



# BED ME, BARON



THE BED ME BOOKS  
BOOK TWO

FELICITY NIVEN

## PRAISE FOR FELICITY NIVEN

Felicity Niven's writing is sharp and exquisite.

— JULIA QUINN, AUTHOR OF THE *BRIDGERTON*  
SERIES

With her complicated and lovable characters, achingly tender love stories, and scorching steam, Felicity Niven has quickly become one of my all-time favorite authors.

— ALEXANDRA VASTI, AUTHOR OF *NE'ER DUKE WELL* (2024) AND THE *HALIFAX HELLIONS*  
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Niven is a masterful storyteller, deftly weaving beautifully drawn characters with taut, witty prose. A sensational new voice in historical romance.

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# BED ME, BARON

## BOOK TWO OF THE BED ME BOOKS

**After twenty-two years, someone has to make a move.**

Lady Phoebe Finch has waited long enough. She's a grown woman, more than ready to be a wife and a mother. If she must give up on the man she's loved all her life, so be it. But maybe he might be willing to tutor her one last time?

Baron Danforth taught Lady Phoebe Finch to walk when she was one. He taught her chess when she was eight. He's like a big brother to her, surely. But when his dear Phoebe comes to him for bedding lessons, George Danforth must confront the truth: his best and oldest friend is not only the most alluring woman in the world but also the love of his life.

And she's engaged. To a man who's not him.

**When you've blundered everything, stalemate isn't an option.**

*Bed Me, Baron* is the second book in the steamy Regency romance series *The Bed Me Books* from author Felicity Niven.

Complete content warnings available at author's website:  
[www.felicityniven.com](http://www.felicityniven.com).

BED ME, BARON

THE BED ME BOOKS

BOOK TWO

FELICITY NIVEN

# BLETHERSKITE BOOKS

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The characters and the events in this story are fictitious.

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*To Phoebes everywhere:  
go ahead and carpe that diem.  
And to all the Georges: wake up.*

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# PROLOGUE

## 1805. DUCHY OF ABINGDON.

**G**eorge found Phoebe in the blackness of the priest hole. She wasn't afraid of the dark. Of course, she wasn't. Her name meant light. He had taught her that.

He had to stoop as he came in, holding a candle. He stifled a shudder as he sat beside her. The candlelight made the priest hole tolerable for him. Just barely.

"I've been looking for you," he said.

A sob from her.

"Why are you crying, Phee?"

"I'm not pretty!" she howled.

He let her cry for a few minutes until she got tired and began hiccupping instead.

"I don't like it when you cry. I really wish you wouldn't." An idea struck him. "See here. From now on, when you feel like crying, come to me, and I'll tell you if you really have a reason to cry or not."

She snuffled and looked at him in the flickering light.

"I'm never going to get married."

"Why do you say that?"

"Abigail said I look like a little frog and Judith and Deborah said I am ever so much shorter and fatter than they were when they were my age."

Phoebe's leap from her older sisters' comments to the conclusion that she was both ugly and condemned to spinsterhood made no sense to George. But she was only eight. And a girl. His own six-year-old sister mystified him, too.

He folded himself into a cross-legged position. "All right, Phee. I'll tell you the truth. I didn't want to because it might go to your head. You must promise not to let it."

She wiped her face with her hands, leaving dirty smudges on her round cheeks. "I promise."

"You are uncommonly pretty."

"Really?"

"Yes. And you'll have no problem getting married. You'll have a husband if you want one."

"Will you marry me, George?"

"No, of course not."

The corners of her mouth turned down and new tears began to fill her eyes and brim over.

"Stop that. You're much too young for me. You're only eight, and I'm twelve. And the lady never asks the gentleman. It must be the other way around."

She snuffled again. "That doesn't seem fair."

He shrugged. "It's the way things are."

"When I am closer to you in age, will you ask me?"

"You will never be closer to me in age, Phee. We will always be four years apart. When you are twelve, I will be sixteen and will have already met my wife."

"Yes." A tremble to her chin.

"And you can't ask me to ask you. That's the same thing as asking me."

"Yes." This was followed by a sob. And then another one. She looked down at her own lap. "I'm s-s-sorry."

“But.” He paused. Did he really want to promise this? Anything to get her to stop crying. “When we are very old, if we haven’t married anyone else, I will ask you.”

She lifted her head. “What is very old?”

“Twenty.”

“When I am twenty or you are twenty?”

“You. Twenty isn’t old for a man. But you must promise not to cry anymore.”

She stared at him. No new tears came. But George could see her nose was still running and her face looked wet and sticky and dirty all at the same time. He went into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief.

“Here.”

She took it and wiped her face and her nose. She held it out to give it back, but he shook his head.

“You keep it, Bumblephee.”

“Thank you.” She played with the corners of the handkerchief.

“Now, I have an idea. What do you say to my teaching you how to play chess this afternoon?”

“Isn’t chess for men? And very hard?” Her lower lip stuck out and her tone was petulant.

“There’s a queen in chess. If there’s already a woman in the game, it can’t be just for men,” George said.

“A queen?” Suddenly, Phoebe seemed very interested.

“Two queens. A black one and a white one. And they’re very powerful. As for chess being difficult? The rules are simple. You’ll be able to learn them this afternoon. Shall we go see if your father will let us use his chessboard in the library?”

“Yes, please, George.” She leaned over and put her lips against his cheek. A kiss.

He got up very quickly then, picking up the candle he had brought with him, careful to stay leaning over and not to bump his head on the low ceiling. He held out his other hand to her and she took it and also stood, and they made their way out of the priest hole and into the bright sunlight of the upstairs hallway.



ONE

14 YEARS LATER. JUNE, 1819.  
LONDON.

George Danforth had been out of sorts all week. The damnable thing was he had no idea why, and he had never been a man to suffer ignorance with good grace.

He paced the study of his London town house, reviewing the possible causes of his unease.

Of course, there were always the looming philosophical questions that haunted him at night when shadows gathered in the corners of both his bedchamber and his mind. Questions about his place and purpose in the world. But those worries weren't bothering him right now. In fact, they seemed rather silly and irrelevant at the moment.

There was something else unnerving him. Something new. Something pressing.

He had no financial worries. Yes, he had unexpectedly had to spend a good part of last month away from London due to some flooding in his barony. But no lives had been lost and everything had been managed as well as it could be under the circumstances.

His sister Alice, the person most likely to plague him, was being remarkably well-behaved despite having been left alone in London for some weeks. He had heard no reports of a new scandal.

He felt physically well. True, in the last few days, he hadn't slept more than a few hours a night and his appetite had been poor. But that was *because* he was out of sorts. His lack of sleep and his picking at his food were results, not causes.

He was in a fine fettle. Despite being in town, he was well able to exercise, riding early every morning on Hampstead Heath and indulging in some long bouts of fencing three afternoons a week. But this week, the pounding of his heart and the use of his muscles had brought him no respite from the mysterious, gnawing thing that kept him from sleeping and eating.

He had enjoyed *the chair*, the best chair, the perfect chair at his club over the last four days. Even today, after his weekly visit to Jack MacNaughton's bedside had put him behind time, he had managed to nab it. Frequently, George and Phineas Edge, the Earl of Burchester, competed for *the chair*. This spoke well of *the chair* since the earl was a self-proclaimed hedonist. But Phineas was currently out of town which meant George had been able to claim *the chair* easily and without any teasing from his absent friend who was also very much a rogue.

And on Monday, George had won his weekly chess match against Lady Phoebe Finch, his oldest and best friend in all the world. Handily.

Therefore, he should be in a good mood. Everything was in order, and he sought order even as he craved control. An iron grip on himself and on those matters which concerned him.

But he wasn't in a good mood.

Something was wrong.

Maybe the nagging disquiet he felt derived from the fact that his win at the chessboard on Monday hadn't been due to his own skill. Instead, it was almost certainly owing to Lady Phoebe's rather slapdash play that evening. She had been more scattered than usual, putting her fingers to her mouth several times before remembering and jerking them down.

In retrospect, it was understandable she had been preoccupied. Her surprising engagement to the Duke of Thornwick had been announced the next day. She had likely been anxious on Monday evening about the impending announcement of her nuptials.

Come to think of it, his own disagreeable mood had started the same day her betrothal was made public. Tuesday.

Peculiar.

The very beginning of a trace of an inkling of a notion started to tease at a distant corner of his mind.

