a handful of days.

Then there was no time for further conversation, for the vehicle came to a halt and a footman at the curb opened the door then put down the steps in front of the free-standing house, which is what many of the homes were in this area.

Her father exited first. Once he turned, he extended a hand and assisted her from the carriage.

She held the skirt of her beautiful gown above the muck on the street until they were welcomed into the house, and by the time she and her father had entered the large ballroom, she rather felt as if they were in a completely different world.

"Good heavens, this is quite lavish, isn't it?" she breathed to her father after they cleared the reception line and met their hosts.

"Well, when one is a duke, one spares no expense."

She tossed him a glance. "No being tempted by the card tables tonight, Papa. We are nearly solvent and might be in a few months if we're careful." At least they were the last time she'd looked at the ledger books.

"I promise."

Everywhere she looked, an autumnal theme met her gaze.

So many vases and baskets full of flowers in shades of yellow, orange, rust, and red rested on small tables and Roman-style pedestals about the room.

Swags of the same along with branches from oak trees had been fastened over windows and doorways.

The arrangements were enhanced by fruits as well as silk birds and gauze bows.

“This must have taken ages to decorate.”

“They have an army of servants, poppet.”

Murmurs went through the crush, and moments later, she realized many of the guests were peering at her. “Am I truly that much of a sensation?” It was quite rubbish having that many eyes on her, but there was nowhere to hide.

“You are everything lovely and angelic. Enjoy the stares,” her father said with a cheeky grin. “I always tell you that you could have exactly this if you would just consent to going out into society more often.”

“I don’t want the attention.” At least not from the men in the crowd who regarded her as if she were only good enough to grace their arms and warm their beds, too far beneath them in station to actually wed.

Her father patted her hand that rested on his arm.

“I hope this night gains you everything you’ve ever wanted, pet.

” His smile was a bit sad about the edges.

“You’ve seemed quite happy and more full of life for the past handful of days, and I can only guess it’s because of the earl.

” A sigh escaped him. “Though I would have liked for it to have been due to a man you have a chance with.”

“Me too.” Her own smile felt forced and a bit sad.

“I think my luck is eternally bad in that regard, always choosing men that I shouldn’t.

” As she spoke, the opening waltz began with a handful of couples on the parquet floor, including the ducal couple as well as Greystone and Lady Sarah, since the ball was being held in their honor.

“But oh, look how handsome he is tonight!” she said in a quiet voice.

“With his back so straight and his hair prone to curling and the way the tailcoat stretches over his shoulders.” A shiver of need went down her spine.

Why can’t he be mine? Perhaps if only for tonight.

“None of that now. You look like royalty, and can easily outshine many of the women in attendance.” He snorted with derision. “The lady doesn’t seem in an overly festive mood tonight when she’s with Greystone.”

Sadly, Lady Sarah didn’t know how lovely the earl truly was.

But she didn’t say that aloud. “Thank you, Papa, for the compliment.” With much willpower, Tori tamped down on the urge to cry.

“I wish Mama could see me. She would say I fell out of a fairytale book, or that I was

pretty enough to garner at least three offers in one night.”

“That she would.” His eyes went misty. “Your mother would be so proud. She did so want you to marry well, but she also wanted you to be happy.” Then her father noticed one of his clients, who waved. “Excuse me, poppet. I’m going to talk with Mr. Putnam, and no, I won’t go to the tables.”

As soon as the opening waltz ended, a country reel set up, and she was pressed by a few men to partner.

Selecting one of them—for it didn’t matter much to her and she’d not yet seen the earl outside of partnering Lady Sarah—Tori indulged in the reel.

She’d forgotten how lovely the exercise of dancing truly was, but it wouldn’t make her spend more time in society.

That simply wasn’t the type of woman she was.

Her partner was congenial enough, but he wasn’t Montague, and she only had eyes for him anyway.

When he escorted her over to the sidelines, she gave him a polite thank you but didn’t commit to another dance later in the evening.

However, before she could contemplate what to do next, Montague was there before her, and she stared up at him with absolutely no thoughts in her brain, for he was that stunning in evening dress with a sapphire stick pin in the snowy folds of his cravat.

“Good evening, Miss Amherst.” Admiration was clear in the chocolate depths of his eyes. “I am glad you came.”

She couldn't help her grin. "You are?"

"Of course." The earl glanced about to make sure no one paid them attention. "Our last meeting from yesterday was far too brief and not nearly as satisfying as I would have liked. To say nothing of the fact that these past few days have been quite... entertaining and..."

"Yes?" She could hardly force the word out, for her heartbeat raced so quickly and loudly through her veins.

"...eye opening." Yet he raked his gaze over her person, and those dear eyes of his darkened slightly. "My God, but you are stunning tonight in gold. I trust you visited my modiste?"

"I did. She was quite helpful, and I must say, I've never owned or even worn something this lovely."

"It looks as if it was made for you." When his gaze came back to hers, it was quite obvious he approved. "I want to call out every man who is looking at you right now."

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Heat seeped into her cheeks. “Do stop, Greystone.”

“It’s true.”

She shook her head and offered a polite smile to a couple strolling past their location.

“Where is Lady Sarah?”

“Talking with one of her friends.” As a few preemptory notes from a string quartet burst upon the air, he gave her a half bow from the waist before offering her a gloved hand. “Do me the honor of partnering me in this next Viennese waltz?”

“Oh!” Dear heavens, this was all so formal and romantic. “Of course.” As soon as she slipped her gloved fingers into his palm, he grasped her hand and then led her to an open spot on the dance floor. “Shouldn’t you have reserved all your dances for Lady Sarah?”

“No doubt I should, but she is busy, and I invited you here tonight because I wished to dance with you .” Shadows lurked in his eyes with hints of desolation. Was he thinking about his nuptials tomorrow?

Then the music began, and he led her into the complicated steps of the waltz.

There was something so sensual and intimate about touching hands and circling about one’s partner before being obliged to switch.

Each time that happened, she followed the earl’s movements with her gaze, and what was more, he did the same to her until they’d come back together for a precious few

seconds.

“My father did his last authentication of the necklace,” she told him in a hushed whisper while letting her hand slide against his.

“And?”

They circled each other, and all she could think about was the brush of his arm, the random touch of his hip to hers and the electricity it imparted.

“There was an inscription under one of the jewels on the metal with the king’s name and the date of their wedding, so it does belong to the royal family of France. ”

“That is incredible.”

She nodded. “It is, and I’m also going to return it.”

“What?” The earl made a misstep and stumbled.

“My father and I are going to France. Hopefully there, we can meet with the English ambassador and then present the piece to the royal court.”

“Oh.” Once more they were separated and given new partners in the intricate dance.

It was the infinite hopelessness in Montague’s eyes when she’d told him that last bit that caused her heart to squeeze so hard she feared it would crack and then shatter. Why would knowing she’d go out of the country cause such a reaction? Regardless, it hurt him to see him like that.

When they came back together, his touch lingered a bit too long on her hands, but his eyes remained stricken. “Let me go with you. After all, I helped you take the piece

out of Dawson's house," he said in a whisper. "Let me be there at the end as well."

"You can't." The ache expanded to her chest. Emotion lodged in her throat. "You're to be married tomorrow."

"It can be postponed. Sarah would understand."

"No." Tori shook her head. "There needs to be space between us, and it will be better if I'm gone." Tears welled in her eyes. "You have told me a couple of times that you are laboring beneath responsibility and duty. That is why you are marrying, isn't it?"

"Yes, but—"

"That is your destiny, Montague. Going to France is mine."

Again, the steps of the dance took them away from each other. The temporary break from him didn't help her regain control of her emotions. In fact, if anything, it made her want to retreat to a quiet corner and give in to the tears sitting heavy in her throat.

When they came back together for the last time within the set, she nearly clung to his hands. "I'm sorry, Montague."

He shook his head while he fought to control his expression. "No. I don't accept that."

The poor man. He looked like she felt. "We have this dance. You can fetch me some punch after it ends. And we have the night we shared. That must be enough." She kept her voice low so they wouldn't be overheard.

The shock mixed with silence in his eyes caused her to stumble this time, but he was there to keep her from falling. "Please change your mind. Don't leave me here."

“Oh, Your Lordship, stop. You won’t be alone, you’ll have your fiancée, and soon she will be your wife, and you will have fulfilled your duty.”

“No.” Emotion graveled that one word. “Sarah doesn’t love me.” His chin trembled and he leaned toward her with his lips nearly at her ear. “She told me she is increasing with her lover’s child. How can I go on, Victoria? How can I pretend that the child is mine knowing that’s not true?”

“I’m so sorry.” No wonder he seemed ready to cast up his accounts. “I can’t imagine how you’re feeling, and I don’t have ready answers for you.” Her own eyes teared up, because the whole situation wasn’t fair. “You’ll still have your swan friend.”

He almost smiled. So did she even though she wanted to cry. “I don’t love Sarah,” he admitted in a choked voice. “She has always been my best friend.”

