



CHRISTMAS  
*Grace*

KAYE CHAMBERS

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Christmas Grace

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Christmas in London was a Yankee's holiday dream, cold, bright, and beautiful. It wasn't my first holiday in the capital, but the season wasn't the reason I'd made the trip over from Reykjavik. No, I'd come to London to crash a party.

Jacob Forsyth's invitations to any event were hard to come by, but his Loki Security's Christmas Gala was one of the most sought after events of the season. The guest list read like a "Who's Who" list of the richest people in the world.

It wasn't the social accomplishment of being seen that had my skin tingling beyond the nip of the cold, it was the venue. Unlike previous years, he had chosen to host his annual affair at his very own castle located just beyond London's sprawling boundaries. The excitement of entering Jacob's private lair sharpened my senses and sent adrenaline rushing through me.

The fact I was entering blind only made the mark that much more exhilarating. Originally built in the 1600s, there were no reliable blueprints of the layout. I knew from stolen documents from Loki's internal correspondence that Jacob had personally overseen renovations designed to make his new home totally secure. Considering Loki vaults were the only ones I couldn't crack, I didn't doubt he'd outdone himself. The thief in me was dying to test it, so here I was.

The hotel limousine joined a long line of waiting cars and I pulled my mink stole tighter across my shoulders in preparation for braving the cold. Women's fashion didn't consider that walk from the car to the inside and my dress was no exception. With my pale coloring, I'd passed on the traditional red and green for something that complimented me rather than the season. The ocean blue silk was daring with a barely there back and plunging neckline. I'd chosen diamonds to show off the generous assets the dress showcased. The cold stones rested around my throat like a collar, designed to draw the eye of anyone who understood their worth.

Shaking out the hemline, the matching diamond-accented satin pumps sparkled in the dim light. I smiled and held up a shoe to appreciate the jewels. The shoes coordinated with the equally encrusted clutch that held my lock picks, tiny digital camera, and single tube of lipstick – everything a lady needed for a successful evening. My mother would have been proud.

Well, I'm sure she would have been if I'd had one who cared enough to raise me instead of dumping me off on the doorstep of St. George's Home for Abandoned Children. Pushing the familiar resentment firmly from my mind, I looked forward to discover my car was the next to pull up to the drop-off.

As the door opened, I smiled a bright smile to the handsome man offering me a hand to help me from the car and onto the red carpet. His brown eyes showed laugh-lines and he returned my smile with a wink, steadying me when I pretended to need the support to get my heels under me.

In reality, my eyes were soaking in the details. A dozen tux-clad attendants loitered along the red-carpeted walk to the large double-doors thrown open to show the lighted entryway. Despite the well-fitted tuxedos, bulges gave away the location of firearms. I could see the faint

outline of a knife hilt on one of them as he reached up to engage his hidden earpiece.

Getting in wouldn't be a problem, but getting out may be more difficult than I initially anticipated. But that's what back-up plans were for. With a jaunty smile, I hurried up the walk and into the warmth of the receiving area.

The girl behind the coat check wore an earpiece and bulge at the small of her back. Apparently, Jacob Forsyth didn't trust anyone. I could relate to the paranoia. I handed over my wrap and made my way into the party.

The ballroom was awash with every variation of red and green imaginable. The black tuxes faceted the brilliant colors, showing them to advantage like jewels. My gaze slid over them, looking for a specific prong in the setting. He wasn't hard to spot. Then again, six-foot-plus Vikings had gone out of fashion a thousand years ago.

Jacob stood between two older gentlemen with a glass of champagne in his hand and a "help-me-escape" expression. Sweeping through the crowd, I knew the moment his gaze locked onto my approach. With a saucy, confident smile, I strolled between the two silver-haired foxes and reached for the glass of champagne.

"Darling," I breezed. "There you are, and with the glass you promised me forever ago."

He gave up the glass with grace and I took a long sip, savoring the sweet nectar, sliding my hand onto his firm forearm.

"I'm sorry, dear. Lord Havenshire and Mr. Montrie distracted me with business. Forgive me?" His voice was textured and carried a Scandinavian accent familiar thanks to my Icelandic residence.