*Rap-rap-rap.*

The inkling fled as he turned on his heel to stare at the door which led to the special entrance. He wasn't expecting a knock at that door. He had never had a knock at that door. The women who came through that door didn't knock.

A familiar voice said, "It's me, George."

He opened the door, and now he was even more out of sorts.

Lady Phoebe Finch was unannounced, tripping lightly into his study on a Friday afternoon. Not the right day. Not the right time.

And she had come through the special entrance that had its own staircase. The special entrance from the back garden off the alley that obviated the need for a servant to let her in. The special private entrance that only his mistresses used.

Phoebe had previously always come in through the front door of the Danforth town house, laughing with his butler Wynn, accidentally dropping her wrap or her reticule or her gloves on the floor of the hall, popping down to the kitchen to chat with Mrs. Hay and to snatch a few biscuits before coming to his study where she would leave crumbs on the carpet which he would have a chambermaid come and sweep up after she left.

Wrong day. Wrong time. Wrong entrance. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

"I want a rematch, George. Let's play." She put down her reticule and took off her gloves.

"We play chess on Mondays, Phee." He picked up her dropped glove and handed it to her.

“I know. But I thought, just once, you might indulge in a change of routine.” She untied the ribbons of her bonnet.

Once more, he picked up a glove and handed it to her. “Why? Are you busy on Monday?”

She took off her bonnet. “No, I will also come on Monday to play.”

“You want to play an extra game?”

“Yes.” She unbuttoned her silk spencer and shrugged her way out of it. “But I’d like to change the rules.”

He ignored the dropped glove this third time. He was provoked by what she had just said.

“Change the rules?” Yet another unprecedented thing. “Use some of those bizarre Italian castling rules?”

“No, I misspoke. I didn’t mean the rules of the game. I meant I’d like to lay a wager.”

“Blast, Phee, use your words precisely. A wager is entirely different from an alteration in the play of the game.”

“Calm yourself, George.”

He resumed his pacing. “I am calm. I’m just not myself this week. And I don’t know why. Maybe because it’s been so hot. It’s a puzzle.”

“Has anything happened?”

“No.”

“Nothing’s wrong with Alice, is there?”

“No. Alice is the same as usual. Alice is Alice.”

“May I sit, George?”

He noticed she was still standing.

“Phee, you know you don’t have to wait for an invitation from me. I’m such a rude fool, I’d likely leave you standing forever.”

She smiled and said teasingly, “Yes, Lord Danforth,” as she made an elaborate curtsy.

He liked to see her smile. It did lift him, take him out of himself a bit. “My only desire is that you should take your ease in my presence, Lady Phoebe.”

He bowed deeply with a flourish and his wig came off his head. He clutched at his bald pate a split-second too late.

Well, it didn't matter. If he had known Phoebe was coming, he would have already taken off the wig. But he usually wore his dark wig on a Friday at home, since it was his afternoon for his mistress and even though Lady Starling wasn't coming today, he had kept it on since, after all, it was still Friday whether his mistress came or not.

But Phoebe saw him without the wig more often than she saw him with it. He had known her since she was born, after all. He still remembered meeting her as a baby for the first time, leaning over her basket.

She had been the bald one then, and he had sported a full head of dark-brown curls. How he missed those curls. Because by the time he was eighteen and had become the Baron Danforth in the wake of his father's death, his curls had already started to thin. And now, eight years later, he was completely bald. She on the other hand had the same thick, long, dark-blond tresses—albeit now pinned up—that she had started growing after shedding her wisps of baby hair.

He had taken to wearing a wig when he was twenty-two. But he never wore one when he played chess in his study. Or when he wrote his speeches for the House of Lords or worked on one of his etymological monographs. He thought better without a wig, some notion of air getting to his brain.

He picked the wig up off the floor and put it on his desk. He'd take it to his valet Morton after Lady Phoebe left.

She had assumed her seat in her usual chair.

“Shall I ring for some tea or sherry, Bumblephee? Surely some biscuits?”

She rocked back and forth a little. “I'd rather you didn't. In fact, I'd rather no one else know that I'm here.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yes. Mother thinks I went to Lady Huxley’s whist party early with your sister. I didn’t lie, exactly. I just misled her.”

Odder and odder. Phoebe was exceptionally transparent. It was one of his few advantages when playing chess against her. He always knew when she was three or fewer moves away from a planned check. He could sense her excitement no matter how hard she tried to hide it.

How strange she should mislead her mother. Why couldn’t Phoebe just have said she was coming for a game? Even though her mother frowned on their chess matches, her father would have allowed it.

Well, no matter. The opportunity to get an extra game with his most dangerous opponent? It more than made up for the fact that his mistress was out of town. If George Danforth had been a demonstrative man, he would have rubbed his hands together in glee.

But he wasn’t. Instead, he put the chess table in place and began to arrange the pieces on the board.

“What’s this wager then?”

“If you win, you can have my copy of the first edition of Cawdrey’s *Table Alphabeticall* that Great-Uncle Seth left me.”

“I can?” He had coveted that book for years. “What if you win?”

She studied the pattern of the carpet. “You will bed me.”

There was a silence. George could hear a far distant clanging in the alley behind the town house. Some coal for the kitchen being delivered, perhaps. Or ice.

“I will what?”

“Bed me.” She raised her head and met his eyes. “You will take me to your bed. Now. This afternoon. Immediately after the game.”

He collapsed into his own wing chair.

“I know this afternoon is the time your mistress usually comes to you. But I also know Lady Starling is not in town at

present. Perhaps bedding me might be a substitute so your routine will be less disrupted than usual.”

His breath was gone. His mind was blank.

“I’ll give you draw odds, George.”

When they played chess, White always went first. Draw odds meant she would play White but, as Black, a draw would count as a win in his favor.

He said nothing, still not really able to comprehend her proposal. Her lewd bet. The odds she was offering him.

She shifted in her chair. “Fine. Pawn and move, then.”

This meant he would play White and she would give up a Black pawn before the start of play.

“Phee.” He coughed. “I don’t understand.”

“You know I announced my engagement this week.”

“Yes.”

She clasped her hands together tightly, something he knew she did when ungloved to keep her fingernails out of her own mouth. “I suddenly realized I know nothing about pleasing my future husband in the marital bed.”

Oh. Foolish girl.

He leaned forward. “Phee. That is usual. In fact, it is assumed and considered desirable.”

She raised her head and stared at him levelly. “It’s not desirable for me, George. You know I hate not knowing how to do something.”

That was true. Phoebe didn’t like to fail. It was what made her such a worthy rival.

She stood. “I need bedding lessons. You are the logical person to give them to me. What do you say to the wager?”

“You must give me a moment, Phee.”

She smiled even as her voice betrayed her with a slight quaver. “Yes, I suppose it’s a bit like Sir Josiah asking you to bed him.”



Sir Josiah Bastable was George's standing Wednesday night chess game. He was, if it were possible, an even slower and more methodical player than George himself. Sir Josiah was also well over fifty, portly, and had breath that chronically reeked of onions.

She went on. "Although I do like to think I probably rank higher than Sir Josiah in your choice of bed partners."

Of course, she did. But was that truly the standard by which she measured herself? *Oh, Phee.*

She lifted one foot and brought it down with a small thud on the carpet. Was that an impatient stamp from his little Phoebe?

"Fine," she said. "Pawn and two moves."

Phoebe would lose a pawn and he would play White and make the first two moves in a row.

He was silent.

"Knight odds," she offered, her expression stony. This meant she would lose a knight before play even started. She stood in front of him, fidgeting with her fingers, waiting.

"Give me queen odds." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wanted to claw them back. Had he lost all sense of himself? All sense of *her*?

Wait. There was no need for panic. He took a deep breath. Queen odds was an extremely safe bet for him. They were a well-matched pair at chess, despite her impulsive daring and his considered caution. If Lady Phoebe had no queen, he should beat her easily. The rare first edition dictionary would be his. There would be no bedding of his best and oldest friend.

"Fine," she said and resumed her seat.

She was queenless but as the odds giver, she was White and went first.

Very quickly, George lost his surety that he would win. Even with no queen, Phoebe's play was nimble. He, on the other hand, seemed to be playing in a heavy fog, one that

confused him and twisted his thoughts. *He* was the one that was distracted today.

Because now when Phoebe moved a piece on the board, he saw her hand and thought of those fingers—with their nails she had worked so hard to grow—clutching at his back as he lay atop her, thrusting into her.