No wonder they were so close, and Sarah seemed to know much about him. “Then you’ll have a bad time of it, I’m afraid.”

“But I promised my dying father; he already spent the dowry and used the property given over as part of that.” He shook his head.

“I have no options.” Then the dance ended.

At the conclusion of the set, he led her to the side of the room.

“Oh, God, what am I going to do?” In the crush and confusion, Montague took her hand and tugged her out of the ballroom.

The tightness of her hand in his brought her a modicum of comfort, but her heartbeat pounded as she followed him. “What are you doing? You’ll be missed since the ball was thrown to celebrate your engagement.”

“A pox on all of that.” He shook his head. “I can’t give you up without saying goodbye.”

“But—”

A sound that was a cross between a sob and a growl escaped him. “Let me have this, Victoria. It’s the only way I can face my future.”

She forced a swallow into her suddenly dry throat. “A future that’s not your own.” Why did it matter so much that he’d made the promise to his father? What was really holding him back from chucking it all into the proverbial bin and starting over?

“It is how the aristocracy works.”

“Then four people will be miserable.” How could she manage to survive with knowing there was no chance of being with him in any capacity?

By the time she returned from France, he would be well on his wedding trip, and the likelihood of seeing him after Twelfth Night was unlikely, for they didn’t move in the same circles of society anyway.

“Perhaps we shall write letters. It would be something we could both live for.”

“Rather empty hope, don’t you think?” Yet it would extend the heartbreak every time a letter arrived. That was no way to live.

Even if it would be a piece of him.

The earl, however, said nothing as they hurried through the corridors, moving away from the gaiety in the ballroom.

Oh, Montague. Why couldn't he realize there was more to life than society, position, and expectations? Why was he hellbent on throwing away his own happiness on the altar of pleasing his dead father? If she did nothing else this night, she would find the answer to that question.

But at least she would have him to herself one last time.

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Shit, I'm the biggest nodcock in all of London.

Grey didn't care as he held onto Victoria's hand while leading her up the grand staircase to the second floor of the duke's home.

He also didn't care that he was due to marry another woman on the morrow.

Every beat of his heart called Victoria's name; every breath he took screamed that he couldn't see a future if she wasn't in it.

He ducked into a room at the right of the stairs.

No candles burned inside, so clearly it was off limits to ball guests, and he was quite all right with that, for he wanted privacy.

Perhaps it was a private parlor, but the ducal couple wouldn't have need of it for the next hour. "This will suit our needs."

"What if we're found out?"

"We won't be." After he closed the door behind them and threw the locking mechanism, Grey immediately took her into his arms and claimed her lips in a rather intense kiss, keeping her trapped between him and the door at her back even as his heart felt as if it was being shredded.

Victoria must have felt that same connection, that same desperation, for she looped her arms about his shoulders and kissed him back, awkwardly at first, but then with

more confidence and authority.

With every tiny movement of her lips on his, with each press of her soft body into the harder planes of his, he fell all the harder for an idea that he could never have...

Fell for her. Despite the impossibility of a future with her.

Wrenching away, he rested his forehead against hers.

“Victoria, I...” He cleared his throat, for it had grown tight with everything he hadn’t allowed himself to feel since meeting her in that library at the rout.

If he said the things that were rapidly being written on his heart, covering that organ with the ink of his soul, he’d come undone, and everything would fall.

Everything he stood for would come crashing down and destroy them all in the process.

“I hope your travels are safe and successful.”

“Thank you.” The warmth of her breath skated over his cheek. “And I hope your nuptial ceremony tomorrow leads to... contentment if you believe there will never be love.”

“I can’t see how it will. Sarah and I were misaligned from the start; I’m just too much an arse to stop it.

” His chest constricted. “I’m a fool.” He couldn’t breathe properly.

If she was pregnant from their first coupling, it might truly kill him to know she would have to flee London in disgrace.

Could he step in and raise the bastard? Yes, but it would never inherit the title if it was a male and without her, what was the point?

Of anything?

“Why are you clinging to the promise you made to your father on his death bed? You have a chance to make everyone happy, but you won’t. Why?”

“I suppose I owe you an explanation... after everything.” But it made him afraid, and he didn’t enjoy feeling cowardly.

She pressed her lips together while tears twinkled in her gorgeous blue-gray eyes. “You do, and if this is the last time I’ll be in your company, I want to know it’s for a good reason.”

“Right.” Not knowing how to begin, Grey led her over to one of the sofas.

Even in the gloom, the white-painted wooden frame gleamed, and the brocade cushions were inviting.

He sat heavily and pulled her down beside him.

“My whole damned life I wanted to be like my father. Hell, I wanted to be better than the man my father was.”

“And you don’t think you’ve accomplished that?”

“In many ways, yes, I do. However, he and my mother despised each other much of the time.” As he spoke, he tugged her closer and drew his lips along the side of her neck to the crook of her shoulder.

That wonderful gown made everything so much more satisfying and easy.

“I didn’t wish to have a marriage like that, so when my father and Sarah’s struck an arrangement for our engagement, I didn’t mind because I’d always found her likeable enough and we had known of each other before. ”

“Because you move in the same circles?” Victoria turned to him. She undid the buttons on his tailcoat, and he absolutely helped her to remove that piece of clothing, left it to slip off the sofa to the floor.

“Yes. I thought if she and I had a chance of having a marriage better than my parents, then I would do what I could not to fight my father’s wishes.

” He didn’t want to talk about this. Instead, he wanted to make love to her, show her how he felt even though he shouldn’t have such emotions for a woman who wasn’t his wife.

“So you made your father a promise when he was dying that you would marry Sarah and do whatever it took to make it work. So you would be better than him, give the title what it needed.”

“But I waited too long, drug my feet because I didn’t want to marry.” He loosened his cravat, and Victoria yanked the length of silk from his neck. “Sarah met someone else. She fell in love, and now our marriage is doomed for certain failure.”

“Yet you can walk away.” When she frowned, all he wanted to do was kiss her... and forget. “What is holding you back?”

“My father never did anything for me; he was constantly ordering me about. It’s one of the reasons why I went into the military, merely to get away from him after my mother died. I wrote to Sarah, and we became close friends.”

Victoria's eyes widened. "And?"

His cuffs, collar, and waistcoat followed the other clothing to the floor.

"When I discovered that my father had already spent or used the dowry for his own needs, I was livid. I threatened him when I was on leave that I would refuse to marry her and live out the remainder of my life in the military." When he met her gaze, saw the compassion and understanding there, the hopelessness came roaring back.

"My father said that following through on the wedding would make him proud. I'd never heard those words from him before, and it made an impression on me."

"Oh, Montague." With a sigh, Victoria gently pushed him backward until he reclined on the sofa with his back against a decorative pillow.

Then she climbed on top of him, straddling his waist with her golden skirts flowing about them.

"He manipulated you, but when you were home again and he was on his death bed, he asked you when you'd marry. Correct?"

"Yes." He nodded. "I was weak and lost in grief. Even though he was a horrible father, he was mine. How could I renege on that promise? It made him so happy at the end." A sigh escaped him, for he was quite distracted by her, and already his length was shuddering to life.

"And now tomorrow I'll follow through with that promise."

"Yet it doesn't matter. Your father is gone."

"That's what Sarah said too, but I'll know, and I don't break my promises." Unable to

not touch her, Grey put his hands at her waist. “It’s something I pride myself in, Victoria. I can’t go back on that; it’s at the very core of who I am.”

“I understand that, but sometimes life requires us to think differently.”

“It’s too late.” His stomach pitched at the magnitude of what he would do less than twenty-four hours from now. “But tonight belongs to us. You and me. So we’ll have something to remember when...” He couldn’t finish the thought, couldn’t say it aloud for that would make it all too real.

A tiny frown tugged at one corner of her mouth. How well he remembered what those lips had tasted like, how softly they’d cradled his, how she’d moved them over his skin. “You are willing to sacrifice your life, Sarah’s happiness, for a promise?”

“There is naught else I can do.”

“Perhaps not.” She turned her attention to the rain-speckled windows that cast odd shadows on the wall in the dark. “But I admire the determination and how you adhere to your principles.”

Even when it turns into stupidity.

Tension brewed in the air between them. How could she sit there so calm and composed, leaning over his body until their lips were so close, when his stomach was in knots, his thoughts jumbled, his world crumbling, falling, ending?

To her eyes, was he being an idiot? But if a man didn’t have his principles, he was nothing, and he wanted her to think of him fondly.

For lack of anything intelligent to say, he blurted out, “You will no doubt have a lovely time in France. I’m sure your father will take you to interesting sites.”

No! That's not what I want to say!

"Perhaps, but that isn't the focus of my visit.

" Her voice was so low, he barely caught the words.

When she turned her head and found his gaze, stark longing lit those depths for the space of a few heartbeats.

"Though to see the Palace of Versailles will be something I'll never forget.

" She dropped her gaze to the open placket of his shirt.

