

# **DANCE FOR A DEAD PRINCESS**

**By**

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## PROLOGUE

Mid-April 2010, Paris

In the gray spring rain, he stood in the Place d'Alma staring down at the tunnel where she had vanished from his life on the last night of August 1997. He came here whenever he was in Paris. He counted the pillars until he reached number thirteen, the one that had taken her life. Tears formed behind his eyes, as they always did in this place. But he refused to let them overflow. Instead, he took a long breath of fresh rain mixed with the exhaust of cars speeding through the tunnel.

When the big black Mercedes entered its skid that horrible night, his last living link to Deborah had been taken from him. Diana and Deborah, West Heath girls, friends forever. Deborah had been dead since 1994, but he had lost her long before she became his wife, three years after he met her at Diana's wedding to the Prince of Wales in 1981. How many nights had he spent talking to Diana about his marriage, about her marriage, about his guilt over Deborah, and about the impossibility of being in love? Too many to count. He ached to tell her now how empty his life had become without either of them.

He stared down the long, gray tunnel, wondering as always what she had felt as she had slipped away from everyone who loved her. Had she struggled against it, as Deborah had? Or had her torn and broken heart quietly accepted its fate? No, he doubted that. She'd have fought to stay with her boys. Diana hadn't gone into death quietly. That January, she'd had a warning of what was coming. She'd recorded a video tape naming her assassins and had given it to someone in America for safekeeping. But

she would never tell him who it was. Too dangerous, she always insisted. If you had it, they'd come after you, too. Leave it alone, Nicholas. The tape is safer out of England.

His phone abruptly interrupted with a text message from his assistant. He was late for a meeting of the Burnham Trust at the Trust's Paris headquarters, and everyone was waiting. Well, they could wait. All day and all night if he wanted. He was the Eighteenth Duke of Burnham and the second richest man in England after the Duke of Westminster, and he'd be late if he decided to be. He hadn't wanted to be a duke but having been forced into the job, he was going to enjoy every possible perk.

As soon as the news of Diana's death reached him, he'd vowed to find her tape and make it public. No luck for the last thirteen years, but his latest operative had just come up with a stellar lead at last. It was so stellar that not only was he pretty sure he was going to find the tape, he was also going to have the opportunity to unload the decaying family seat in Kent and exact his well-deserved revenge upon his father, the Seventeenth Duke.

## CHAPTER ONE

Mid-November 2010, New York

Conference rooms are all the same. As are airports. On a cold, wet, mid-November afternoon, His Grace, the Eighteenth Duke of Burnham, decided that those who thought running the Burnham Trust was a glamorous job should go from London to Paris to Brussels to New York seeing only conference rooms and airports. He was now trapped in one of the beastly things on the twenty-eighth floor of the Manhattan offices of Craig, Lewis, and Weller, studying the deepening early twilight through the sheets of glass that formed the walls. His mood was as black as the coming night. This was the last leg of his autumn trip to ascertain the status of Trust assets in several countries. And two weeks of nonstop polished mahogany tables, crystal water decanters, dense financial statements delivered by earnest twenty-somethings, and masses of sandwiches on large silver trays had been a mind-numbing combination. He longed to go back to his suite at the Plaza, draw a hot bath, and order a bottle of Balvenie Cask 191.

But a quiet evening in was highly unlikely with Ami Hendria in town. Twenty-eight-year-old blonde bombshell actresses were not fans of a low key evening by the fire. Still, he would be the first to admit one reason he kept Ami around was to avoid having the world find out who Nicholas Carey truly was: a middle-aged homebody, longing for some solitude and a nightcap. On the other hand, the female segment of the populace would have refused to believe his real persona if he had posted it on a billboard in Times Square because, as a widowed duke, every woman he encountered believed he was

swinging Prince Charming. And he was anything but that.

Oh, he *was* bored if his mind wandered to scotch and the possibility of eluding Ami's grasp that evening. To bring himself back to the present, he looked down the nine-foot glossy mahogany conference table and counted the populace. Three lawyers from Beville, Platt, and Fisher on one side, all local counsel for the Burnham Trust. And two on the other from Craig, Lewis, and Weller for Miss Reilly's Female Finishing Academy. Why did it take five lawyers to sell a house to a girls' school? And why weren't any of them the one he wanted to see? His operative had named Taylor Collins, a partner in the Craig, Lewis real estate section, as was the one likely to know where Diana's tape was. He'd told Hollis Craig he wouldn't sell the Abbey to his daughter's school unless Taylor was on the deal. Yet he'd been trapped in this conference room for more than an hour with no sign of her.