"Only if you'll dance with me." I turned my bright smile to the men in question and found them staring at me as if I were a two-headed monster. "You will excuse us, won't you?"

Both men murmured and stepped back. Jacob placed his hand over mine and escorted me onto the dance floor, taking my half-full glass and depositing it with a passing server.

“Funny,” I murmured as he took me in his arms to sweep me into the music. “You don’t sound British.”

“And you sound frightfully like a Yank,” he replied with amusement. “But I shall forgive you only because of your timely rescue.”

“I’ll take that as a thank-you,” I slid my hand up his arm flirtatiously. He stared down at me with grey eyes that seemed to see far more than they should. I imagined wolves staring down prey with that exact look.

“As you should,” he leaned to whisper softly in my ear. “But I’ll actually say the words if you’ll give me your name.”

“Ruth Fisher,” I slipped into my alias easily. It was one of my favorite personalities to use. “And yes, I crashed your party. I overheard some guests at my hotel talking about what a wonderful gala this was supposed to be and decided to wheedle my way in. Forgive me?”

He threw back his head and laughed loudly. People around us turned to stare as he swept me into the waltz. He was much lighter on his feet than a man of his bulk should be. I settled into his lead easily, enjoying the thrill of dancing with a handsome man. I loved dancing, but rarely got the opportunity to indulge. I was usually busy with other things at high profile parties. A thief has to make a living when the occasion presents itself.

“You know,” he said softly after a moment. “I should thank you for your interest. Most women don’t have the *grace* to announce such things.”

Was it my vanity or did he emphasize my name? No, I was being overly sensitive.

The dance ended and Jacob artfully dipped me, much to my delight. When he righted me, he took my hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. I seized the opportunity.

“I understand the castle is a recent purchase. It’s lovely all light up for the holiday.”

“Thank you, Ms. Fisher. I’ve just recently finished renovations. It’s amazing how much it needed to make it a home. The previous owner had let it settle into a state of disrepair. Would you like a tour?”

“I would absolutely love one! If it wouldn’t take you away from your hosting duties, of course?” I batted my eyes at him for affect and watched his mouth twist into a self-satisfied smile. Men could be so easy.

“I believe my guests can manage without me for a moment,” he said as he leaned closer to whisper conspiratorially, “It will give them more time to imbibe on my very expensive champagne.”

*That their money paid for,* I silently added.

The thing about working high-powered men is appealing to their ego. Whoever said vanity was the sin of women had never met a man with more money than sense. Jacob strolled me through the public areas of the house keeping a running chatter about the history behind each of the exhibits and the castle itself. It was like walking through a museum with a very sexy guide. I exclaimed in all the appropriate places, mentally calculating what each item would fetch on the market, and deciding none of it was really worth the effort it would take to filch.

While tasteful, all the art and relics available for public appreciation weren’t priceless or terribly valuable. I fought boredom until we arrived at a doorway and Jacob stopped. He stared at it in contemplation before slanting a glance my way.

“And in here, I keep my most valuable treasure. But, if I show you, you must promise complete secrecy.” His face was solemn, but there was a twinkle of merriment in his eyes.

“Oh,” I breathed. “I adore secrets. I’m very good with them.”

“I just bet you are,” he said in an amused tone as he opened the door.

I giggled like a twit and sashayed through the doorway expecting to find a place more conducive to getting to know one another in the biblical sense, but found a cozy office without so much as a couch. Confused, I looked around and my gaze locked onto the display case centered on the wall opposite the beautifully crafted mahogany desk.

The display was magnificent.

A beautifully wrought sword rested against a backdrop of blue silk. Hanging next to it was a wooden shield, nicked and faded, but definitely authentic. Completing the scene was a mass of volcanic rocks lining the bottom of the case shimmering with quartz and crystals. Drawn to it, I reached up to touch the display glass and jerked my hand back mindful of fingerprints.

“It’s beautiful,” I said reverently, breaking the silence, and turned to find Jacob resting against the closed door watching me with an intense gaze.

“My ancestors believed that sword was magic. Not only did it kill the last dragon, but it was carried into battle until the Vikings lay down their weapons to pick up plows. As long as one of our bloodline possesses it, we cannot fail at anything.” His voice carried the conviction of a zealot. He believed the legend. Turning to face the display, I believed it, too. The sword gave off an aura of raw power that made belief easy.