He was vile. Vile.

He looked only once at her face during the game. He saw two strands of her dark blonde hair which had escaped her hairpins, her serious mouth, her pink cheeks, and he was adrift in a sea of fantasy that involved her hair tumbling down completely, her mouth moaning in ecstasy, her cheeks flushing a deep red.

It was madness.

And then she looked up at him, fierce and angry about something, her brown eyes boring into him, and he had to close his own eyes and when he opened them again, he made sure to look at the chessboard and only at the chessboard.

Utter madness.

She was the most aggressive she'd ever been in the game, attacking him relentlessly, fearlessly, her pawns brutally battering his king into submission.

She won.

Of course, she did. The real question was—did he let her? He didn't think so.

He finally looked at her again as she checkmated him. Her face was still creased with anger, an emotion he wasn't used to seeing there, especially after she had won.

She leaned back in her chair and steepled her fingers.

“I didn't know I was so unattractive.”

“What? You're not—”

“You offered me a handicap that guaranteed you were almost certain to win, George. You must be very averse to bedding me.”

He wondered if he should reveal that he thought he might have, without meaning to, let her win. But he couldn't do that without insulting her chess play which had been brilliant and ruthless this afternoon in a way that his own had never been and never could be.

And he knew it wasn't true. He hadn't let her win. He just had not been capable of winning today.

He leaned back in his chair and steepled his own fingers, mirroring her. Surely, she had learned that unfeminine pose from him since he had assumed it so often during her chess lessons when they were children.

"There are two alternate theories. First, you are such a good player that even queen odds could not prevent your win. My mistake was not making your handicap more severe, say queenside odds." Phoebe would have lost all her pieces on the side of the queen, save her pawns.

She let out a little snort of disbelief.

"My other theory as to why I might have lost is that you are . . . uh . . . actually *too* enticing and the gentleman in question—that is, me—was preoccupied by the possibility of what might happen after the game."

Phoebe tilted her head and scrutinized him. "Your play *was* poor today. Did you lose on purpose?"

"I don't think so."

"But you're not sure?"

"I must wonder. But I remind you that I lost even after you gave me queen odds. And I assure you that whatever the cause—your skill, my preoccupation with the outcome, my possible secret wish to lose—all only reflect on you in the most complimentary manner."

He thought now she would laugh and tell him this had been an ever-so-good joke on him. She'd say his sister Alice had put her up to this prank. Phoebe was unpredictable at times; one more reason why she was such a good chess player. Given her frank and honest nature, a drawn-out joke like this would be a stretch for her, but not an impossibility. Yes, now

she would giggle and gloat over her win and get up and go out the door, leaving behind one of her gloves and he would have to put it in his desk drawer until she returned on Monday for their regular game. When she would leave a different glove behind.

But no.

She stood suddenly. "Let's go into your bedchamber."

This was no joke.

George's mind floated free, detached. It watched his body stand and walk and open the door that connected his study to the room where he slept. And where he bedded his mistresses.

## TWO

George observed Phoebe take in the details of his bedchamber. She gazed at the chair he used when he couldn't sleep but was too tired to go into the study next door, the large bed with its fawn velvet canopy and curtains, the bright lamp next to the bed with the extra oil reservoir so it could be lit at all hours of the day and night, the portrait of his beautiful dark-eyed French mother and besotted father that had been painted shortly after they were married.

He suddenly realized that although she had spent every Monday night during the Season in his study next door for the last eight years, Phoebe had never been in his bedchamber.

Of course not. The Monday night games were, in and of themselves, highly irregular, rarely spoken of outside their families, and only allowed by the Duke of Abingdon because of George's friendship to Phoebe since her infancy. George was like a brother to her. But even her rather permissive father would have barred her from ever being in this room. And he knew her mother disapproved of the chess games entirely. And, perhaps, of him.

Phoebe turned from his parents' portrait and faced him. "I don't have much time. What shall we do first? Will you undress me?"

Had he agreed to this?

The irrefutable and definitive answer was yes.

Yes, he had.

George was a man of his word. He had taken the wager. He had proposed the crippling odds that had not crippled Phoebe in the least. Now, he would have to pay the forfeit.

His wits slid back into his body as he scrambled to find a way out of his predicament. Shockingly, his mind came up empty even as his cock began to fill with blood.

“Well, traditionally, I would think,” he said, his throat suddenly tight, his voice hoarse, “one might start with kissing.”

“Oh, good.” She looked relieved. “I’d like to try that first. Go ahead, George. Kiss me.”

He stared at her mouth which suddenly looked like the most fragile of roses. Delicate and lush, at the same time. Full-blown. One touch and a petal would fall.

These were lips he usually saw compressed in a thin line as she considered the position of the pieces on the chessboard. Or moving rapidly as she recounted some madcap tale his own sister had told her. Or smiling apologetically when she came into his study late on Monday evenings and saw him sitting, tapping his foot impatiently, waiting for her.

Now, the lips were waiting to be kissed. They were pale and pink and plump.

Perfect.

He almost laughed. Perfect was not a word he had ever thought of associating with Lady Phoebe Finch. Her defining quality was her lack of perfection. Her hair that always escaped its pins, her nails that she used to chew down to nubs out of nervousness, her petticoats that hung down below the hems of her dresses, and her inability to show up for anything on time, a habit that drove him mad.

But her lips were perfect.

He started slowly, carefully, standing several inches away from her, leaning down, kissing those perfect lips with only the lightest of pressures.

Her face was tilted up to him, her eyes closed. She was no doubt imagining the Duke of Thornwick, her betrothed, in George's place. That stirred something in him. Something dark and ugly and angry that had no place in his kisses with his best and oldest friend. He pushed the darkness away and made sure his kisses remained tender. Circumspect. Almost brotherly. Although he would never kiss his sister this way.

He was surprised to feel her arms around his neck and when he ended one of his light kisses, she held his head down and pressed her own lips against his. Hard. Hungry. Demanding.

He pulled away, breaking her grasp on his neck.

Her big brown eyes opened as her arms fell to her sides. "I just." She was gasping a bit. "Wanted to kiss you back."

"I see." He felt he needed to be stern. He was the tutor here, after all. The senior. The one with experience. And besides, sternness was his usual mode of expression. "Your future husband might like that. He might not. You will have to gauge. The safest course is to do nothing and only receive what he gives you. Don't give, just receive."

Her face fell. "Oh." Then, "Did you like it, George?"

"It doesn't matter what I like, Phee."

"It does to me. I don't want you to regret giving me a lesson. After all, you are sacrificing your Friday afternoon."

A good teacher was honest with his pupil. And his member had throbbed with the unexpected ardor of her kiss.

"I liked it," he said. Unsmiling.

She turned her head on its side. "I liked it, too. May I do it again?" She put her hands up as if to throw her arms around his neck as she had before.

"No. Let me." He put his arms around her waist and drew her to him. Oh, how delightfully soft her short, curved body was. How perfectly she molded to him. Those warm breasts. How could he have never noticed her breasts before?

Come now, that was a lie. Of course, he had noticed her breasts before. When he was sixteen and obsessed with breasts and she was twelve and had just started budding. He remembered selfishly wishing her breasts would grow faster. And then she was thirteen and her breasts were more than buds. They were beautiful. Large in comparison to her height. Just slightly smaller than croquet balls.

But he had spent thirteen years acting like an older brother to her. He had scolded himself for letting his gaze linger. He had felt full of shame on the mornings he awoke after having spent in his sheets while dreaming of touching her breasts. Oddly, in his dreams, her breasts were not attached to her head or the rest of her body. But they were definitely her breasts. Or what he had imagined her breasts to be.

Thankfully, at age eighteen, just after he had become the Baron Danforth, he had had his first experience with an older woman and had been able to banish the young Lady Phoebe Finch from the part of his brain that managed his cock. With a great deal of success. Until this afternoon.

Because now her breasts were larger than croquet balls. But, of course, a great deal softer than croquet balls. When had that circumferential growth happened?

Her gown today was as modest as always, but her bosom had pushed up when he had pulled her to his own torso. Looking down, he could see the gorgeous shadow between her breasts which only served to highlight her voluptuousness. He raised his head and her face was there, inches from his. She was looking at him looking down at her breasts.