The tape was so sensitive, Nicholas knew he couldn't approach Taylor Collins directly about it. But he was more than happy to offer Burnham Abbey, the ancestral home of the Careys, on the sacrificial altar of subterfuge. The place had long been an albatross around his neck that he was determined to remove. He smiled happily at his picture of his father, the Seventeenth Duke, turning in his grave in the Abbey's chapel as the lawyers blathered on blissfully and incomprehensibly about the terms of the deal.

For as many of his forty-nine years as he could remember, he had detested lawyers of every ilk. The American big firm types were particularly irksome because they all looked, sounded, and dressed exactly alike. Dark suits, starched white shirts with

monograms on the cuff, and subdued silk ties. And the women lawyers. Oh, he didn't even want to think about their sexless, baggy black outfits. Was being neutered worth all that money they reportedly made? He knew Taylor was thirty-nine, but he bet she looked at least forty-five and was twenty pounds overweight. And probably chain smoked and had a face like a bulldog. He didn't look forward to dealing with her.

Well, here was his chance to find out. The massive, dark mahogany door to the conference room opened, and another female suit stepped inside. Except this one was so, so different from the others. And not at all the woman he had expected to see.

“Sorry to be late. I had a call from the Cuniff trustee that I had to take.” She was speaking to Hollis Craig, but a pair of eyes the color of spring violets were fixed on him. Very like Diana's eyes, but deeper.

“My partner, Taylor Collins, Your Grace. She's going to be in charge of the file for Miss Reilly's as we agreed.”

His heart was racing so fast, he had difficulty speaking; so he merely nodded in response. At thirty-nine, she looked ten years younger. She was barely five one and probably weighed all of a hundred pounds. She was wearing an obviously expensive, form-hugging black wool suit. Her jacket allowed the demure ruffle of her blouse to spill over its dark edge, highlighting the single strand of perfect pearls circling her creamy throat. Her dark hair was pulled back into the usual professional woman's knot, revealing more perfect pearl drops in her exquisite little ears. He wondered what she looked like when her hair was wild and free. Her face was impassively professional, yet he sensed

much more lay beneath the surface. Physically he was drawn to her so strongly he wondered what color La Perlas she was wearing, but he longed for more than sex. He desperately craved the impossible: time alone and the chance to know who she was beneath the lawyer facade.

The conference room doors opened once more and another black-suited woman with hair also tightly wound roused Nicholas from his fantasies. She wasn't as expensively dressed, and he recognized her immediately as the telephone receptionist who sat at the throne-like desk opposite the elevators. Her task was to greet everyone who arrived at the twenty-eighth floor.

"Your Grace?"

Why did all professional women have to slick their hair into those ridiculous knots? Did it make them seem more serious? More competent?

"Your Grace," she repeated. She was young, early twenties. Her eyes said, maybe I will be his Cinderella. Even a woman in a business suit longs to be a princess. Or at least a duchess. Although he doubted Taylor Collins would be interested.

"Yes, Miss—?"

"La Breaux. Marie La Breaux."

"Well, yes, Miss La Breaux. What is it?"

"A call for you."

"I'll take it later. After we've wrapped up in here."

"I'm afraid it's the headmistress from your ward's school."

"Oh, very well." Nicholas got up and went into the adjoining conference room, this one dominated by a long glass table, sterile enough for surgery, surrounded by empty high-backed chairs. It looked like a board meeting of ghosts, and for a moment Nicholas saw the empty room as a metaphor for his life. The people he had loved the most were all ghosts: his mother, Deborah, Diana, Annabel.

"Hello?"

"Helen Myrtin, Your Grace, from Miss Whitcomb's School." Her thin, nasal vowels sliced through the silence and reminded Nicholas that in person she appeared as intimidating as she sounded. Thirty-five. Always dressed in suits so crisp they looked like military uniforms. "I'm afraid there's been a bit of difficulty with Lucy. Again."