“Is that the key to your success?” I asked flirtatiously, slipping back into my persona with some effort.

“Success is measured in many things, Ms. Fisher,” he said and frowned. He presses his hand to his ear. My gaze followed it and saw a tiny wireless earpiece tucked inside. Chastising myself for missing it on my initial inspection of him, I watched as he narrowed his gaze.

“Something has come up that requires my attention. If you’d like to continue our tour, you’re welcome to wait here. I shan’t be but a moment.”

“Then I will marvel at your treasure while I wait, Jacob,” I gushed, unable to believe my good fortune. He nodded his head and left.

This was obviously his private office. It reflected what I knew of the man – nicely furnished in a simple fashion, but carrying an understated elegance. A twang of guilt hit somewhere close to my heart over the fact I was about to violate that sanctum.

My gaze drifted back to the display case. The sword was nice and I had clients who would kill for that piece of history, especially with the legend behind it. But, not only would I have a difficult time getting it out of here, it would take time to unload it. My dispersing agent was good, but not *that* good.

With a huff, I surveyed the room in search of obvious clues for a more lucrative option. Surely he kept some of his design legends here. My gaze swept through it three times before tracking back to the tall landscape centered behind the desk. It was exactly placed – centered, level, and perfect – too perfect.

“Ah ha,” I murmured as I hurried toward it. A tug at the corner of the frame earned a click and the painting swung outward on well-oiled hinges. I frowned in disappointment at the safe hidden in the wall. It was old, plain, and serviceable, hardly worth the effort to open.

Twirling the knob, I listened to the tumblers rattle. I didn’t even need my exceptionally keen hearing to discern the combination. A few flicks of my wrist and the lock released without a fuss. Nestled inside were stacks of currency from a wide variety of countries. It was an evening doomed to disappointments, it seemed. The safe wasn’t deep enough to hold the blueprints I hoped to find. Well, there was no reason to leave empty-handed.

I didn’t need bills that were undoubtedly marked or recorded somewhere. I liked to deal in a much more refined trade and found it in a small black velvet bag haphazardly tossed into the corner half-hidden by the money.

The bag made an enticing clinking sound when I picked it up. Experienced fingers felt gemstones rattling around loosely, but I didn't bother to confirm the type. There would be time enough for that later. Opening my handbag, I deftly secured the gems in a hidden compartment in the lining and locked the safe back.

Maybe, I thought excitedly, there was another hidden trove in the room. I was still standing by the painting pulled back into place when the door opened unexpectedly. My host strolled in, stopped, and gave me a penetrating stare.

I waited for him to voice the suspicion I saw on his face, but he strode to me, leaned over me, and pushed the frame lightly. The answering click as the latch caught gave me away.

"Looking for something?" he asked softly from inches away. The heat of his body radiated outward, reminding me of how it felt to stand too close to a blazing fire. My heart began to pound and I looked up at his chiseled jaw, mesmerized by the muscles clenching and unclenching inches from my face.

"All your secrets," I answered in a voice made husky by excitement. His eyes flared as his gaze met mine. "Oh, come now, Jacob. You leave me in here with your greatest treasure and expect me not to pry? Surely you realize that's just naïve."

He chuckled and eased back, not actually moving away, but not hovering over me imposingly. His Viking ancestors would be proud of how well he managed the menacing stereotype.

"Very likely so," he agreed and held out his hand. "So tell me, Grace, did you have time to open it?"

Busted.

"Nope," I answered, dropping the act. "How long have you known?"

"Facial recognition software picked you up about ten seconds after you exited your car. You were watched from that moment until my head of security realized we weren't on the monitors anymore."

“That’s why you were called away,” I guessed. He nodded, his hand still held waiting for me to acknowledge it.

“The video feeds from this room are kept private and not piped into the main control room. Come now, the game is up. Let’s take this into the sitting room for a more...thorough...discussion.”

From the expression on his face, I knew exactly where the discussion might lead, but put my hand in his anyway. While I was willing to trade some things for information, my body wasn’t one of them. He didn’t have to know that though.