He kissed her then as he would kiss his mistress. A hard kiss to match his cock that pressed against her. Again, he felt her arms on his shoulders, her hands on his neck. And now the hands moved upward and slid over his pate.

This was a completely new sensation. No woman had ever touched his bald head.

Phoebe must be thinking of the Duke of Thornwick who sported a full head of golden curls. She was imagining running her fingers through Thornwick's hair as she kissed George.



With that thought, he was overcome by the bestial darkness he had felt before. Now he let his hard kiss become a savage one and he forced his tongue into her mouth and clenched his fingers into her back, clamping her body against his with an even greater force.

She did not pull away from the invasion of his tongue or the tightening of his grip but made a little noise that sounded suspiciously like a yelp.

He broke the kiss. Her eyes were still closed.

“Oh, George,” she moaned. “Oh, George, do that again.”

“You cried out, Phee.”

She opened her eyes but her hands kept caressing his head. He almost wanted to moan himself with pleasure. *Oh, my God.*

Phoebe bit her lip. “I was surprised, that’s all. But if you do it again, I won’t be surprised and I’ll be quiet, I promise.”

He grunted. “Some men like their women to make noises.”

“Do you like noises?”

He grunted again, a sound that might be yes or no. In truth, he loved a woman to voice her arousal. Not the overblown, false shrieks of whores but the little sounds a woman seeking her own satisfaction might make. How else was he to know he was pleasing her before he stripped her down and got a feel or a glimpse of her quim? His own arousal was evident even while clothed, straining his trousers, but women needed to give clues, damn it.

“May I?” She took one of her hands off his head and placed it between their bodies. What the devil? She put her hand over the very evident arousal pushing at the fall of his trousers. “I want to feel it.”

He took a deep breath. He knew his height, his build, and his grave mien were intimidating to most people. Could he intimidate Phoebe? He spoke harshly. “Take your hand away.”

“Oh.” She looked disappointed, but she did as he said. “You didn’t like it. I thought maybe you would since I could feel it was hard against my stomach.”

He cleared his throat. Their bodies were still together, his arms around her. She had returned the hand that had grasped his cock back to his head, and she continued to touch his scalp with long delicious strokes of her fingertips and then her palms rubbing and then her fingertips again. Involuntarily, his neck relaxed and he began rolling his head, following her hands.

Her touch was irresistible. Against his will, his eyes went to half-mast. “You know then . . . about a man’s . . . organ?”

“I know it gets hard when a man is aroused and it goes inside the woman when he beds her.”

“Yes.” His eyes were closed all the way now. What a sheer, unadulterated delight this was. He did not frequent brothels, preferring a series of mistresses, but he thought he might pay a visit to Madame Flora’s soon if only to pay a whore to rub his head.

“But men don’t like women to touch it.”

His eyes popped open. “What makes you say that?”

She faltered. “Y-you told me to take my hand off of it.”

He growled. “Your husband will not want you grabbing his cock on your wedding night. He’ll think you’re a trollop and will lose all respect for you.”

“Do you think I’m a trollop, George?” she whispered and stilled her hands on his pate.

Damn. How was he going to get her to keep stroking his head? “Of course not, Phee. But I know you. Your future husband doesn’t. I know you are just a curious young woman who wants to be prepared.”

She smiled and resumed rubbing and tickling his scalp. *Thank God.*

“So when my husband gets to know me better, he won’t mind my grabbing his cock?”

“Phoebe!” Where did she learn to say such filth? And what did it mean that his own cock throbbed even more intensely when he heard her say that word?

“Oh, George.” Could she be purring? “I was just repeating what you said.”

He was going to have to be careful. “Don’t use that word with your husband.”

She fluttered her lashes. “What word should I use?”

“None.”

Phoebe stopped mid-flutter and looked at him with narrowed eyes as if he had taken his king out too early. “None?”

“You should not acknowledge the existence of his organ.”

“But what about . . . ?” She took her arms off his shoulders, her hands off his skull, and he almost whimpered from the loss of her touch. And George Danforth was not a man who whimpered. Ever.

She stepped away, breaking his grip on her back, and all he could think about was how he was going to get her back in the circle of his arms so he could coax those magical hands back up to his scalp again. He almost didn’t care she was imagining Thornwick’s curls as she rubbed his own loathsome, bald head. Almost.

She went on. “But what about when he beds me and wants to put it in me? Won’t I have to acknowledge it then?”

“No.”

She tilted her head. “I am to have it inside me and never talk about it? Not even to say something like, ‘What a large organ you have, Your Grace?’”

He laughed.

She was bewildered. “Isn’t that what men want to hear?”

He laughed harder. George had been told many times, especially by Phineas Edge, that he was a humorless man, far too serious, couldn’t tell or take a joke. Hell, couldn’t understand a joke. George almost never laughed and now he couldn’t stop laughing. He was bent over, breath gone, his knees weak.

Because his Phoebe would never say that to Thornwick. Never. After all, he had seen Thornwick's rather puny organ himself while bathing at the shore in Brighton. True, all men diminished in the cold sea, but Thornwick's penis had been noticeably small.

And Phoebe could no more give false praise than she could cheat at chess.

He felt dizzy and yet he could not stop laughing. He stumbled over to the bed and collapsed on it. Tears were streaming down his face.

"I think you're a trifle hysterical." Phoebe was standing over him, frowning, her arms folded over her beautiful bosom that he had noticed this afternoon for the first time in eight years.

Finally, he quieted. His abdominal muscles actually hurt from laughing so hard. He caught his breath but stayed lying on his side.

"Men can't be hysterical."

"You just were."

"The word derives from the Greek *hystera* which means \_\_\_"

"Womb. I know, George. I don't need entomology lessons from you. I need bedding lessons."

With that, she reached down and put her hand directly over the bulge in his trousers.

He willed himself to shove her hand away. But he did not. And why should he? He had already told her the important thing—she should not do that with Thornwick.

He groaned.

Without moving her hand, she disappeared from his field of vision. He felt the mattress move under him, and he knew she had gotten on the bed behind him. He felt her breath on his neck, the heat of her body on his back. Her arm still reached over his hip and her hand cupped his member.

“I’m watching the clock just like you, for once. And I thought I should hurry us along. You are not as hard as you were before. We are going backward, not forward.”

“Etymology.” His voice was strained.

“Pardon?” She was squeezing his cock. “Good. You’re getting very hard again.”

“Entomology is the study of insects. Etymology is the study of the origin of words. Just remember,” he shuddered involuntarily, “*ent* is like *ant*. An ant is an insect. *Entomology* equals insects.”

“Oh, George.” Her voice was husky and her mouth was very near his ear. “You’re a natural teacher. No wonder I came to you for my bedding lesson.”

“Were there—” His voice caught. He licked his lips. “Were there any other contenders?”

“Am I doing this right?”

“Squeezing is fine. But primarily,” he gulped and then lowered his voice, “what is wanted is friction.”

“Friction?” She loosened her grip and began to rub up and down over his shaft through his trousers.

And now, wonderfully, miraculously, her other hand was touching his scalp again.

*How am I ever going to top this experience? A beautiful woman rubbing both my heads at the same time?*

And not just any beautiful woman. A beautiful woman who loved him. And whom he had loved her entire life. And that thought gave him enough strength to take her hand off his cock and turn over on the bed to face her, still holding her wrist. Blessedly, her other hand stayed on his head, skimming his scalp lightly.

Phoebe was lying on her side as he was, and her pupils were very large, their inky darkness almost overtaking the brown irises.

He didn't wait for her to ask. "I didn't want to get too aroused, too early."

"Is that a problem?"

"The younger the man, yes. The older the man, the opposite problem is true."

She smiled. "So you are a young man."

He growled. "I'm only four years older than you, Phee. And I need to keep my head clear for your lesson."

"Oh, George." Her own voice was breathy.

"*Oh, George* what?"

"Will you kiss me that way again? The way you did before? And put your tongue in my mouth?" She laced her fingers into his and pulled him toward her even as she kept stroking the top of his head with her other hand.

"Only if you answer my question."

"What question? Oh. Oh, yes." She smiled. "No, there were no other contenders to be my bedding tutor. You're my teacher, my oldest friend. Of course, I came to you."

Even as he felt reassured that she thought he was the obvious person to teach her about coitus, he wondered why the devil she was marrying the Duke of Thornwick. She was still much too young to get married. Wasn't she?

"Now kiss me, George."

He kissed her. She opened her lips immediately to the touch of his.