Why couldn't it be him who escorted her there? To show her the lovely things the country of France had to offer, the ones Napoleon hadn't destroyed?

"I'm glad you'll be able to travel. Oddly, Sarah and I will travel through France much at the same time you will.

" Would they even be on the same ship? That would be both a dream and a nightmare.

Why the devil wouldn't she look him in the eye?

Did she regret the time they'd shared and was too much a coward to admit it?

Did it mean nothing. Do I mean nothing to her?

Something akin to panic welled in his chest. "Victoria, I..."

"Don't say it." A waver entered her voice. "Don't say anything to mar this moment or

make it worse.”

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“Fair enough, but I want you to know, the time we’ve spent together has shaken the foundations of my life.

” He wanted to choke on the words. Knowing she would soon walk out of his life would leave a ragged hole—already had—and his heart bled from it.

Perhaps it always would, for he couldn’t anticipate a time in the future when he wouldn’t mourn her loss.

Even if by some miracle, he and Sarah could have a loving marriage, it would prove excruciating to never see Victoria again.

“Please look at me. I want to get lost in your eyes one last time.”

Finally, she raised her gaze. Moisture glinted there; her eyes were luminous, and she had never been more beautiful.

In fact, she looked much like an angel in that golden gown with her blonde hair so elaborately arranged.

“Oh, Grey, why must you cling to duty?” Emotion gave her voice a smoky quality.

“Why won’t you finally live for yourself? ”

“I cannot, for I was raised knowing I would marry for position, land, and coin. Love was never an option.” Grey spat out the words, for he’d been a fool when he made his father that promise.

“If I don’t, Sarah’s father will sue me for breach of contract.

I’ll be destitute. What kind of life is that? ”

“At least it would be your own.” She shook her head, her eyes stricken, but they remained silent. “Regardless, I hope you do find happiness. You deserve that.”

“Thank you.” His nod was curt even as his heart was shattering from the multitude of fractures going through it. “We both will do what we must. You’ll write and at least let me know of that necklace’s fate?”

“I will.” A tear fell. She laid a hand on his chest. “Thank you. For everything. For your protection, your time, your attention, what we shared...” A few more tears fell to her cheeks. “For the first time since I lost Louis, I felt as if I mattered to someone again.”

Oh, God.

Every one of those crystal drops broke him. They swept into his soul and rubbed him raw. Grey moved his hands to her waist then slid them up her ribcage, past the sides of her breasts to hold her shoulders. “You do. God, you do so much. Never forget that.”

“You do as well. Remember that.” Her moisture-spiked lashes framed blue-gray eyes full of emotions he couldn’t identify.

Or wouldn’t, for that would make this night so much worse.

Her voice broke. She spent a few seconds composing herself, and it was the most pitiful thing he’d ever borne witness to. “If things were different...”

But they aren't and can never be. "Damn it all to hell." He couldn't stand to see her in distress, especially not when her abject sadness mirrored his own.

But he was too much a coward to say what was in his heart, what had been scrolled over his soul, for he wasn't quite sure what to call it.

Love? Was it love? Did he believe in that?

Looking at her, knowing he couldn't be with her again after tonight, his heart squeezed, ached so much he gasped from the pain. It might be love after all.

And I'm tossing it away as if it doesn't matter. He was indeed the fool both Sarah and Victoria had called him in roundabout ways. His heart broke all over again without her to help him glue his pieces back together.

Unable to bear one more second apart from her, Grey tugged her down over his body. "Let me give you a proper goodbye." A groan escaped him, for she felt far too good against him.

"I haven't bid you nay yet, Montague." She peered up at him, a mixture of hope and misery in her eyes. "You have been my greatest adventure, I think, more valuable than the Marie Antoinette diamonds."

"Shit." With those words, he was done for.

Grey took her into his arms and kissed her soundly.

It was a hard and unyielding embrace, for he wanted to sear himself onto her brain.

"Remember me, Victoria, even when you're into your dotage with a bevy of grandchildren playing about your feet," he said between kisses that not only set his

blood aflame but also threw him off the tallest building to plunge to his death.

It was pure folly, but he needed her like a drowning man needed air.

It didn't matter that their time was quite literally ticking down.

"I could never forget you." She returned his kisses with the gentle enthusiasm he was learning was one of her hallmarks. This was not a woman who regretted what she'd done. Soon, she was as breathless as he.

If he was a gentleman, he'd let her go, put an end to their association, but he'd never been quite sane when Victoria was involved.

Even from the first, when he'd slipped his fingers around her wrist in that damned library, she'd invaded his mind and infected his blood.

"Scandal it'll be tonight; I don't care.

" Grey yanked down the low bodice of her beautiful gown, and when her gorgeous breasts were bared to his view, a shuddering sigh escaped his throat.

The second he cupped those mounds, palmed the quivering flesh, worried those pink nipples into hard peaks, he set out to kiss her senseless.

One more taste, one more drink, one more time to hear her cry out in repletion so the sound would haunt him for the rest of his life.

The scent of her, the silk of her skin, the way her lips glided over his, the magic in her touch as she burrowed her fingers beneath his shirt all worked at his undoing.

"I didn't have enough time with you." She slid her fingers through the hair at his

nape. “There is so much I would have adored doing to you, with you, along with finding out more about you.” Her voice wavered. “Now Sarah will have that joy.”

“Ha.” Not trusting himself to say anything, he claimed her mouth again, treated her to deep, drugging kisses he hoped would imprint his very essence into her brain.

But even that tactile embrace wasn’t enough.

He wanted all of her, needed to be with her, needed to join them together in the most basic of ways so he could retreat to this moment when life became too overwhelming in the years to come.

God, but he wasn’t strong enough to give her up!

Over the course of four days, she had shown courage, strength and determination, more than he could ever gather for himself.

There hadn’t been time enough to see more of her intelligence, to watch as she reached her full potential, to listen to her stories and learn about her life, or even come to know her father.

What would happen to them if her father managed to wager away the rest of the coin he had to his name? It was too sad and worrisome to contemplate.

To distract himself, he continued to kiss her, to taste her in an effort to take away her tears.

He wanted to make certain she’d keep his memory alive and etched upon the very chambers of her heart.

Yet those kisses did nothing to settle the panic in his soul or patch the rapidly

widening cracks in his heart.

With a sound that was a half-cry half-groan, Grey slid his hands to her hips, ground his rampant erection into the cradle of her thighs, into her center, and when she held him steady with her legs twined about his, he nearly came undone from the simply joy of having her in his arms.

“Victoria...” His heart broke again, into finer pieces than it previously had, for this was the last time he’d ever touch her, for he rather doubted she was the type of woman who would be satisfied in being a mistress.

I can’t think about that right now else I’ll go mad.

Staving off the need to sob, he buried his face between her soft breasts, palmed them, fondled those modest globes.

When she urged him closer, he gladly suckled the nipples until she moaned and squirmed against him.

Oh, it would be so easy to lose himself in her and never look back, but time was against them. Soon, someone would come searching for him, since that damned ball had been thrown in his honor as well as Sarah’s.

“Grey, please.” Victoria panted, twined her arms about his shoulders and whispered into his ear. “I want to know you’ll remember me as well, that I at least made you think differently about the world even in the short time we’ve known each other.”

Oh, God. “Of course you have; I’m as shocked as you regarding that.

” Hot tears rose in his throat; they cut off his words.

Wading through the heartbreak of something that might be love if he gave himself time to truly think about it wasn't something he had much experience in.

Grey kissed her as if she held the last drop of water and he wanted to share it with her.

When that wasn't enough to tell her what was on his mind, he delved a hand between them, fought through yards of silky fabric to find his frontfalls.

After wrenching the panel from its buttons, he guided his prick through the fabric in search of her center.

When the head of his member bumped her wet opening and she moaned with the same need coursing through him, he didn't hesitate. Grey thrust upward once and deeply until he was fully seated in her heat, and he died a thousand deaths to know this was final. "Ah, Victoria..."

"You feel so good." The whispered admission stole his breath. Her eyes shuttered closed, but she wriggled into a more comfortable position and held him tight. "Fill me perfectly... you are perfect."

Pieces of his breaking heart went into her care. Perhaps she could make something beautiful with them.

The blonde arcs of her lashes against her pale cheeks almost leveled him.

"That is exactly how I feel about you." With a half-cry, half-groan, he pushed into her with long, powerful strokes while she met him each time, moving her hips to crash down onto him.

Being joined with her was too much, and he would break apart soon, but he slowed

down, needing to savor this act. “God, I need more.”

“So do I.” She stared up at him with tear-wet lashes and so much hope in her stormy eyes that he caught his breath. “Give me all of you.”

“I will.” In fact, she already had all of him, but it wasn’t enough.

Wrapping his arms around her, he flipped them both over.

It didn’t matter that they were more or less tangled in skirting, seeing her nestled in gold with such trust and emotions in her eyes nearly brought him to his knees in surrender.

“Damn, Victoria, how can I give you up?”

“You must.” Her voice broke. “We were never meant for forever.”