Jacob led me toward the display case and I followed willingly. Obviously, I had missed something else and I was dying to see what. Reaching the wall, he reached up and lightly tapped a panel. It slid silently open revealing a keypad. His fingers flew across it faster than my eyes could follow ensuring I’d never be able to recreate the code. A rush of air preceded the panel sliding into the wall soundlessly.

It opened to the type of room I’d expected to see before. A leather sofa rested in the center of the spacious room covered in furs. I stopped in shock, but the hand resting against the small of my back pushed me softly into the room and fell away.

Heavy wooden chairs and tables rested in corners and against walls covered by tapestries depicting Norse mythology. Fascinated, I turned full circle and found myself facing a very amused Viking with his arms crossed emphasizing his expansive chest. I had a moment of apprehension but it melted away. Jacob Forsyth was many things, but a barbarian he was not. If he meant to do me harm, he wouldn’t do it here with a ballroom full of his richest clients, half of whom had been my victims over the years. Besides, there was a certain sense of honor about him that made me feel secure in his presence.

“Do you like what you see?”

“It’s very medieval,” I said and put on my brightest smile. “But suits you.”

“You have no idea,” he murmured almost too softly to hear. Louder, he continued. “Won’t you have a seat, Ms. St. George? We have so much to discuss.”

“Do you want me on the couch or a chair?” I asked flippantly, eyes glued to his face. Something dangerous flashed across his expression and the muscles along his jaw flexed again. Something about me, or the situation, was playing with his infamous control. Curiosity ate at me and I held my ground.

“Do you really want to know what I want, Grace?” he asked. I nodded and he closed the short distance between us in a rush. I expected him to swoop in like a raptor, but he didn’t. Instead, he cupped my face, tilted it up, and looked into my face searchingly. “I want to know if you’re the woman I’ve been waiting all these years for. I want to know if you’re the fated one. Are you?”

Mesmerized, I shook my head as much as his hand on my cheek would allow. With a growl, he kissed me. Hunger surged fueled by deprivation and the excitement of the moment. I opened my mouth readily, eagerly giving back the passion he poured into me. He put his hands on my hips and urged me backwards until my knees came into contact with the edge of the couch. It took no more than a gentle shove to send me sprawling onto the soft covers.

Jacob stood over me; his body set for conquest despite the tuxedo declaring he was not, indeed, a Viking out of legend. I licked my swollen lips and smiled as I kicked off my shoes and dropped my clutch beside them. There was definitely one way to skin a cat.

“Who have you been waiting for, Jacob?”

His gaze was stormy and he shook with the effort to hold himself in check. For the first time, I realized just how dangerous he could be if pressed. Under that civilized veneer rested a deadly adversary. Could I have misjudged him?

His nostrils flared like an animals and he seemed to be drawing in my scent. Could he be more than human? No, I'd have picked up on that. It wasn't like I was unfamiliar with the world beyond that lay buried under layers of superstition and folklore. I'd grown up with quite a few denizens of it.

"I've been waiting on the right woman to lift the curse," he answered grudgingly, pulling me from my musing. Jacob leaned down, bracing his hands on either side of my body, trapping me in a cage of massive strength.

I expected him to kiss me again, but he didn't. Instead he took another deep draw of breath and hovered.

"What curse?" I asked without thinking. "And how can I break it?"

"Are you a sorceress?" he asked and abruptly pulled away from me. I missed the heat of his body immediately. "No, I don't suppose you are. You may not be human, but you're not what I need."

I felt him shutting down, the camaraderie of earlier vanishing behind a wall of his self-discipline. In a panic, I stood up quickly and reached out to run my hand across the soft lapel of his jacket.

"I can be anything you need, Jacob," I promised and prayed it didn't come to more than I planned to pay out. "Just tell me what it is."

His body was still as stone beneath my hand. I counted the heartbeats. One. Two. Three. Four. The tension left him with a hard blow of breath.

"Grace," he said. "If you only knew how tempting your offer was, but no. You're not human, but you're not what I need to break my curse. A thousand years ago, I was a young, rash man raiding gold from these very coasts. I came upon a dragon guarding a church and slew her. With her dying breath, she lay a curse upon my head sealed to fate by her blood upon the ground."