*This is stupid. This whole idea of a lesson. If she does that with Thornwick, he will immediately know she's kissed someone before. I need to stop this.*

But her mouth, her lips, her hands felt so wonderful. He told himself he deserved just a little more. He may not get to marry the suddenly enticing Lady Phoebe Finch, but there was not a cat in hell's chance he was going to give up kissing her when she was lying on his bed, doing the asking.

Her tongue chased his, probing his mouth, reaching out to run over his lips. Minutes passed as he tasted her mouth and she tasted his, over and over again. Each kiss he swore would be the last. And each kiss demanded another one. That sweetness. Those lips. That exploring tongue.

They were no longer holding hands. She continued to rub his head with one hand but her movements had become rougher, more frenzied. Her other hand was groping his buttock, pulling his pelvis into hers. He had a hand on her bottom and a hand on her breast, and he didn't know when that had happened.

And now he was on top of her and, oh, oh, oh, both of her hands were on his head again, and he was grinding his cock into her and she was mewling into his mouth and pushing her hips up against him.

She took both of his ears in her hands and pulled his head away from her own.

“George,” she said.

Her pink lips were no longer pink. They were red and swollen and even more perfect than before. Which was contrary, of course, to the whole notion of perfection since perfect was, by definition, an absolute and could not have a comparative or superlative form.

“George. Let's take our clothes off.”

## THREE

George did not trust himself to speak. He first got off of Phoebe and then off of the bed, swallowing his groan. His cock and bollocks were aching.

She sat up, her hair falling down from her hairpins.

His shoes had come away from his feet sometime during their prolonged kissing session on the bed. He took off his tailcoat and waistcoat and untied his cravat and unbuttoned two buttons at the top of his shirt. Then he gripped the shirt and took it up and over his head.

He heard a noise like a long exhale and realized Phoebe had not yet moved from the bed. She was not taking off her own clothes. She was sitting and watching him, her mouth open.

“Goodness.” Her tongue darted out and ran over her lips. “George, you’re beautiful.”

He grunted. Some very male noise of denial, he hoped. His face felt warm. “Men aren’t beautiful.”

“Oh, no, you’re wrong.” She hopped off the bed and took a few steps toward him. “You’re wrong, dear teacher, dear friend.” And then her fingers were running over his abdomen, his chest, his shoulders, his arms. “Look, you have hair here. And you’re so hard. All these muscles. Did you get all these just from riding? You’re like some delicious village blacksmith.”

“Like some delicious blacksmith? Who have you been talking to?”



She looked up at him, her hands squeezing his biceps. “To whom, George. To whom have I been talking. You’re the one that taught me that. And I’ve been talking to your sister, for one.” She slid her hands back up to his shoulders.

He tried to keep his voice gruff. “My sister knows nothing about village blacksmiths, Phoebe. I would advise you to ignore her. And you better hurry up. I think you’re wearing more clothes than I am.”

“I want to see your cock first.”

Again, that word in her mouth. He did not think he could get any harder, but he did.

He unbuttoned the fall on his trousers. As he did so, she backed up and sat on the edge of the bed again, her eyes fixed on his hands at his fall.

There, his shaft was out, straining upwards, begging for release. And his trousers were at his ankles and he was stepping out of them. He looked at her face.

She was looking at his cock with her head tilted. There was a little vertical crease above her nose, between her brows. That was the crease that showed up whenever he checked her during a game.

He waited.

“Can I?” The crease got deeper but her eyes did not waver from his member and she reached out. He stepped forward and she wrapped her hand around his shaft and his breath caught in his chest. *Oh, yes.*

“It’s very hard,” she said. “But the skin is very smooth and satiny.”

“Yes.”

“May I give it some friction now?”

“I think you had better not.”

“All right.” She released him and looked up at his face. “Do you want to undress me?”

“Which would be more difficult for you? For Thornwick,” he swallowed down the rising bile at her future husband’s name, “to undress you or for you to undress yourself in front of him?”

“Oh,” she said and blushed and looked away. “For me to undress myself in front of him.”

He blinked but kept his voice even, neutral. “Then that is what you had better do. In front of me. For practice.”

Her face was still red. “All right.” She kicked off her shoes and rolled down her hose while still sitting on the edge of the bed. What lovely rounded calves and trim little ankles she had.

She got off the bed and stood in front of him. As she reached behind her back to undo her buttons on her dress, he had to resist stroking his member as he watched her.

But he felt he should warn her.

“Do not be upset if your future husband touches himself while he looks at you.” His voice was louder than he had intended.

As her dress popped over her head, she gaped at him, astonished. He noted how beautiful she looked with her dark-gold hair mussed, her red lips swollen, wearing only her stays, chemise, and petticoat.

This was a husband’s view of her. He was the first man ever to see it.

Again, the darkness enveloped his mind. The Duke of Thornwick—he of the puny cock, the yellow curls—would be able to see her like this every day for the rest of his life.

“Why would he be touching himself? Shouldn’t I be the one doing that?” She threw her dress down and stepped toward George and grasped his member again.

Oh, oh, oh. *Steady now.*

“It can be difficult for a man to restrain himself when he is aroused. And I am sure he will be aroused looking at you.”

*After all, I am, Phee. I very much am. Even without you grabbing my cock. Damn it, why wasn't I aroused like this a year ago? What am I saying, a year ago? Hell, how about last week? Before you agreed to marry Thornwick?*

“Show me what to do with my hand, George.”

“No.” He grabbed her wrist. “Let go.” She did.

“Then with my mouth.”

“No!”

The violence of his response made her take a step back. For the first time today, she looked frightened. The answer to his earlier question—could he intimidate his little Phoebe?—was yes.

He released her wrist and tried to make his voice soothing as he had after he had beaten her with the Fool's Mate when she was nine. “Your husband will expect to show you things, Phee.”

She squared her shoulders and stuck out her chin. “I want *you* to show me, George. That's the whole point of this. I don't want to be nervous. I want to know things. How to please my husband. What if—” She gulped. “What if he laughs at me? He's so intimidating. He's a duke.”

He sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled the counterpane over his shaft and gestured with his arms. “Come here, Phee.”

She walked over and he snugged his arm around her waist and put her onto his now safely covered lap.

“Your own father is a duke, Phee.” He permitted his hand to edge off her stays-encased waist to the unconstrained soft curve of her hip under her petticoat. His thumb stroked the top of her leg.

“I know. But my father, well, he's Papa. He has to love me and do what's best for me. Thornwick doesn't. And Thornwick is . . .” She paused. Was that a shudder? “I should think he has very high standards.”

“You call him Thornwick? Not Arthur?”

“He hasn’t told me to call him anything yet.”

“How did you accept him? When he asked you to marry him?”

“Yes, please, Your Grace.”

“What?” He couldn’t help it. He smiled and almost laughed.

Her face was serious. “I said, ‘Yes, please, Your Grace.’”

He shook his head. “Well, Thornwick or Arthur or His Grace, all of them should have to love you and do what’s best for you. That is the function of a husband.”

Now it was her turn to smile.

“Oh, George, that is so sweet,” she chortled.

He was perturbed. “What’s so funny?”

She put her hands to his head and stroked his pate as she giggled. And again, he couldn’t help relaxing into her touch. He hadn’t known how much he longed for someone to tend to this contemptible part of himself that he kept covered so much of the time.

She nuzzled her face into his neck.

“I just love how you smell, George, and I can’t seem to stop touching you.”

“That’s . . . good.”

“Do you promise to show me everything? Teach me everything?”

“No.”

She took her hands off his head and got off his lap. “That’s not fair!”

“I want your appetites to guide you, Phee, not mine, not . . . anybody else’s.” He had been about to say Thornwick’s name but he had almost gagged with the attempt. “If you want to know about something, I will attempt to teach you, but I am not going to demonstrate an erotic encyclopedia from A to Zed for you.”

She glared at him, her hands on her hips.

“Forgive me, Phee. This is more difficult than I anticipated. I find myself having a hard time concentrating.”

A devilish smile twitched her lips as she looked down at his counterpane-covered lap. “Yes, evidently a very hard time.”

He countered her smile with a frown. “Let us do one thing at a time. Right now, you are undressing. Then we will get in the bed, and I will attempt to show you what you want to know.”

Her smile faded. She turned her head on its side again. How bewitching that little head tilt was. Did she know it? Did Thornwick know it? Had she looked askance at him in just that way when he had proposed?