No! In that moment, he forgot everything—the promise he’d made to his father, the knowledge that his marriage would have friendship but no romantic love, the fact that Sarah was increasing with another man’s child—and he poured all his concentration, all that he was, into coupling with the woman he’d accidentally found.

Deeply he went into her lush body as she molded herself to his form. Stronger he joined with her, wanting to feel every single glide and brush of his skin against hers, the way her heat welcomed him home over and over.

Of course he couldn’t last, for he was far too stimulated for longevity.

His thrusts grew more frantic. Harder, deeper, faster he moved his hips, seeking to be one with her, for then she might not leave him, their reality might not be true.

Victoria bucked her hips in time to his frantic movements, and for a few seconds, their breathing, their coupling, their carnal dance aligned and everything was perfect.

Raw sensation raced through Grey's member.

His stones pulled tight to his body and then he fell over the edge into bliss the same time she did.

There was no chance to bedevil her button or explore those slick folds, but then, perhaps they were far too primed.

Her soft, whimpering cries of completion warmed his ear while she collapsed into him, clinging to his neck as if he might disappear, holding on as he sank into her soft body.

"Oh, Montague." Her lips brushed the side of his neck. "Would that everything was different, for remembering you will be such torture." Her whispered words were so low he could have imagined them, but her quiet sobs washed the sentiment away.

"Indeed." As his breathing returned to normal, Grey held her tightly for the last time, telling her with his body what he couldn't with his words. Never did he want to let her go, but they couldn't remain here, for their paths led in opposite directions.

Just as they always had.

Eventually, he pulled back and then levered off her body.

Tears streaked her face, those same signs of despair also threatened to erupt from him soon if he didn't flee.

"Goodnight and goodbye, Victoria." He dropped a kiss to her forehead.

“I wish you good fortune in France with the royal family. I adore your commitment to what is right.”

A cry that sounded like “no” came from her. She caught his hand, and he reveled in that parting touch. “Please try to make your union with Lady Sarah work as best you can despite the circumstances.”

Though he nodded, he knew there was no hope of that, for things were far too complicated now. “I will.” It was an empty promise, the first he would break.

She struggled into a sitting position on that sofa, fussed with her bodice until it properly covered those perfect breasts. “Be the man I know you can be, the man I had a passing glance of during the short time I’ve known you.”

Oh, dear God, why does this hurt so damned much?

Surely, he was wrong. Surely, a man couldn’t fall in love with a woman he didn’t know in just a few days.

He couldn’t take it any longer. “Victoria, I…” In the end, he was a coward. Without another word, Grey fled the parlor, putting himself to rights as he went. He ran blindly through too many corridors before stumbling down the grand staircase as sobs racked his body.

Everything he’d ever wanted was in that woman, but his hands were tied by his damned duty and the promise he’d made to his father.

Yet how could he return to his obligations and live his life as if nothing between them had ever happened?

As if his whole existence hasn’t been flipped onto its head just from knowing

Victoria, his very own diamond?

How can I go on?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 7:55 am

Mayfair, London

England

The carriage-style clock on the mantel in the drawing room delicately chimed, indicating it was three-thirty in the afternoon.

That meant Montague would be married in less than two hours.

The thought of it had tears welling in Tori's eyes, but then, that was no surprise, for she'd passed a nearly sleepless night.

After that coupling at the ball with him where they exchanged souls, feelings, emotions, and everything of the like except words that might have changed their reality, she had sobbed out her grief in that parlor for a bit before composing herself the best she could.

In the moments following, she found her father and implored him to escort her home, for she couldn't bear to spend another minute at the ball where she would need to watch Montague do the pretty with Lady Sarah and pretend she was happy for him.

Once home, she fled to her bedroom, barely waited until her maid helped her out of the luxurious clothing then she threw herself onto her bed and tried to nurse her breaking heart. It was an impossible task, of course, but tears were the only solace she had available.

Now, she blinked away her tears as her father came into the room. There was work to

be done, and they were headed for the London Docks where they would board their ship in a little while.

“Is the luggage in the coach?” As surreptitiously as she could, Tori wiped at the tears with her lace-edged handkerchief.

“It is.” Her father nodded. “Trunks and bags, it’s all packed and waiting for us.”

“Good. And the Marie Antionette necklace?”

“It is in a jewel box in my valise, which won’t leave my side for the whole of the journey.” Then he frowned as he peered more closely about her. “Are you quite well, poppet?”

“I don’t think so.” Her chin wobbled. Once more, she dabbed at the corners of her eyes with the handkerchief. “I’ve done a terrible thing, Papa.”

“Even worse than stealing a priceless diamond necklace from someone and then attempting to smuggle it out of the country?” Amusement threaded through his voice as he looked at her from over the rims of his spectacles.

“Yes, even worse than that.” She sniffled. “I’ve fallen in love with Greystone.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.” Tori nodded. Attempting a laugh, it failed miserably, which made the whole situation even more ridiculous.

“I met him five days ago, haven’t even spent a whole day with him, yet each time I’m in his company, I feel complete, I feel as if I’ve found the place in life where I’m supposed to be.

” She shook her head. “That’s insane, isn’t it?

To feel like that for someone I barely even know? ”

If he could talk sense into her, perhaps she would feel better about leaving England.

“I’m happy for you. Once love comes for you, you can’t hide from it, and there is no explaining how it happens. Or for whom.” As her father beamed, Tori’s spirits sank. “Have you told him of your feelings?”

“No.” Her mind went to the ball last night, how dancing with him had been so amazing and how she’d felt like a princess for the evening in the sparkling gold gown he’d bought her.

“We indulged in a dance then went to a quiet room for a chat.” She didn’t want to share what else she and Montague had exchanged, for she wished to hoard that to her heart. It was far too precious.

“Mmm, I’m certain talking wasn’t the only thing the two of you indulged in, but I’ll take your word for it.” With a sigh, he held her gaze. “I’m going to give you some advice. Whether you take it or not is your prerogative.”

“All right.” She nodded. “I’m in such a miasma of confusion and sadness, I will gladly listen to what you’ll say.”

“In cases like this, there is only one option.” With a smile, he laid a hand on her shoulder. “Tell him how you feel.”

Her heart squeezed. “He’ll be married soon, and besides, I can’t do that. He’s not mine. Those feelings, that connection, must be forgotten. Anything else will be forbidden once he speaks his vows to Lady Sarah.”

“Oh, poppet, there is so much you don’t know about the world.” He patted her cheek.
“The earl can be yours. He just needs the proper motivation.”

“Ha.” Slowly, she shook her head. “He has had the motivation, yet he remains stubborn, remains loyal to the ideal of what he hoped his father might have been.” Then she frowned.

“And I’m leaving with you to return the necklace.

Doing the right thing is what you and Mama always taught me, so I can do no less now. ”

“You are quite marvelous, this is true. However, I can carry the necklace to France.”

She frowned. “What about me?”

“You’ll use the time to secure your man’s heart, of course.”

As if it was that easy. “What do you mean?”

“My girl, go to his home, tell him what’s on your mind, and if that doesn’t work, ask him to marry you instead.”

For the space of a few heartbeats, Tori stared at him as his words tumbled over in her brain. “Do you truly think it will work?” Suddenly, hope bloomed in her chest, where it had been dormant for far too long.

“Obviously, I can’t tell the future, but I do know if you stay here or go to France, the future that you dream of will never happen.

” There was nothing but honesty in his expression.

“You will always regret not following your heart on this, and if what you share with the earl is so earth-shattering, it deserves a chance.”

“I’m not sure about that.” Yet her heartbeat quickened. “It’s unorthodox, this asking a man to marry a woman. Am I brave enough for that?”

“You are plenty brave; always have been. Believe in yourself.” He smiled at her.

“Whoever said that life needs to follow a set of undisclosed and arbitrary rules? Clearly, the earl is frightened of his true feelings or of following his heart. He is practically crying out for you to come in and rescue him, set him on the correct path.”

“He does seem to need a bit of nudging.” Then worry came in to steal her newfound hope. She frowned again. “Doing this will cause scandal for certain. He’ll detest that.”

“What if he does? At best, he’ll finally admit to his feelings. And what great story isn’t based on a bit of scandal?” He held her by the shoulders. “Stop dithering, poppet. Go. He makes you happy, and I’ll wager you do the same for him. Fight for the man, for the future you want.”

“And what of Lady Sarah?”

“Does she love him?”

“I don’t think so. From what he’s hinted at, she loves someone else and is currently carrying that man’s child.”

“Ah, then it’s fate. If you can change Greystone’s mind, then everyone will be free to make their own choices.” He kissed her cheek. “Good luck. I’ll see you in a month or so.”

A panicky, excited feeling chased through her insides. Was she going to do this?
“What about your work and clients?”

He shrugged. “If there is anything urgent, my assistant can take care of it, and you can smooth out the details.” With his hand, he made a shooing gesture. “Happy hunting. I hope you find yourself engaged by this evening.”