I didn't bother to correct his misunderstanding. While I enjoyed a certain degree of dexterity, sight, and hearing, I was most assuredly

human. Santa just didn't bring little girls superpowers no matter how often they asked them on their Christmas lists.

"That was your sword," I prompted totally fascinated by the story he spun.

"Indeed it was," he acknowledged with a bow of his head. He stepped back, away from my hand, with obvious reluctance. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I have to go back to the party lest my guests decide I've abandoned them for a pretty face. You, forgive my rudeness, should probably excuse yourself from the festivities. As tempting as it is to spend the evening with you on my arm, it could prove awkward if any of my clients recognize you."

"You should be thanking me for bringing you so much business considering the way I handle my referrals," I said tartly, stung by being reminded of my less-than-welcome status.

He chuckled and pursed his lips, considering. Finally, he said, "You're right. For your help in growing my treasury, I'll grant you a boon. What would you like as a reward?"

"A secret," I jumped at the chance.

"Within reason," he said cautiously.

"What's the secret of your vaults? Why can't I crack them?"

"That's easy. Magic," he grinned impishly and dropped on his knees. My heart gave a lurch when he reached around me, mindful of the treasure hidden in my bag. Instead, he grabbed my shoes and held them out before me. He helped me slip them on like a prince from a fairy tale. The romance of the thought made my heart skip and dropped my hand down to pick up my purse myself.

"Seriously," I pouted. "You promised me a boon and I've asked it."

"And I've answered," he replied as he offered his arm. "Magic. A man of my experience learns a few things if he's to adapt to the world we know today."

With a snort, I placed my hand on his arm and took another long look around the room, categorizing it for future reference. He saw it and shook his head.

“Don’t even think about it, Grace. If I find you on my property again, I’m afraid I shan’t be nearly as accommodating as tonight. Do you like Swiss chocolates?”

“Doesn’t everyone? Why?”

“Because I plan to spend New Year’s in Switzerland. Join me and maybe we can come to a more mutually satisfactory arrangement.” He said it so cavalierly that it took a moment to process his meaning. When I did, I burst out laughing.

“Not a chance,” I said.

“Why so adamant? Surely you feel the possibilities?” He stopped at the door to lock it and I sighed as the panel slid back into place. Even knowing it was there; I was hard pressed to believe the secret room existed. It made me wonder what else was hiding behind the walls.

“Because, Jacob, you will never tell me what I want to know. And if I can’t have what I want, neither will you.”

“Ah, Grace, but I have. Ask another question. I will answer it gladly.”

“Fine,” I thought quickly. “What’s your real given name?”

“Tyr Thorsson,” he answered softly, opening the door to his office and escorting me into the hallway. “And that’s a fact I’ve shared with no one else in a very, very long time.”

Names have power and I filed his away. Maybe, someday, I’d be able to use it to get the answer to my question. Magic, indeed. Neither of us spoke as he escorted me through the party and called a car to take me back to the hotel since my driver had left with instructions to return after midnight. When he handed me into one of his cars at the curb, he leaned down and whispered.

“Think about it. Come to Switzerland.”

“I’ll think about it,” I agreed and watched him gently close the door. We both knew I wouldn’t be ringing in the new year nestled by his side, but I hadn’t not seen the last of him, either. By coming to his home, I’d upped the stakes of the game.

I made it to my hotel room with no incidents and pulled out my gem glass. Using the coffee table and a bright lamp, I untied the velvet bag and dumped it onto the polished wooden surface. Diamonds of all shapes and sizes spilled out and glittered in the light. I gasped in delight and reached for the largest stone which was about the size of the end of my pinkie. Eagerly setting it against the light, I stared into the glass and started laughing.

There, laser engraved where the identification number should be, were two simple words: NICE TRY.

One by one, I sorted through the stones and felt amusement bubble into hysteria as I dropped each one back in the bag. The entire lot consisted of worthless man-made stones. Granted, they were high quality, but they weren’t diamonds.

It was no wonder Jacob Forsyth, no Tyr Thorsson, had left me alone with that paltry safe.

Maybe, just maybe, I’d go to Switzerland after all.