Nicholas had hoped she wouldn't refer to the past, but in fairness, she had a right to sound exasperated. It had taken a hefty chunk of Trust cash, tastefully donated to the school's general fund, to keep Lucy there the last time. "Tell me about the problem, Mrs. Myrtin."

A very human sigh surprised him. "I'm so sorry, Your Grace. I hate giving bad news."

"If she's drinking again—"

"I wish that were the only problem. Unfortunately, Lucy has begun to experiment with drugs. She had too much to drink, threw up in the loo, and passed out. One of the other girls found her and called Matron who called Dr. Briggs. When he looked her over he found signs of cocaine use. And later we located some among her things."



Nicholas gripped the phone and willed her to stop speaking. The alcohol had started last year. It had been tough to deal with a fifteen-year-old who had a taste for scotch. Maybe he should have seen the other coming. But he had put his head in the sand. "Are you very sure she was actually using the stuff—not just trying to sell it?" Both were bad, but using was worse. It would be much harder to stop that.

"Perfectly sure." The headmistress' voice tightened in response to his denial. Give me any window, any hole, to escape this he prayed. Don't make me deal with another failure where Lucy is concerned. I know it's my fault. But it hurts too much. Far too much. Still, fate had already done its work. There was no going back.

"Dr. Briggs says the drug caused bleeding around her nose. The girl who found her in the loo thought she was dying."

"I see. And where is Lucy now?"

"In the infirmary. We have to send her down. At least until the New Year. You realize that, of course."

"Of course." But she wasn't saying out for good. There was still hope. "But after Christmas?"

"You'll have to show us she was treated. And that she's—uh, how do they say—clean. Perhaps one of those drug management programs in Harley Street. Although I will warn you the source is her boyfriend. He'll find her if she's in London. He's very persistent."

"Boyfriend?"

"Well, man-friend, actually. Didn't you know about David Lowenby? She said you approved."

"David Lowenby is Lord Gaynor's heir and twenty-five years old. He's almost ten years older than Lucy. She couldn't have been seeing him."

"I'm afraid she has. She told us she had your permission," Mrs. Myrtin repeated.

"And you believed that?" Nicholas didn't even attempt to control his outrage.

"Well," her tone of detached poise seemed to slip momentarily, "I did think of ringing you up. But she was so emphatic. Good family. All that."

He sighed. "Well, the harm's done. But if I put her in Harley Street, Lowenby will find her with more cocaine. You are right. I'll have to think about what to do."

"There are home programs, I think. Nurses you can hire. Maybe one of the Harley Street clinics can give you some information. But we do have to send her away today. And you appear to be out of the country."

"New York is not the ends of the earth, Mrs. Myrtin. I can telephone my staff. I'll send an estate car for her as soon as you ring off. I would imagine my driver can be there within the hour."

"That would be greatly appreciated, Your Grace."

After Nicholas hung up, he sat for a long minute watching the New York skyline. He felt empty and sad and defeated. She had promised no more drinking. She would study to get into Oxford. She would find some meaning and purpose for her life. Not just parties and shopping. But all her promises had meant nothing. He glanced at his watch:

four thirty here, so nine thirty in London. He could have Lucy at Burnham Square before midnight.

He picked up the phone once more, this time punching the intercom button.

"Marie La Breaux, here, Your Grace." She sounded so eager. For what, he wondered.

"Please get my butler on the phone and tell him to send a car to fetch my ward from school. At once."

"Yes, Your Grace. I'm sorry the news was bad."

But he wasn't inclined to tell her anything, so he ignored her condolences. First rule of survival in the tabloid fishbowl of aristocratic life: never give anyone information about yourself. "And get my London solicitor, Lord Thomas, on the line. My personal assistant will give you the numbers."

"Yes, Your Grace." She sounded more distant now. She understood he was not going to let his guard down with her.

Kerry Thomas, his chief friend from Eaton, would know what to do. Restraining orders—whatever it took to keep the press out of Lucy's screw-up. Maybe he could recommend a treatment program. A scholarship boy from a poor Dublin family, Kerry was resourceful. And now rich.

As he sat waiting for Kerry's call, he wondered if he should fly back to London that night or follow his original plan to return in the morning. His pilot was used to turning around on a dime if Nicholas demanded it, but sticking to his original itinerary

looked very attractive. He didn't feel ready to face Lucy and her problems any sooner than tomorrow night. If then. He could stay at the Ritz for a couple of days and avoid his townhouse at Burnham Square for at least forty-eight hours. Cowardly, but tempting.