“Oh, Papa, you are so sweet. I will try to catch you at the docks and tell you what happened, and if it’s not good news, I’ll accompany you to France.”

“I’ll wait to board for as long as I can.” His grin was encouraging. “For what it’s worth, I believe Greystone is a good match for you.”

Tori had just exited her room as the longcase clock in the second-floor corridor chimed the four o’clock hour.

She’d see her father off, and Montague’s nuptial ceremony would begin in an hour, so she needed to puzzle out what she would say as well as hire a cab to even take her to...

oh good heavens. She didn’t know where he lived. It never came up in conversation.

As panic rose in a heated wave, the butler met her at the landing.

“Miss Amherst, there is an Inspector Cordelle from Bow Street here. He is waiting in the drawing room, but he wishes to speak with you most urgently and says he won’t go away until that happens.”

The panic grew in intensity. “Oh, dear.” I’m going to be late.

Yet there was no recourse, for apparently the man wouldn’t leave until they had a

conversation.

“Very well.” How could she properly talk with this inspector in the very room where she’d made so many lovely memories with Montague? “I suppose I have to attend to him.”

“Do you want tea brought in?”

“Goodness, no. Time is of the essence just now, and I don’t want to give him more reason to linger.

” Already, it would be cutting things close.

Then she turned about and entered the drawing room, where a tall, thin man stood at one of the windows.

“Thank you for coming, Inspector. How might I help?”

“Good afternoon, Miss Amherst. I wish to speak with you about the night of Lord Dawson’s rout, but I was told your father is not home?”

“That is correct. He’s on business at the moment.” It wasn’t exactly a lie, but it wasn’t the full truth either.

“Very well.” The tall, thin man gestured to a sofa. “Please sit, and we’ll start straightaway.”

She nodded. “I don’t know what I can do to help, for I don’t know all that much about what happened the night of the rout.”

“We are quite thorough at Bow Street, and are questioning all the guests that were

present. I've been told that you started your time in the drawing room with the others?"

"I did, yes." Every moment she tarried here was another second she wasn't on her way to Montague's home. Would all she'd ever wanted be lost due to this ridiculous man?

"What happened after that?"

Tori shrugged. "I wasn't feeling well, so left the drawing room to seek out a ladies retiring room."

He frowned. "But you were unable to find it?"

"That's correct. So instead, because I was a bit lightheaded, I entered the library and laid down on one of the sofas, hoping I would stop feeling so poorly.

"The lies tripped off her tongue with ease that should have been disturbing, but she didn't give another thought to that either.

There were simply other things to worry about.

"I see." The inspector's expression was inscrutable, and Tori didn't enjoy not knowing what he thought. "How is the Earl of Greystone involved?"

Oh, let me count the ways.

"In what?"

"The theft of a valuable diamond necklace from Lord Dawson's study."

She frowned. "He is not. As far as I know, but then if he was, why would he tell me?" She'd protect his name as much as she could, yet the minutes ticked by, and as they did, knots of anxiety pulled in her belly."

The inspector narrowed his eyes. "Yet you've been seen in his company over the past few days. Surely, the two of you would have spoken about the events from the rout."

Icy fingers of fear twisted down her spine. "How do you know that?"

"There are eagle-eyed observers around Town, Miss Amherst. Also, servants talk, and will give up critical information if enough coin is offered."

Did her father know that? Perhaps they should sack the staff. That sort of betrayal couldn't be tolerated. The panic in her chest grew more frantic. "Do you want the truth?"

"That is preferable." From his perch in a nearby chair, he leaned closer, clearly thinking that she would admit to the theft.

Her heartbeat accelerated. "I've stupidly fallen in love with the earl."

The inspector frowned. "Isn't he due to marry soon?"

"Yes, in less than an hour, yet you're here, bedeviling me with useless questions." With a glance to the door, she sighed and then focused again on the inspector. "I need to get to him, to try to implore him to change his mind."

Several seconds went by in silence. Then he spoke again. "I rather doubt that will happen. He's an earl. He's doing his duty by completing the nuptials his father arranged."

I don't accept that! "Stranger things have happened, Inspector, but I couldn't bear wondering what could have been if I don't try."

He nodded. "While that is true, it has no bearing on the current interview. Where is your father?"

"I told you. He left earlier on business. Won't be back in the country for a month." Thank goodness for another truth.

"What happened to the necklace?"

She almost answered truthfully but caught herself. "How should I know? I've never seen it. No doubt Lord Dawson sold it or hid it to collect insurance money, if he acquired it through legal means"

"That is an interesting theory, but I suspect the necklace is in the wind."

"It might be. Depending on the stones, it would fetch a king's ransom.

That would go a long way for someone." If she could send him off on a fool's errand of poking into pawn shops, then he would leave her and her father alone.

Slowly, Tori rose to her feet. "If that will be all, Inspector? I truly need to crack on with my plans."

"Very well." He stood, but looked at her with concern and speculation. "If I may offer one suggestion?"

"Yes?" It was quite aggravating knowing that every moment prevented her from reaching her goal.

“If you are going to persuade the love of your life to leave off with his engagement at his nuptial ceremony, wear something more fetching than a typical day dress.” When he winked, she gawked. “When a woman is trying to entice a man away from his duty, she needs to at least look the part.”

“Oh.” She frowned as she glanced down at her boring day dress of navy cotton. “Perhaps you’re right.” More delays!

“And if you can change quickly, I’ll drive you to the earl’s home myself.”

That statement caused her jaw to drop. “Why would you do that?” A swath of hot guilt went through her from lying to him.

“Who can say?” He shrugged. “However, I know what it feels like to be in love, and quite desperate at that. I’m still madly in love with my wife, and if I can play a small part in your romance, why not? As long as you’ve told me the truth up until this point.”

“I have.” She nodded, but the heat in her cheeks blazed. It didn’t matter that her truth wasn’t the same as what the inspector wanted to hear. “Do you believe that I had nothing to do with the jewel theft?”

He grunted. “I wouldn’t say that. Frankly, I think you’re up to your neck in guilt, as is the earl, but since I can’t prove it and I have no direct evidence, there’s not much I can do.”

Well, there was that. It was a reprieve of sorts, and she didn’t take that lightly. “You’re a lovely man, Inspector.” With hurried steps, she gained the door. “Oh, and we need to stop by Hyde Park on the way.”

He frowned. “Whyever for?”

“I need to find a swan!” Then she rushed upstairs. Good Lord, all these delays might sink her chances! Will I be too late?

Only time would tell.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 7:55 am

Mountjoy House

Berkley Square

Mayfair, London

The urge to cast up his accounts rocked Grey's form as he walked into his drawing room.

The nuptial ceremony was set to begin in twenty minutes.

Already, guests were coming in. The space had been cleared of its usual furniture, and in its place were two rows of seven chairs each, featuring gilt legs and blue brocade cushions.

This would be a private ceremony, so not many people had been invited.

As he roved his gaze about the room, it briefly landed on Viscount Lorrington, his wife's lover.

Acknowledging him with the faintest lift of the chin, his gaze next landed on his soon-to-be mother-in-law, the Marchioness of Beckworth.

An attractive woman and much what he imagined Sarah would resemble in thirty years' time, he offered her a small grin, but she merely nodded.

I guess I know where I'll stand in the family.

Letting his thoughts have free reign, with every step, it hurt to breathe and the ache around his heart throbbed.

He couldn't acknowledge the guests coming in, couldn't bear to think of what would happen far too soon, couldn't contemplate having to attend the dinner that would directly follow the ceremony.

Instead, he moved to one of the windows, clasped his gloved hands behind his back, and peered down into the Mayfair street below.

Why the hell am I doing this?

Right now, in that moment, everything was pointless.

It took all his control over his emotions not to break down in front of everyone, for he knew it was too late to do anything about his circumstances.

Today, he would marry his best friend. Unfortunately, she wasn't the woman that lit his blood on fire or made his soul soar, but hell, she'd done a wonderful job in decorating the space.

Slowly, he turned from the window to glance about the room.

It was done up lavishly with autumn flowers and sprays of leaves, candles, tulle and ribbons.

They hung over the doorways, above the windows, on the sills.

There were vases of the blooms resting on a few of the tables that remained.

Two small urns reposed on the fireplace mantel.

What had it cost Sarah to do all this while her heart was being torn apart?

God, I don't deserve her or Victoria, for different reasons. They were both right to call me a coward.

Now he understood her pain. Now he understood her feelings of being trapped.

Now he knew exactly how hopeless she was.

All because he was an arse to go through with this, yet how could he not, when it was the last promise, the last words he'd said to his father, and then his father had said he was proud of him?

When the double doors opened, and Sarah stood briefly in the frame, his heart didn't soar. In fact, it hurt like the devil. Hell, it was already broken, and he didn't have the strength to summon false emotions, not even for her sake. But to give credit where it was due, she was stunning today.

Clad in an ethereal gown of ivory and gold with the long, sheer veil she'd told him about, she was the very image of a forest elf escaped into the human world.

