

Several hours later, his sister, Teresa found him leaning against a pillar in the back of the ballroom. His presence was obscured by a large topical fern of some sort. She had laughed at his preference for hiding, and had persuaded him onto the dance floor for a waltz.

As they twirled around, Greyson was reminded of how much he liked to dance, especially the waltz. He remembered their lessons with Senior Garcia, in this very room when he had been a teenager. He had learned to waltz with his sisters and cousins. A rare smile lifted his lips as they twirled to the music. Back then life had been fun, and dancing. . . . dancing had been pleasurable. Not like today, when if he asked a girl to dance it meant he was practically proposing.

“What are you smiling about, dear brother?” Teresa smiled back.

“Thank you; I had forgotten how much I love dancing.”

Her eyes twinkled through her mask. “You should do it more often.”

The smile dropped off his lips, as they both noticed mothers dragging daughters to the sidelines. Teresa chuckled. “You know . . . if you would just pick one to marry than they would leave you alone. Then you would have someone to waltz with anytime you wanted.”

“Agg, sister, not you too? How can you turn against me when you yourself waited for the right one to come along?”

“Because you, dear brother, are not even trying. You haven’t been to an event during the season for two years . . . you dismiss the eligibles out of hand without even meeting them. You seem to think that the woman of your dreams will just stroll up to you someday and announce that she is the one and that you must dance with her.”

“Precisely.” Grayson cut in.

“And you expect this to happen while you are sequestered away to your estate in the country?”

Greyson cut his eyes from the sidelines to his sister’s face again. “Sounds like an excellent plan to me.” His tone, the dry bored voice that he was known for.

Greyson swung them near the balcony doors as the waltz ended and the mothers moved in his direction. He bowed to his sister and stepped out through the French doors into the shadowed veranda.

He skirted the wide covered balcony and ducked into a space shadowed by the bay windows of the ballroom. He smiled as the advancing mother and daughter walked past without seeing him.

He would have stepped out of his hiding spot, but paused when two young ladies moved toward him.

“Did you see, Lord Byron asked me to dance?” the first girl twittered. Greyson grimaced. He didn’t understand why girls did that nervous little laughy thing.

“How do you now it was Lord Byron?” the second voice asked. Her voice was soft and sure. Greyson’s ears perked up. He liked the way it sounded, very feminine, very honeyed.

“Honest, it’s hard to cover up all that red hair even at a masque,” explained the first, twittering again.

“So did you enjoy the dance?” asked the second with a smile in her voice.

“Oh, I didn’t accept,” squeaked the first.

“What?” demanded the second.

“Well, what if I tripped, or stepped on his foot, or . . .”

“Oh, Pretty, I cannot believe you are so impossible” Greyson lost the rest of what they were saying as the second grabbed the first and marched her away down the balcony and back into the ballroom.

Greyson was intrigued in spite of his misgiving and after a minute decided to follow the pair back into the ballroom. He admitted he wanted to match a face with that delightful voice. Once in the great crowded room, he quickly realized that finding a young lady that he had no idea what looked like was an impossible task. The dancers twirled past as the masked faced guests wove around the back and sides of the dance floor. Hundreds of people moving, and then he saw the mothers advancing toward him again.

Greyson ducked to the back and wove his way toward the doors that opened into the large hall. Just as he reached the door something sight caught his attention. A young man with bright red hair stood against the back wall.

Greyson swerved and joined the young man. Greyson leaned back and watched the several men leaning against this particular wall. He grinned to himself, at one time a long time ago; he had been one of these poor saps. Back before his father and then his grandfather had dropped dead, and left him a duke at the tender age of twenty. The red-haired boy was wearing a bright green mask that clashed terribly with his hair color. Greyson wondered briefly why he himself was here with the buckflowers against this wall. He didn't even know if this particular young man was the Lord Byron in question. And if he were, then what? . . . Did he really expect those two ladies to come and find the red-head again?

Grey shifted uneasily on his feet and had just decided to sneak out of the ballroom again, when the crowd parted and a shapely young girl in blue dragging another young lady in pink appeared in the crush. The first girl stopped in front of the young red-headed gentleman. The other young lady pulled against the first's hands and made sounds of embarrassment. Greyson could see that the second's face was several shades deeper than the pink of her mask and gown. The first girl refused to release the squirming girl, and proceeded to explain herself to the redheaded boy.

“Begging your pardon, my lord, but I believe you are under the illusion that Prudence does not want to dance with you. Please be assured that this belief is utter nonsense, and that Prudence would indeed love the opportunity of a waltz with you.” With that pronouncement she basically shoved the young girl she was towing into the redhead's arms. Both of them blinked at her in stunned silence. The music started up for the next waltz. The first girl peeked at them through her mask and made a motion that they should precede with all due haste to the dance floor. Her stance showed that she would broach no arguments.