“I don’t know enough to ask for the right things. For example, I didn’t know men put their tongues in women’s mouths until you did it to me.”

Suddenly, he was filled with guilt. She was such an innocent. What was he doing? And now she was near him and her hands were on his head again.

“And I didn’t know how much I would want to touch your head. I don’t know why, but rubbing you here,” her hands dragged more slowly and her voice became very soft, “makes me ache down there.” And she ducked her head, using her chin to point to her groin.

His guilt fled, vanquished by her hands on his head, her whispered confession. “Truly?”

She nodded. She leaned down and spoke directly in his ear. “I’m all achy and pulsing.” She straightened up and shifted her weight back and forth between her feet. “Is that to be expected?”

“I think so. Are you achy and pulsing right now?”

“Yes.”

He hated to have her take his hands from his head but being a teacher meant sacrifices had to be made for the good

of the pupil.

“Turn around.”

She did as he asked and indeed it proved impossible for her to keep petting his scalp with her back to him. He reached from his seated position and untied the knot at the bottom of her stays. He began loosening the lace.

“Oh,” he heard her say.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just surprised you know how to do this.”

She was surprised? But she knew he had experience. Otherwise, what good would he be as a teacher? And from what she had said earlier, she knew he had mistresses and Lady Starling was his current *inamorata*. His sister Alice must have told her. Damn Alice and her gossiping tongue.

But what did Phoebe think he did with his mistresses? Play chess?

*No, idiot. She knows that’s what you do with her.*

“You don’t have to unlace them all the way.” She stepped away from him and pulled the stays over her head. Still facing away from him, Phoebe removed her chemise and as he stared at the flawless milk-white skin of her bare back, she fumbled with something at her waist and dropped her petticoat to the floor.

Now he was looking at simply the most gorgeous bottom he had ever seen. He had anticipated seeing her breasts ever since he had grabbed and pulled her to him for that first tongue kiss. But given how little information was revealed about a gowned woman’s body below her waist, he had not predicted her bottom. Yes, perhaps he should have been prepared since he had groped a buttock through her dress while kissing her on the bed before, but the visual?

It was spectacular.

The barest hint of a dimple above each cheek on her lower back, framing the inward curve of her spine. Then a pouty pair of perfectly smooth and creamy globes. Protuberant in the

most enticing of ways. Like the most delicious fruit. Sharp demarcations between her buttocks and her thighs that faded as the lines moved out toward her hips. And those thighs, wonderfully fleshy as the most beautiful women's legs were. Round and thick and luscious to match her bottom. But his eyes were drawn, irresistibly, back up to her cheeks. He longed to sink his hands, his teeth, his soul into that bottom.

Then she turned around and he mourned the disappearance of her backside even as he gloried in the front of her body. A sweetly curving abdomen leading to the triangle of her light brown maidenhair that covered the pulsing ache she had told him about. And her breasts—those succulent, larger-than-croquet-ball-sized orbs. Now he could see they were round and high, crowned with large pink areolae and plump nipples that begged for a mouth. His mouth.

Finally, he ripped his eyes from her body to look at her face. She was biting her lip, worried. The little crease between her eyebrows was back. Her whole body had a very fine tremble.

He cursed himself. He had been indulging his own base appetites and not tending to her as he should.

She spoke first. "Do I look all right, George?"

Again, a teacher owed his pupil honesty. And honest praise. "You're beautiful, Phoebe."

Her whole face changed. The crease disappeared. A pink blush tinted her face, her neck, the tops of her breasts.

"Really? I am to your taste?"

"You would be to any man's taste, Phee. You are magnificent."

"Really?"

He moved the counterpane off his lap and showed her his hardened shaft.

"When a man is this hard with no touch, just looking, it means the woman is exceptionally arousing."

The pink on her face veered toward red.

“Let’s get into bed, Phee.” He raised the counterpane and slid into the bed himself and toward the far side of the mattress, holding up the coverings so she could get in after him.

She scrambled into the bed and clutched the counterpane eagerly, bringing it up over her breasts until it was just under her chin.

“Are you cold, Phee?” He was up on his elbow, next to her, observing her.

“No, I’m hot. After all, it’s June.” A pause. “I feel shy.”

“That’s fine. Your husband will expect some timidity.” Again, the thought of Thornwick in bed with Phoebe made him want to cast up his accounts. He pushed the nauseating thought away. “I’d like to touch you. Would that be all right?”

“Oh, yes, George.” She practically cooed. “Please touch me.”

He started by running his hand over each one of her shoulders, then her upper arms, then her upper chest. When he moved his hand down under the counterpane to one of her breasts, she shuddered. Oh, oh, with just the lightest brush of his fingers, her nipple was puckering under his touch. He gently folded the counterpane down. Oh, yes, those lovely breasts with the even lovelier shell-pink areolae and the loveliest of dark-pink nipples, one flat right now, the other poking up so seductively from his light stimulation. Now he brushed the other nipple and was delighted to see it become as erect as its twin. He seized the closest breast with his hand, kneading it and bringing his mouth to the peak. As he suckled there and swirled his tongue over the already hard nub, he heard her gasp, and then moan as she rubbed his head.

“Oh, George.”

He didn’t like women talking during lovemaking. Sounds, yes. Words, no. Words were for another part of his brain. Words distracted from his animalistic pleasure. But suddenly, his name in her mouth was the most powerful aphrodisiac in



the world. He released her breast and leaned over and suckled at the other breast, hoping to make her say his name again.

She didn't. However, her moan became more high-pitched and fervent, her hands moving more quickly over his scalp. Just as he began to nibble, she spoke.

“Do you think the duke will like my breasts, too?”

He raised his head, surprised, letting her breast pop from his mouth. He was so lost in his delight in her bosom, the feel of her hands on his head, his desire to make her say his name again, he had almost forgotten what this was about.

Her hand moved off his head and slid between their bodies. She grasped his cock.

“Show me how to move my hand on your sex now.”

He kissed her breast and murmured, “Not yet, Phee. First, I'm going to touch *your* sex.”

She gasped as she let go of him. He could hear her gulp even as he peppered the flesh of her breasts with tiny kisses. “You are? Is that something husbands do?”

He looked at her and met her eyes with the steeliest gaze he could muster. “A good husband does.”

“Yes, George.”

He couldn't resist lunging and kissing her mouth. Again, he was startled by how perfect her lips were.

He brushed her soft, rounded abdomen with his fingertips. She shivered under his touch. Before he could ask, she said, “No, I'm not cold. I'm excited. By you, George.”

His cock twitched. “By me?” He moved his hand down to her thigh and cupped her there.

“You're the one in bed with me.” She moved her legs apart slightly. He ran his fingertips down the delicate skin of her inner thigh to her knee.

“It's very warm under this counterpane, Phee.”

“Yes.”

“Would you mind if I looked at you?”

She met his eyes boldly. “Not if you don’t mind me looking at you.”

He pulled the counterpane off of both of them and threw it on the floor and then returned his hand to her maidenhair. “I want to find that achy, pulsing place.”

Watching her face, he put a finger against the seam of her mound. She formed an O with her lips, and as he put one of his legs over hers, she spread herself open to his hand.

She was hot to the touch. Her folds were silky and dewed. He brushed her little berry and it was already hard and the O of her mouth transformed into the most wicked smile he had ever seen from her.

She inhaled sharply through that smile. “Oh, George. Oh, oh, oh.” She reached for his head, pulling him down as she strained upward off the mattress, her lips hungry, her tongue searching. It was the most erotic kiss of his lifetime as she lapped against the inside of his mouth and rubbed his head with such a frenzy he thought she might rub his scalp off.

Then her body arched into him.

Was it possible she was climaxing already? He had been so focused on his own sensation, he had not noticed that her berry had become even harder and more prominent under his rubbing finger, but yes, her hands were clutching his head as she spasmed against him and she was—could he call it grunting? It was more of a huff. A delightful little voiced exhalation against his mouth.

“Huh . . . huh . . . huh.”

He wanted to capture that huff and bottle it.

He took his hand away from her mound and wrapped his arm around her and eased her back to the mattress slowly.

Her eyes were closed. She was turning her head from side to side as if she were saying *no* and sliding her hands again over his skull.

“Oh, George. Oh, oh, oh.”

“Yes, Phee.”

“Oh, George.”

Her lashes fluttered and she looked up at him.