A modest tiara sparkling with small emeralds and diamonds set in gold sparkled in her dark hair—the stones matched the engagement ring he'd given her a seeming lifetime ago—and in her hand, she carried a small bouquet of white lilies and yellow roses.

Clearly, nothing in the flowers represented passion or love, only friendship.

If it was a symbol for him, he understood.

When she looked through the veil and met his gaze, the grief in her expression

echoed what he felt, but when her father, who escorted her into the room, patted her hand, she turned her head and gave him a smile that was watery at best.

Murmurs of appreciation went through the guests, and he died a little more inside.

Too late, too late, too late!

The marquess, who was quite a tall, well-built, barrel-chested man, escorted Sarah to where Grey stood near the windows.

He cleared his throat and rested a narrow gaze on him.

“I’m trusting that you will make my daughter happy, that you will keep her in the style to which she’s been accustomed, and that you will remember her dowry and gifts have already been used by your father. ”

“I am well aware of that, Beckworth,” he said around clenched teeth.

“Papa, stop. This is already a difficult day,” Sarah whispered to her parent. “Go sit with Mama. I would like to speak with Greystone alone before the ceremony begins.”

“Very well.” The marquess bussed her cheek then left her standing before him.

As of yet, the minister hadn’t made an appearance, so Grey took Sarah’s free hand in his. “I’m sorry that this day can’t be an occasion of joy as it should be.”

“I can see that.” She peered up into his face and searched his gaze with hers. “I can also see that you are as miserable as I am. I’m sorry for that most of all. You are far too lovely a man to think getting married to me is the same as having a noose put ‘round your neck.”

“That paints me in a rather horrid light.” But he brought her hand up to his lips and kissed the glove-covered back.

“Now I know what you’ve been feeling all along.

” Then he put his free hand to his chest over his heart, which had shattered beyond all repair.

“I suppose we’ll both be miserable together, so there’s that to give us a further bond.”

Though she attempted a smile, it was a watery affair at best. “Perhaps.” A stifled cry escaped her. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive you, Grey.”

“I know.” A wave of pain went through his chest that had nothing to do with the circumstances.

Knowing he’d angered his best friend so thoroughly that she held ire for him, made him feel like a failure as well as a cad.

“Again, I apologize. Ours will be a union in name only. It has to be, for I won’t bed you; can’t, not anymore.

” He paused, merely to struggle with the emotions that sat far too close to the surface, ready to be let loose at any time.

“I’ll give Phillip’s babe my name. It’s the least I can do for you.

It will want for nothing. You can raise it as you see fit, live at the country estate with the babe as well as Phillip, I care not.

” In this moment, he wanted to walk into the Serpentine and not stop until the water entered his lungs and he could no longer draw breath.

For then the relentless hurt and desolation would stop.

“There is nothing left for me anyway in this life.”

“On paper, that is a lovely sentiment, but in my heart? It’s a slap to the face.” Still, she held onto his hand, and he appreciated the physical support, for he would break soon. “Oh, Grey. You are well and truly tip over tail for Miss Amherst, aren’t you?” she asked in a barely audible whisper.

“Yes.” The word was yanked from a tight throat, and there was no embarrassment. There were only facts, and he had come by them far too late. “But she’s gone, left to go to France on a visit of some importance, and I’m bereft.” Quite frankly, he would never be the same.

Not that he wanted to. Since knowing her, he’d changed in tiny ways but hadn’t had the opportunity to explore what they would mean.

And now, it didn’t matter.

“I’m sorry.” Sarah laid a hand on his arm. “Life is sometimes unfair. I expect there will be more of that in our future.” Tears sparkled in her eyes.

“It is.”

“You won’t even consider taking Miss Amherst as your mistress? At least then the two of you could still be together...”

“Ha. She is far too lovely for that, and I couldn’t bear only having her for part of my

life. Besides, it wouldn't be fair to you, even if you have Phillip."

"Yet our marriage will be empty."

"I can't talk about this, Sarah. It's too painful." He patted her hand, and hoped to God she would learn how to forgive him. "Will you continue being my friend? I couldn't bear it if you left me completely as well."

"Of course." She wiped at the tears on her cheeks. "I'll make sure you don't do anything stupid or harmful to yourself, just as I was there for you during the war."

"Ah." Never had he asked her to do that, she'd merely taken it upon herself.

If possible, his chest drew tighter, squeezing him, choking the life from him.

It hurt to draw breath. "Thank you." Responsibility and his own personal beliefs were crushing him.

"God, Sarah, why can't I just throw everything to the winds and do something not expected of me? "

Her smile was rueful at best. "Years of ingrained expectation, no doubt."

"And your father will sue me for breach of contract."

A tiny chuckle left her throat. "He probably will, but I might be able to talk him 'round. I've already started that, and I think he's beginning to thaw." She shrugged. "Once he discovers a grandchild is on the way, I'll wager he'll be more open to negotiations."

"Unless he's not pleased with the scandal, and we're out of time, besides."

“There is that.” Her expression crumpled back into devastation.

Hot panic welled in his chest. I’ve ruined everything. “Run, Sarah. Leave me. Go now before everything starts. Take the wedding trip with Phillip.” He nodded in encouragement. “I’m strong enough to withstand the scandal.”

He hoped.

“Oh, Grey.” Once more, she gave her head a shake as the murmur of guest voices grew in intensity.

“I can’t do that, and you know it. Especially not for this child’s sake,” she added in a barely audible whisper.

“At least we have company in martyrdom.” She was near tears again, and he couldn’t bear that it was because of him.

Grey squeezed her fingers in sympathy. “You are making a huge sacrifice for me? Why?”

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“I don’t know.” She blew out a huff that stirred her veil. “Perhaps I can’t bear to see you in misery, and as your best friend, we should probably stick together. Who knows? In a handful of years, we might be able to obtain a divorce.”

“And yet by then, everything between us will be destroyed. The people we both love will have moved on with their lives, and we will have lost everything anyway.” He slowly shook his head as his heart continued to break. “It’s insane.”

“Agreed.” Her eyes sparkled with tears as she nodded. “You know how to fix it.”

“I...” Where was his damned courage? Why couldn’t he make himself break free from the shackles of duty and an old promise? There was no gaining pride from his father since he was dead. Then why did she insist on clinging to the past? Was it to keep a piece of his father alive?

I’m a fool.

There was no more time for reflection. The carriage-style clock on the mantel softly chimed the five o’clock hour.

A man of indiscriminate looks and temperament came into the room with a younger man, who held a leather folio.

No doubt that was the register and other paperwork to make the union legal.

“Good evening, everyone. I’m Mr. Markam, the minister who will conduct the ceremony.

If you could all settle into chairs, we'll soon get underway.

"He came over to Grey and Sarah, then introduced himself as he transferred a worn, leather-bound book to his other hand.

"My clerk, Mr. Simmons, is in charge of the registry and other things. Is there somewhere he can wait?"

"Of course." Grey shoved all thoughts away. "You may make use of my study downstairs. We shall come by once the ceremony has concluded."

"Very well." With an incline of his chin, Mr. Simmons scurried out of the room. "Are there any concerns before we begin?"

Oh, if only you knew.

But for the sake of keeping scandal to a minimum, he shook his head and released Sarah's hand. "I don't believe there are, so if we could crack on? We're both anxious to put this ceremony behind us." He flicked his gaze to the butler, and then gave him a nod.

Immediately, that austere man closed the double doors while the remainder of the guests settled into the available chairs.

Mr. Markham led them to the top of the room, pausing before the fireplace where cheerful flames danced behind the decorative metal grate, for there was an autumnal chill in the air.

"The nuptial couple is ready to begin." He included them both in his gaze.

"Lord Greystone, Lady Sarah, please face me." When they did, he opened his book to

the appropriate page.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of these witnesses, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man’s innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church...”

Grey forced a hard swallow into his throat and attempted to concentrate on the pulse pounding in his ears.

Perhaps it would drown out the vicar’s words.

This wasn’t how he’d wished to find himself wed.

Dear God , in minutes he would say vows to Sarah, his best friend of years.

He would be expected to begin a life with her, yet having a child with her was completely out of the question since she was already increasing with another man’s babe.

That he would be forced to call his own, raise as his own to prevent scandal and gossip.

Pain welled in his chest and sent sharp pricks of aching fire through his heart.

At the last second, he stifled a wild sob that rose in his throat.

Sarah must have heard his distress, for she turned her head. The haunted look in her eyes reflected his feelings so completely that he was lost in a mire of self-doubt and grief.

The minister continued, his voice a pleasing timbre as he talked about the holy state they were about to embark upon. Grey wished he had a glass of brandy in hand, but it hardly seemed proper to drink himself into oblivion on his wedding day.

I don't want to do this! It felt all too wrong, a betrayal to his own life, regardless of the promise he'd made to his father.

Mr. Markham held the Book of Common Prayer in his hands, the black leather spine cracked and worn, while he addressed Grey.