The red-head seeing a way to appear the gallant hero rescued the fair maiden from the wrath of her friend and the embarrassment of the situation swept the twittering girl into his arms and onto the floor.

Grey couldn't help it. Another smile lifted the corners of his mouth reaching all the way to his eyes. She was intriguing and delightful. She stood before him and watched the two dance away. She dusted her hands on her dark blue of her skirt and then adjusted her mask. He noted that the mask was one of the smaller types and did little to conceal her face. Satisfied that her mission was done she turned from the dance floor and noticed him. Grey stood stock still as she eyed him up and down. He saw the flicker of recognition light her eyes. He searched his mind for something impressive to say, but he found himself tongue tied. He swallowed awkwardly.

She smiled up at him in delight. "Kind sir, could I impose upon you to dance with me."

Grey tried to cover his surprise at her request as he bowed formally and took her hand.

As he pulled this delightful vision in blue into his arms, he felt his heart bump against chest. She was tall. Her head came up to his chin. Greyson grinned; she was the perfect height. His hand settled on her trim back as her hand rested on his shoulder. He pulled her into the dance. She immediately followed his lead. They twirled around the room. He found himself relaxing as her laughter rolled around them. They waltzed. Greyson was trying hard to get a handle on his confused and shattered emotions. He felt his life had just turned upside down. This was what he had been waiting for; this moment all his life, and nothing in his life had actually prepared him for this truth. He held her and they danced. It was magical, beautiful. The lights twinkled off her laughing eyes, the satin of her gown swished against his legs. He smiled again for the third time in the last hour, more than he had in the last month.

The world was finally right . . .

. . . and then the dance ended.

She smiled her thanks, and curtsied to him, and then had turned and walked away. Greyson's brain scrambled from confused euphoria into instant panic. Where was she going? How could she just walk away from what had just happened?

Greyson, after a minute of frozen stunned bewilderment, stumbled after her through the new set of dancers that from converged on the floor.

He caught up with her just as she reached the door to the balcony. He followed her onto into the shadowed terrace. "Please," Greyson implored laying a hand on her bare arm.

Startled she turned and looked at him through the slits in her mask, her eyes questioning. "You didn't tell me your name."

Greyson watched the expressions cross her face.

"My name is Grey" he offered.

"Well, at least grey is something easily defined," her eyes twinkled at an inside joke.

Greyson moved closer, "Would you agree to a walk in the garden with me?"

She leaned over the railing and considered the well-lit paths through the garden below. She shot him a look from the corner of her eye. "Well, if you agree to keep your hands . . . and everything else to yourself." She nodded.

Greyson smiled again and looped her hand through his arm as he guided her down the wide back steps to the garden path.

"You never told me your name."

"And I don't intend to."

He looked at her in surprise. "Then what shall I call you?"

She shrugged and chuckled. Greyson loved the way she laughed. It warmed his soul. "I guess you will have to pick a name. . . . but do try to make it something interesting. . . . Jane is just so unimaginative."

"Is your name Jane?"

She laughed again. "Not hardly."

"You really have no intention of telling me your name."

"Of course not, what is the point of a masque if one goes around telling who one is."

The fairy lights twinkled in the candle holders placed along the path. The music from the ballroom faded in the background. They rounded a bend in the shrubbery to interrupt two figures locked in a passionate kiss.

"Oh, dear, I am so glad we found you first- your mother is hunting everywhere for you." Greyson's young lady explained to the young girl in the embrace. The two lovers quickly broke apart and dashed back along the path toward the house.

"You know her?"

"Haven't a clue who she is," stated his companion. She started walking again. Grey chuckled.

"Give me a hint," Grey returned to the subject of her name.

She ignored his comment and walked up the bridge that crossed a small manmade pond. The air was filled with the sound of night frogs. The candle light reflected on the water creating a fairy tale setting. A lantern was hung from the center post, lighting up the area so it could be easily seen from anywhere in the garden.

"No," she said airy, "If I were to reveal my name then you would be forced to tell me who you are - including that you are a Lord, or at least second cousins to an earl, or worse yet, a duke, or some such silliness - and expect me to be duly impressed. When it becomes evident that I have no intention of being impressed the evening will be ruined."

The young lady moved so that her back was to the tall stone railing of the bridge. Bracing her arms on the stone supports she attempted to gracefully jump up to sit on the railing. Greyson moved quickly, and placing his hands on her waist, assisted her up. Once she was seated securely, he released her waist, and then placed his hands on either side of her against the stone railing. This put their faces on the same level only a foot apart. Greyson reached up and pulled his mask off. He didn't want anything to block his view of this lovely creature.