Then, too, it was Ami's last night in New York before she flew to Paris to begin a new movie. She expected him to take her to dinner at Per Se, with dancing afterwards at Provacateur. The thought of all that throbbing music punctuated by green strobes gave him a headache in advance. In addition to being very egocentric, American twenty-something actresses loved night life. And were completely convinced dukes did, too, despite his sincere explanations to the contrary.

Well, even if blonde American actresses had dukes pegged correctly, and they all liked to boogie until dawn, he didn't. Maybe it was because he had never felt much like a duke to begin with. Maybe it was because he hadn't been intended to be one, either. Arthur had been real duke material. He could picture his older half-brother at Provacateur until the wee hours. He didn't deserve a lifetime subbing for Arthur.

Hours under strobe lights, sandwiched between gyrating, sweating bodies was just the sort of thing Deborah would have loved and would have insisted he do with her. But even the most boring activities had been worth it—to be close to her. All at once, he could see another pair of blue eyes. Not deep violet like Taylor's, but pale as spring rain, cool, and appraising. Deborah's eyes. Deborah's voice. "I can't live locked away in that decaying old house in Kent. Don't be ridiculous. There's everything to do in London and nothing at the Abbey except watching it crumble to bits stone by stone. You can't

seriously be thinking of living there." He could hear her voice as clearly as if more than a decade had not gone by since the last time she had spoken. And he could picture her graceful body and the way she shook her golden, shoulder-length hair to make a point.

The memory was too sharp and too clear, and it hurt too much. He brought himself back to the dilemma of Lucy. He would leave New York in the morning as planned. But he'd lie to Ami and cancel the evening. She'd be furious, but she'd get over it. And if she didn't, there were a zillion more just like her waiting to attach themselves to him. He badly wanted his evening alone at the Plaza with his bottle of scotch. No, that wasn't what he wanted at all. He wanted to take Taylor Collins to dinner at Per Se, drown in her violet eyes, and learn everything about her, including which places on her tiny exquisite body she liked to be touched. But that was out of the question. He hadn't expected her to be beautiful and sexy, but he had to force himself to stay on track. He had made a promise to Deborah and to Diana. He couldn't be so distracted he gave up his quest for the truth.

He would telephone Steve Riddely now and arrange for him to come round early in the morning to look at Lucy and advise him about treatment programs when he returned. Steve's father had been his own father's doctor, and he knew he could trust him not to tell anyone why Lucy had been sent down.

As for himself, he was a coward. Tomorrow or even the next day would be time enough to deal with Lucy.

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The next morning, his Lear Jet was scheduled to depart at eight thirty. As he sat on the tarmac, waiting in the queue of airplanes for clearance to taxi and takeoff, Nicholas Carey reflected upon his success the prior evening. Ami had been easily put off with a promise to fly her to London the following week. Apparently she was willing to risk the ire of her director to be with him. Not a good development. But the bottle of Balvenie Cask 191 had been superb. He had almost obliterated the shock of meeting Taylor Collins with its joys.

But he was sober now, and she was very much on his mind. He had to find a way to see her again, not only to find Diana's tape, but to learn more about her. How to do it without being obvious? Ah, the sale of the house. She was the lead lawyer on the file for the buyer. This would be easy. Way too easy. He picked up his cell and dialed his personal assistant.

"Myles?"

"Your Grace."

"I want you to call Suzanne Kelly, the woman at Miss Reilly's who is overseeing their purchase of the Abbey. Tell her there may be a problem with conveying a clear title to the school; and their attorney, Taylor Collins, must come to England and personally examine the documents to determine whether the Trust can actually sell the house."

"Will do, Your Grace."

"And another thing. The land conveyance records are at the Abbey library in the family papers section. Keep them in the library but hide them where they'll be very

difficult to find.”

“Yes, Your Grace. Anything else?”

“Only one. Book a suite for me at the Ritz for the next three days. I need some time and space away from Lucy while I think about what to do with her.”

“Done, Your Grace.”

The jet gathered speed for take off. Nicholas watched New York begin to drop away. If Taylor knew about Diana’s tape, her life was in danger.