"Wilt thou have this Woman to thy wedded Wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony?"

"His lips curved with a smile. The poor sot assumed this was a wanted union.

"Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor her, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

Oh, God.

A knot of unshed emotion formed in his throat.

How can I ever learn to love Sarah when my heart belongs to Victoria and hers to Phillip?

"I..." How could he say those words when he didn't mean them?

In that pause, he glanced at Sarah, who trembled beside him, and she was doing an admirable job of trying not to openly sob, but her distress added more pain to what was currently destroying his heart. "I..."

Then the double doors crashed open with such force they slammed against the walls. Chaos and confusion went through the assembled guests as Victoria came into the room, followed by the Bow Street inspector from the other day. Dapper, the swan, brought up the odd addition.

“Victoria?” Dear God, but she was a sight for sore eyes. “I thought you were on your way to France?”

“I was, but I couldn’t leave, couldn’t bear the thought of not trying to win you.”

“I beg your pardon?” What was happening? Though she seemed a bit mussed and harried, the gown of pale blue taffeta suited her complexion and brought out the blue in her eyes. “What are you doing here? For that matter, how the hell did you bring the swan?”

“And why?” Sarah asked as she wiped the tears from her cheeks with a lace-edged handkerchief.

A tight laugh escaped Victoria. “I hoped the swan might help make my point, so we’ll find out if it was a mistake or not.”

Dapper, not to be ignored on this highly confusing day, uttered a honk as he made his way through the room toward Grey while the butler quivered with outrage at the doors and Sarah’s viscount lover rose to his feet.

“Am I too late?” The dulcet sound of her voice worked to give him some much-needed calm, even if his brain couldn’t make sense of the interruption. “Have you already spoken your vows?”

“No. Not yet.” He looked at Mr. Markham, who frowned. “If you will indulge us for a couple of moments?”

The minister cleared his throat. “This is highly irregular.”

Victoria halted before them. “I apologize for the interruption, but this can’t wait, and I would hate myself if I didn’t try.”

The marquess launched to his feet. “I demand these... people and swan be removed. This ceremony must continue.”

When the butler surged forward, Grey held up a gloved hand. “Let her say her piece.”

“Thank you.” Victoria bounced her gaze between him and Sarah. “I apologize, Lady Sarah, but I suspect you know how it is when your heart is engaged. Nothing else matters.”

Oddly, Sarah nodded. “Please, say whatever you need to. It might just be what we all are waiting for.”

“Thank you.” When Victoria rested her gaze on Grey, his whole world tilted, and he held his breath. “I couldn’t let you go through with your vows to Sarah before I had a chance to say what’s been on my mind and heart these past couple of days.”

He frowned and quickly glanced at the Bow Street man, who shrugged. “But nothing will change—”

“For the love of God, Montague, please let me talk for once without interrupting.”

One corner of his mouth lifted in a grin, for interrupting was how they’d come by their first kiss. “Very well.”

“I shall strive to make this conversation short.” When she held his gaze with hers, he honestly thought he might drown in the stormy depths of her eyes.

A blush stained her cheeks, making her even more adorable.

“I know you’re stubborn and you have insisted on going through with this ceremony, but I am here today to implore you to marry me instead. ”

“What?” Confusion and a tiny bit of hope pushed through his chest.

She nodded. “I love you fiercely. In fact, as fiercely as this swan loves you.” As she spoke, Dapper continued to wander about the room in a most circuitous fashion on his way to Grey’s location, nipping and nibbling at various things as he went as if trying to puzzle them out.

“I realize that I don’t have a title and I’m not certain I have a dowry—it hasn’t come up in conversation with my father, and now he’s on his way out of the country for a bit—but that shouldn’t matter when the heart is involved. ”

“Why that is ideal in theory, it rarely works in life.” God, he was such an idiot, for she’d come all the way over here to speak her truth regardless of how it made her appear in front of these members of society.

“Why must you be a recalcitrant arse right now?” she asked in a whisper, but before he could respond, Victoria dropped to her knees in front of him.

Gasps from the assembled crowd circulated throughout the room.

“Montague, please. Marry me . I love you. It’s remarkable and perhaps impossible given the length of time we’ve known each other, but there it is.

” She shrugged, and tears shimmered in her eyes.

“Have a life with me and everything that entails. Come what may.”

Dear God. How proud of her was he in this moment? But he shook his head. “The gossips will eat us all alive, sweeting. Stop this at once.” He couldn’t imagine how her reputation could survive after this.

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“No. I can’t, not until I’m done.” She clasped her gloved hands together.

“I’ve never put much stock in gossip; those women clearly having nothing of value in their lives if they wish to talk about each other, but I’ll gladly go through the fork-tongued vipers for you.

” The emotions in her eyes and reflected in her expression nearly became the depth of him, and he watched with a pounding pulse.

“Yes, I’m a nobody in the ton, my father is a skilled jeweler, but his pockets are almost to let, and I have nothing to offer you except my heart. Please say that’s enough.”

“Um, that is a lovely sentiment, of course, but I...”

“Oh, Grey, surely you aren’t going to remain stubborn until the last,” Sarah whispered as she poked at his arm. “This is one of the most romantic things I’ve ever witnessed.”

Victoria wiped at a tear on her cheek. “Truly, Montague, there is nothing else to say. Choose me. I love you, and isn’t that more valuable than property, funds, tradition, or position within the beau monde ?”

The marquess once more sprang to his feet. “This is outside of enough! He has an obligation and a responsibility to my daughter!”

“Oh, Papa, do hush,” Sarah chided. “This is exactly how life should be played out, in

all its messy, sweet, honest glory.” She glanced at Phillip and offered him a smile. “Love is something we should chase with everything we are.”

Victoria, it seemed, ignored them all. “I want nothing from you except your love, Montague. Just you and a life with you, because I can’t bear to think of an existence without you in it.”

He gasped and gawked at her with a tight chest. Knowing he needed to respond, he cast frantically about his mind for the right words.

The marchioness employed her fan to move air across her face. “For shame, Sarah. Demand better of Greystone. Is this how your union will start? With one of his doxies begging for his attention?”

Dapper let out a loud honk, clearly a protest of his own.

But he couldn’t allow such a slur on Victoria.

“Enough, Lady Markham. Victoria is not a doxy. In fact, she is everything wonderful in this world. A delightful mix of maddening adventure, unwavering morals, and adorable sweetness.” Nothing like that had ever happened to him.

Someone wanted him for... him. It was all he’d ever dreamed of having.

“Oh, Grey.” Sarah nudged him in the ribs with her elbow.

Tears made tracks on her cheeks. “Good heavens, say something to her. She has made a grand, romantic entreaty.” When her father blustered again, she huffed.

“Do hush, Papa. This is a pinnacle moment for us all.” Then she once more glanced at Phillip.

“When you find love, why would you want to ignore it, turn it away for tradition or position?” She looked again at him.

“Lean into the scandal and finally embrace your life, live for the freedoms you fought for in the war. This is your time, and it’s quite all right to change course. ”

“I...” When he peered at the guests in attendance, saw the shock and curiosity in their expressions, looked deeply in Sarah’s eyes and caught the hope dancing there, glanced at the inspector who watched the proceedings with an odd, eagerness in his expression completely shoved him over the wall of his reserve and broke through the chains he’d bound himself in due to that old promise.

Finally, his heart shivered and soared. Gone was the constant ache and agony. Bit by bit, the earnestness of Victoria’s entreaty stitched that organ back together, and it squeezed with pure happiness, all the emotions he hadn’t allowed himself to feel since he’d met her.

His vision seemed to narrow. Nothing else mattered except love. Victoria—as well as Sarah—had been right all along. “I’ve been a fool.” He stared down at the woman who held his heart. Taking one of her hands, he held her gaze. “God, such a fool, and much of that has to do with you, sweeting.”

Confusion went through her expression. “What?”

“It’s true.” He nodded, and hoped he didn’t resemble an inmate who escaped Bedlam.

“From the moment I met you, my world has gone tip over tail for you. When you embroiled me in that bit of intrigue that night, I had reservations, but when I kissed you in that garden? I knew you would turn my world inside out.”

“You did?” The hope in her eyes almost sent him to his knees with her.

“I did.” After he tugged Victoria to her feet, he brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back. “Then, with each meeting between us, I fell deeper in love with you for no other reason than you are a wonderful person and I can’t wait to see what you’ll do next, merely for the surprise of it.”

When gasps went through the room, he ignored them.

“I thought that keeping a promise to my father, even though he has been gone for years now, made me a better person, a more honorable man, but the closer this nuptial ceremony grew, along with the advent of you, made me look at things differently.” He renewed his grip on Victoria’s hand.

“Sarah is my best friend; she will always be that to me because we have a history together, but she doesn’t hold my heart, doesn’t inspire me to the grand passion that you do.

The thought of never seeing you again, the knowledge that I would marry a woman I didn’t love, the horror that I would never hold you, kiss you, cherish you, love you again?