"What makes you think, I am not a duke?" Greyson's voice held a hint of humor.

"Well," her voice held the same humor, "Dukes do not usually hold court with the buckflowers. . . Although, you do have a certain arrogance about you." She placed her hand on his chest and pushed him gently back as he leaned forward.

They both knew that he was standing on the line of proper behavior. His hands and everything else were kept to himself, and he was not touching her, but his closeness was questionable. They both knew she could not get down off the wall without making an issue of it. He smiled; her hand lay warm against his heartbeat. He leaned back giving her space.

"You have no desire to meet a duke and have him fall madly in love with you at first sight?" Greyson teased, he was sure she was playing with him at this point. She had after all recognized him in the ballroom.

Her hand dropped away from his chest. Greyson leaned closer and the hand returned to its place against his heart.

"Heavens, no," she gasped. "Why that would make the whole situation unbearably complicated. I should hate to break the poor man's heart."

"You would turn him down?" Greyson laughed in disbelief.

"Why does everyone believe that a girl would marry someone simply because he is a duke? I, myself, cannot imagine being married to a dusty old duke. Besides, he would not have me." She stated as a matter-of-fact.

“Why would you say such a thing?” Greyson’s voice held his disbelief at her words. He could not imagine anyone not being drawn to this delightful lady.

She considered his question. “I am not duchess material. I do and say outrageous things. I think the rules of polite conduct are silly at best. I shan’t like the idea of governesses raising my babies, or sending my children away to boarding school, or my husband having expected mistresses. . .” and then she laughed in delight again. “We have only known each other ten minutes, and already we have me married and committing murder on some poor fictional duke.”

Greyson dropped his eyes to his boots. His mind tried to wrap around what she was saying. She acted like she did not know who he was. “Why did you ask me to dance?” His eyes moved back to her face.

She adjusted the hand she had laid on his vest uncomfortably and pushed to back him up a bit more. “I saw you dancing with the lady in yellow. You seemed to be an excellence dancer.”

Greyson realized she was talking about his sister. “And that was the only reason?” he prompted.

“Well,” the young lady blushed slightly under the mask, “You were the perfect gentleman and not ogling her bosom.”

Greyson threw back his head and laughed; the sound came from deep in his chest and rolled merrily across the pond and the garden surrounding them. She smiled at him in response. “This is a problem you have often?”

The young lady adjusted her seat self-consciously and nodded, “It is worse because I am too tall.”

Greyson’s eyes could not help but slid toward the aforementioned area of discussion. He quickly jerked his eyes back to hers. She was indeed nicely endowed. Greyson smiled to himself, he would have noticed earlier if he wasn’t so taken by the laughter in her green eyes.

He realized she was holding her breath waiting for his response. “You are not too tall, you are perfect,” his voice was a caress. Their eyes locked and the moment held.

The young lady abruptly jerked her eyes from his, and pushing forward moved him away while at the same time jumping nimbly to her feet on the bridge. “We should be getting back, now.” she stated her voice a little breathless.

Greyson nodded, and went to take her hand, but she pulled it away.

Grey approved of her actions even as he disliked them. He was glad she didn’t let strangers hold her hand in moonlight summer gardens, but on the other hand he felt a need for contact, an assurance that she wasn’t a dream.

“I should like to see you again.”

His mystery lady shrugged, “the season is at an end.”

“Tell me you do not plan to leave tomorrow, surely.”

“No, but by the end of the week most likely,” her voice was trying to discourage farther contact.

“Then there is still time.”

“We need to go back, now.” Her voice was soft but firm.

“Of course,” They walked in silence for a minute. Greyson racked his brain trying to think of a way to retain her, to find out her name, to secure an invitation to tea, anything. Dance, he would ask her to dance again, another perfect waltz.

As they reached the foot of the balcony stairs, Greyson turned to ask when the expression on her face stopped him. She was staring with rapt attention at two figures on the balcony. Greyson looked up to see the young girl in pink wrestling in the arms of a man.

His mysterious young lady was gone in a second, racing up the stairs in a flash. After a startled second he followed after, but as he came to the top of the stairs, all he found was the young man lying on the porch floor. Both girls had vanished.

Greyson strolled up to the moaning gentleman. Rolling him over, Greyson recognized him as Lord Towell, Earl of Suxess. Greyson frowned down at him, and then looked around. No one had seen the incident, but him, and, of course, the two girls. The Earl was quite clearly drunk off his feet. Greyson moved to the ballroom and found a butler to help the dandy to his carriage.

Greyson spent the next three hours searching the house to no avail. She was gone. And Greyson still did not know her name.