“Oh. George.”

He chuckled. He leaned down and kissed her shoulder.

She sighed. “What was that?”

“What do you mean?” His words were muffled into her shoulder as one of his hands cupped a breast. He was very hard, and he didn’t know what he should do next with her. Was he going to couple with her? Was he going to show her how to use her hand on him? Why hadn’t he delineated a clear curriculum first? She had said she wanted to know everything, but he wasn’t sure he was up for *everything*. Wouldn’t he release his seed long before he had shown her all the permutations? How many times could a very aroused twenty-six-year-old man release in an hour?

“What happened to me when you touched me down there?”

What? He lifted his head. “The same thing that happens, I assume, when you touch yourself down there.”

A deep crimson spread over her face.

“I only touch myself . . . down there when . . . to clean myself.”

Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no.

“You’re twenty-two, Phee.”

She whispered, “Yes.”

“Is . . . ? Was that your first climax?”

“Climax? Like in a novel or a play? Oh, what a good name for it! Oh, yes!”

He felt wretched.

“What’s wrong, George?”

“I thought . . . I assumed you had had one before.”

“No. But, oh, it was so wonderful. Why do you look so serious?”

*Because I wasn't paying attention to you, Phee. I was paying attention to Lord Danforth. How good I felt. How you were rubbing my head, how you were kissing me. I thought I was preparing you for something. I didn't realize you were there.*

*I am the world's worst teacher.*

He took his hand from her breast and rolled onto his back, away from her.

## FOUR

“**Y**ou know you could do that to yourself, right, Phee?”

She went up on her elbow next to him. “No, I didn’t. I thought I needed,” she whispered, “a cock.” Then, in a normal tone of voice, “I didn’t know a finger worked.”

His own cock hardened further when she said *cock*.

“George.” She was looking at his member. “Are you ready for me to touch it? Or maybe somewhere else?”

He groaned.

“Is that a yes?” He felt a tentative brush of a finger on his scrotum. “Does it feel good if I touch you there?”

“Yes, but no. It’s a no, I’m not ready.”

“But your—” She gulped. “You are standing up at attention.”

He sat up. “I think the lesson is done.” He got off the bed and walked around it, looking for his trousers.

“But—”

“You did stupendously well, Phee. You spent for the first time. That is of enormous significance. It’s most important that you know about your own pleasure.” He found his trousers and started pulling them on. “So you can teach—” he could not prevent the grimace from the choking sensation of bile in the back of his throat, “—your husband about what *you* want. That is the real lesson here.”

He managed to button his fall over his engorgement and now he looked at her. She had not moved. She was still up on her elbow, facing away from him since he had gone around the other side of the bed. Her dark-blond hair was completely hanging down and her spine was in a beautiful curve he followed with his eyes down to the absolutely devastating bottom that was still on display. Those cheeks. He had not yet touched those naked cheeks. Now, he never would. He sighed.

“No!” She rolled over, scrambled off the bed, and stood facing him. “What you did to me was . . . it was a revelation and I will always be grateful to you, George, but that’s not what the wager was. The wager was that you would bed me.”

“But, Phee.” He couldn’t help reaching out and stroking her face even as he tried to keep his eyes off her beautiful, bare breasts. “Think about it. Thornwick will know you’re not a virgin.”

“I’m not worried about that.” She put her hand over his. “I’ll tell him you taught me to ride my pony astride when I was little. Which is the truth. He won’t expect blood.”

“I could get you with child.”

“You won’t. You’ll spill outside me, won’t you? Alice says that must be what you do with your mistresses since you have no bastards.”

Again, George cursed his wayward sister and her blabbing mouth.

And then, to his shock, Phoebe took his hand off her cheek and put his forefinger in her mouth. He felt her tongue swirling. Her round cheeks hollowed and she sucked even as she pulled the digit out of her pouting lips so there was a popping sound.

“I was pretending it was your organ. Did I do it right?” She smiled.

He groaned and shook his head. “I don’t think you will like coitus as much as you liked spending.”

She shook her head back at him. “Don’t you understand? This isn’t about what I like. This is about making my husband

happy. And about—” she faltered, “about not being scared on my wedding night. I just knew if I did it with you first, I wouldn’t be scared.”

He melted. He gathered her to him. “Oh, Phee.” Her soft breasts pressed into his still naked torso. Oh. Danger. He kissed the top of her head. Like a brother might.

“Phee, I can’t couple with you.” His hands on the skin of her back. He felt a wild desperation to sweep his hands down to her buttocks for a squeeze. Oh, oh. More danger.

Her body became stiff against his. “You lost the wager. Maybe because you wanted to, you said. You said I was beautiful and magnificent. And your cock is hard.”

Yes, it was.

“And if you won’t do it, I’ll just go ask someone else.”

Now it was his turn to have his body go rigid with upset against hers. “Who?”

“Whom, George.” She shrugged in his arms. “Lord Longridge, maybe.”

“No!” He pulled her away from him and held her by the shoulders. “Not Edmund.”

Because he had also seen the organ of his friend Edmund Haskett, Earl of Longridge and the future Marquess of Sudbury, at Brighton and on other bathing occasions. Edmund’s phallus dwarfed other men’s phalli. Compared to Thornwick, even compared to George who thought himself fairly well-endowed, Edmund was a Goliath. There were rumors Edmund had difficulty finding lovers who allowed him entrance due to his unnatural size. George’s sweet, little Phoebe would definitely feel a great deal of pain accommodating Edmund.

She frowned. “Perhaps Sir Matthew Elliot. He’s very handsome.”

“Sir Matthew?” Sir Matthew might be handsome, but he was also the most priggish man in London. He made George look like a rake. What could she be thinking? The blond

baronet was almost certainly a virgin and knew less about coupling than Phoebe did.

“Or the gorgeous Duke of Dunmore. He’s stuck at home, abed with his ankle. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind a little company.”

“You are to go nowhere near Jack MacNaughton. And besides he only beds married women.” Or at least he used to. Jack was now pining for some bloodthirsty countess in Scotland.

“Then Phineas,” she said, stepping into him, pressing her body against his and looking up at him defiantly.

No, he did not approve of Phineas Edge, the Earl of Burchester, either. Not for Phoebe’s first time.

Now he knew what he was feeling was possessiveness, not protectiveness. The Earl of Burchester’s tackle was on a par with George’s. And Phineas was rumored to be an extremely tender and solicitous lover. At least that was the gossip among the female members of the *ton*, gossip his sister Alice had repeated to him.

In truth, Phineas would likely be an ideal teacher for Phoebe.

But he didn’t want that for her.

Phineas Edge didn’t love her the way he did.

He felt himself backed into a corner.

Trapped.

And what a wonderfully titillating trap it was.

“Fine,” he said and let his hands slide down from her shoulders, down her back, to her buttocks. “You win.” Oh, those lovely peach halves in his hands.

“Yes, I do. I win. Kiss me, George,” she breathed, her face turned up to his, her voice raspy.

He did. And as he did, letting his lips and tongue roam over her lips and her face and her neck, even as he squeezed those wondrous cheeks of her bottom, he felt her hands on his



fall, unbuttoning. Then his trousers were being pulled down and he was stumbling out of them as he backed her onto the bed, falling on top of her as he tried to devour her mouth with his.

“Oh, George.” His cock, hard and throbbing, was between her thighs, and the tip was pressing into her warmth and wetness.

He kept one hand wedged between a cheek of her bottom and the mattress and supported himself with the other as he bent his neck and brought his mouth to a breast. Her hands were on his head again, caressing his scalp, tickling him behind his ears.

For the first time in his adult life, he thought penetration might be overrated. After all, he was groping her buttock and sucking on her nipple, his cock nestled between her beautiful thighs, and she was rubbing his head. Did he really need to fuck? This was heaven enough for him.

“George, I want you. Please.”

She reminded him this wasn't about him. Blast. He pulled his hand from under her bottom and took his mouth from her breast.

“Are you sure, Phee?”

“George!” It was a frustrated shriek.

He took his aching member in his hand and rubbed it in her slick pinkness, up over her berry and then down to her entrance. She moaned and closed her eyes.

“Look at me, Phee. I need to know if I'm hurting you so I can stop.”

She obediently opened her eyes.

Keeping his gaze locked on hers, he pushed into her. Her entrance was small, tight. She bit her lip.

“Are you all right, Phee?”