It sent me to the depths of despair, and quite frankly, I have been lost since the ball last night. ”

“You have?” Her lips parted, and he wanted nothing more than to kiss her senseless.

“I have.” Grey nodded. “It’s been much like madness, and I’ve tried to ignore it, attempted to shove it to the side because I knew I had obligations and responsibilities to Sarah.”

“But I’ve told you time and time again, a union won’t work if there is no love,” she inserted with a hand on his arm.

“Yes, I know, and now I’m finally doing something about it.

” Grey flashed a grin at Sarah then returned his focus on Victoria.

“The truth of the matter is I love you. Completely, totally, soulfully, eternally, I love you.” He shook his head as awe reflected in her eyes.

“All I have ever wanted was to have someone want me for me alone. And here you are.” It was amazing in its simplicity.

“Is it fast? Perhaps. Is it indefinable? Absolutely. Am I terrified about that? Somehow, but I know, somehow, deep in my heart that all will be well.”

“And?” Both Victoria and Sarah said it at the same time.

Suddenly, his heart was light enough to laugh.

Damn, how long had it been since he’d done that?

“And now, I realize I owe my father nothing. I am free to make my own decisions despite the consequences.” He took both Victoria’s hands in his.

“This is quite awkward given the circumstances of why we’re all gathered here, but marry me, Victoria. Make me the happiest of men.”

Her lips formed an “o” of shock. “What of Lady Sarah?”

“Oh, I’ll wager she’ll come out right as rain, for I suspect Viscount Lorrington has something he eagerly wants to ask of her once the fallout from today settles.

” Then he winked. “Marry me because I love you quite desperately and my life, my

heart, will be so very empty if you don't become my wife.

I care not about dowry or position within the ton . I have only ever wanted love.”

The shift of emotions on her face—shock, surprise, realization, and then joy—once more had his world tilting to the side, and then Victoria nodded. “Yes. Yes! I'll marry you and be quite happy to do so.”

Oh, dear God.

The last of the restraints around his heart fell away.

With a soft cry of victory—and relief—Grey framed her head with his hands, and then brought his lips crashing down on hers.

When she sighed, he took her more comfortably into his arms and then proceeded to kiss the hell out of her, just like he'd wanted to do since the moment he'd met her.

Chaos once more broke out in the room, for there were cheers, clapping, loud protests from Sarah's parents, as well as the excited honking from the swan.

And he adored every second of it. Even when Dapper, apparently annoyed he was left out of the celebrations, wiggled his backside and then defecated on the marquess' shoe.

After sharing another kiss with Victoria, he held her and rested his chin on the top of her head while mouthing “thank you” to Sarah, who wore a grin as large and as cheeky as his.

God, nothing would ever be the same in his life, and he looked forward to every bit of it, no matter if the marquess attempted to destroy his name or his coffers.

None of it mattered. He'd won the most valuable treasure a man could have.

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Greystone Hall

Hertfordshire, England

The breeze brought with it a definite autumn chill in the air, and Grey lifted his face to it, for this was one of his favorite times of the year. As he walked through the grass toward his manor, he couldn't help but feel gratitude for the life he led presently.

With a grin, his mind went back to this time two years before when he'd married the love of his life—Victoria.

When she'd crashed his nuptial ceremony where he would have married a woman completely wrong for him, his life had changed immediately for the better.

There was something freeing but affirming now that he was with the perfect woman for him.

The Marquess of Beckworth was livid, of course, but Sarah had managed to talk him out of the boughs with the promise of a grandchild on the way.

He was only too happy to forget about Grey—after he paid back the dowry the marquess had given to Grey's father—but they'd both agreed the small property could remain in his possession.

Shortly after that, Sarah quietly married Phillip in a small, private ceremony, and they left on the wedding trip Grey had planned to take with her anyway.

While Grey, himself, had been obliged to wait for a few weeks to marry his own love, for he needed to secure a license and other things, but he'd wanted to make certain Sarah had been settled first. But once he finally married, everything else in his life had fallen into place.

They'd spent that first holiday season in Brighton as a wedding trip of sorts, and it was as romantic as he could have hoped.

Shortly after the contretemps of his nuptial ceremony with Sarah had broken up, Victoria had discovered a small box in her father's study with a letter addressed to her.

Inside the box was the teardrop-shaped diamond from the Marie Antionette necklace.

He'd written that he doubted anyone in the French royal family would realize it was missing and to consider it his wedding gift to her and Grey, that it should make up for the dowry he'd no doubt had to pay back to Lady Sarah's father.

How had he known that Victoria would have been successful in winning him away?

Grey never could say for certain, and though he'd since argued with the man about selling the diamond for funding, what was done was done.

Besides, the baron had returned the necklace to the King of France, no doubt with a fabricated story of how it had come to light.

Everything was right as rain, and Bow Street hadn't bothered them again.

And what was more, a month later, he was given the news that his wife revealed she was increasing, no doubt as a result of their first coupling, and that child had been born in late June that next year.

He'd finally gotten his heir, a jolly, chubby little boy they'd named Richard, for he very much had a lion's heart, and it was Grey's middle name.

He had previously thought his life complete when he'd married Victoria, but when she'd presented him with a son?

His heart had expanded once more.

As the rear gardens came into view, he put a hand to his heart, for he caught sight of Victoria as she cut some late autumn flowers with Sarah.

Was there any more beautiful thing than seeing his wife and his best friend being the closest of friends?

In fact, Sarah and her husband had come out to Greystone Hall for a month with their young daughter, who was a couple of months older than his son.

As babies went, the two got on well enough.

And oddly, both his wife as well as Sarah, were increasing again, and apparently, they were both due to deliver in April of next year.

No wonder the two women were friends. What had happened to them had drawn them together, and though he wasn't sure, he suspected he might be the glue holding them intact.

Not that he minded. It was amazing having two strong women supporting him, and he'd come to know Phillip well over the two intervening years.

He was a splendid fellow, and more importantly, they were drafting a bill together that they hoped to present in the Lords next year for a debate and if luck was with them, a vote.

Victoria was the first to greet him. The small bump of her pregnancy was hidden by the folds of the skirt of her maroon day dress, but she was brimming with excitement and energy. Never would he tire of seeing that love in her eyes each time she was with him. “Did you enjoy your daily walk?”

“I did. There is something about being in the country that refreshes my mind and body.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Are you ladies having fun choosing flowers for your dinner arrangement?”

“Of course. Sarah has quite the knack for putting together colors and different heights of flowers.”

“She has an artistic flare for certain.” He sent a wink at Sarah, who waved away his comment.

“Do hush, Greystone.” Sarah took the basket from Victoria’s hand. “I’ll take these inside and start on the arrangement before I go into feed Mary.”

“Thank you.” His wife smiled. “No doubt Richard will stay asleep for another hour, but I’ll be in shortly.”

“Oh, enjoy the lovely day. It’ll turn rainy soon enough,” Sarah said over her shoulder as she moved toward the house.

Once alone, Grey tugged Victoria into his arms. For long moments, he treated her to slow, drugging kisses that had them both breathless by the time he pulled away.

“Are you pleased with how our lives have progressed?”

“How could I not be?” She rose up onto her toes and pressed her lips to his before threading the fingers of one hand with his. “I have everything I’ve ever wanted. Papa will come out in a week to spend time with Richard, and it’s all because of you.”

He snorted. “I rather think if it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t have any of this.

” Even now, two years later, knowing he’d won her, the fear that this was all a dream stabbed through him occasionally.

“If you hadn’t had the courage to speak up...

” His words trailed off as a ball of emotion rose in his throat.

“You would have figured it out eventually. I have every confidence that midway through speaking your vows, you would have come to your senses.” But she smiled and his world tilted.

“Oh, Montague, though I adore Richard to distraction, and I can’t wait to meet our new little one, , when we lie in bed and talk about our day?

That is my favorite time, because I can once more be with you, have you all to myself, and remember how you turned my life upside down that long ago night at the rout. ”

Emotions came over him that put a bit of moisture into his eyes, but he didn’t care.

Life was for showing the people he cared about how much they meant to him.

It was something he’d learned since meeting Victoria.

“We are quite the pair, aren’t we?” Instead of going back to the manor, he guided her down a path that would lead to the hedge maze at the rear of the lawn.

“It’s around our anniversary, sweeting. What say you to getting into a bit of scandal in the maze?

And it would give Sarah some privacy as well. ”

Even after everything they'd shared together, there was still a gorgeous blush in Victoria's cheeks and desire that darkened her stormy eyes. “I would say that anytime with you is a lovely adventure. And you know I've never bid you nay when it comes to carnal endeavors.”

“No, you have not, which is just one of the dozens of reasons why I love you.” Then he grinned.

Life was more than a series of responsibilities and duties.

There came a time in everyone's existence where one needed to decide what was important, truly important, to one and then change everything else to fit around that thing.

Love, at the core, was simply vital to living and actually enjoying one's life.

When that was found? When one discovered where they were supposed to be and why?

There was nothing else like that feeling in the world.