“Unh.” She nodded. She did not smile.

“You're not scared, are you?”

“N-no,” she whispered. Now she smiled. “Not with you, George.”

He pushed farther into her. His thought from a minute ago about penetration being overrated was gone. Completely gone. Oh, the pleasure, the pleasure of being inside her.

No, that was wrong.

Because pleasure was a totally inadequate word to describe being inside Lady Phoebe Finch.

The *paradise* of being inside her.

He supported himself with both hands and bent his head down to her. “Kiss me, Phee.”

Her lips touched his, but more importantly, now that he was hovering so close to her, his chest brushing her breasts, she moved her hands to his head again.

“Oh, George, please,” she said against his mouth. “Don’t hold back. It doesn’t hurt that much.”

He wanted to hold back. He wanted to savor this.

*But it’s not about what you want, imbecile.*

He thrust slightly deeper. She breathed into his mouth and stroked his scalp.

“Yes,” she said.

He thrust deeper still and forced himself to pull his head away from her face so he could look at her.

She smiled at him. “Don’t worry, George.”

He realized then he was likely frowning. And she was reassuring him when he should be doing that for her. He pulled out a little and then plunged his cock in again, slightly deeper than before. She made the O with her lips, just as she had when he had touched her berry.

“How does it feel, Phee?”

“How does it feel to you?”

“It feels . . .” He knew he had to tell the truth. “. . . bloody marvelous.”

“George,” she crooned. “I’m so glad. Keep going.”

Like his initial kisses, he took his time. An almost ponderous, *adagio* tempo that belied the absolute joy his cock was feeling inside her. But he couldn’t help himself. He went much deeper than he intended.

He checked her face. She still had her mouth open but her eyes looked a little hazed.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes.” Then she seemed to come back to herself. “What should I be doing?”

He was panting. “You . . . can . . . keep . . . touching my head.” She giggled and used her short nails to scratch glorious circles on his forehead, the top of his head, his occiput.

“Should I push back?” Suddenly her pelvis was lifting off the bed, following his own rhythm.

“You can,” he grunted, “if you like.”

Phoebe began to push up against him more quickly than his own strokes. Now, from beneath him, she was controlling the speed of their coupling. She was also controlling the depth, pulling very far away from him so he felt he might almost come out of her and then pushing back against him. Hard. Very hard.

Oh. Oh. Ohhhh.

“You . . . are . . .” he panted.

“Yes, George?” she gasped. Her face was flushed, glowing, incandescent. “Am I doing something wrong?”

“You’re a natural.”

*Oh, my God.*

He could not explain what happened next. He lost his mind. It wandered away from him, perhaps realizing it had no place in this bed with these two people panting, sweating, grunting, and joined at the groin.

Without his mind, he could not think. He could only feel. And all he could feel was his cock.

He was made of cock, and only cock. And testicles. He was one big throbbing cock with a pair of lead-weighted testicles.

He seized her hips for one-two-three-four more strokes and then pulled out of her and reared back. Fountaining up between her legs. Screaming.

He had never screamed before.

She sat up.

“George?”

“Ungh.” He couldn’t speak. He sat back on his haunches between her still-spread legs, his hands on his face.

“Are you all right?” she whispered.

Twenty seconds ago, he was more than all right. He was at the highest peak of pleasure he had ever experienced in his life. And now he didn’t know what he was.

“Is that your seed?”

He finally made himself take his hands off his face and look at her. She was sitting up, looking at her own legs. He looked where she was looking, forcing himself not to gaze at her quim.

“Yes,” he said.

She raised her head and grinned. “And no blood, just like I said. That’s what comes of being a hoyden and riding astride.”

A loud voice at the door.

“My lord?” It was Morton, his valet.

It must have been the scream. Morton knew Friday afternoon was for the current mistress since Friday was also the day George’s sister Alice went to Lady Huxley’s for afternoon whist and stayed on for dinner quite late into the night. Therefore, Morton knew better than to disturb George on a Friday.

But George had never screamed before.

“Yes, Morton?” he called out from the bed, still unable to move and surprised to find he had the strength to answer as loudly as he did.

“May I offer any assistance, my lord?” George was pleased to see the door knob did not rattle and Morton did not even try to come into the room. Because George did not remember locking the door.

“Everything’s fine.”

A lie. Everything was not fine.

Because he was kneeling between the legs of a woman who was not only suddenly the most desirable woman in the world but also the woman who knew everything about him and still loved him.

And that woman was promised to another man even as he, the Baron Danforth, had taken her virginity and sprayed his seed all over her thighs and stomach.

“Very good, my lord.” Footsteps moving away and silence.

He looked at Phoebe’s face. She had not moved, had not tried to cover herself when the knock had come. She was still sitting up, legs spread, looking at him thoughtfully.

“Thank you, George,” she said in the same tone of voice she might use when returning a book she had borrowed. She leaned forward and gave a quick peck to his cheek, seized an edge of the sheet and wiped off her thighs and stomach, and before he could gather himself, she was sliding off the bed and pulling up her petticoat.

“I am much relieved,” she said. “It all makes a great deal more sense now.”

Her bottom was lost to view, sheathed in the petticoat.

“You . . . you’re welcome.”

Now the chemise covered her breasts.

“Will you do my stays, George? I must get to Lady Huxley’s, and tomorrow, I have such a lot to do. Mother wants to start drawing up the guest list for the wedding breakfast

which I think is foolish. His Grace hasn't even said whether or not he is going to get a special license. We have no idea how long the engagement will be or whether he wants to get married here in London or at his duchy or ours." She giggled. "I mean Papa's. Because I suppose *his* duchy will soon be what I mean when I say *ours*."

While Phoebe burred on, George willed himself to get off the mattress. Silently, he tightened and tied off her stays. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and watched her put on her dress and try to arrange her hair. He could not even bring himself to get dressed, to put on his banyan or his shirt. He sat naked, despairing.

"Do I look presentable, George?" she asked and turned in a full circle for his inspection.

Her cheeks were still flushed, her lips still red. Her eyes sparkled like they did after she had won a game. But her hair was passably tidy, her buttons done up.

He grunted his approval. He wondered if she would kiss him goodbye. Embrace him. Or better yet, touch his head.

She did none of these. She left as she would after a chess game she had won. Smiling broadly, stepping lightly.

"Goodbye, George. See you on Monday."

She was gone, out the door of his bedchamber into his study. He heard her gather her things, the sound of the door to the special entrance first opening and then clicking closed.

He lay back on the bed and groaned.

What had he done?

More importantly, what had she done to *him*?

Suddenly he was on his knees on the floor, scrabbling with his hands to find the empty chamber pot under the bed.

Finally, what had been heralded so many times this afternoon happened.

He cast up his accounts and filled the chamber pot with the remains of Mrs. Hay's very fine roast beef luncheon.

## FIVE

“**W**here have you been, Phee?” Alice whispered and nudged Phoebe’s slippered foot. They were seated next to each other at a table at Lady Huxley’s. Phoebe was partnering Lady Huxley, and Alice was partnering Lady Fitzhugh.

Phoebe moved her foot away. “Not now,” Phoebe hissed back, trying to suppress the unfamiliar anger she felt toward her friend.

Traitorous Alice should not be bothering her. Not right now. Lady Huxley expected to win at whist and woe betide a partner who made an error in play. Phoebe knew her skill at the game, her drive to win, and her willingness to partner Lady Huxley were the chief reasons she was invited to these all-female whist parties. Otherwise, she did not think she would be on the guest list.

Yes, she was the daughter of the Duke of Abingdon and thus was, on paper, fairly high in precedence. But she was the youngest and the plainest of her sisters. And she had had almost four Seasons already, and up until three days ago, most of the ladies here must have been of the opinion that she was unmarriageable.

After all, she was considered rather wallflowerish. Or bluestockingish. Or hoydenish. The *ton* could not decide. Whatever it was, it was not good.

Yes, her value definitely lay in her ability to help her hostess win.

Her deceiving friend Miss Alice Danforth, on the other hand, was invited everywhere. Alice need not be good at whist. Alice was *Alice*, and no gathering of the *ton* would be complete without her.

It suddenly struck Phoebe that perhaps she was invited to this exclusive afternoon because of her friend. Alice had her choice of invitations and Phoebe could easily see Alice might demand Phoebe be asked as well.

But perhaps, in the future, Phoebe would be invited because she was the Duchess of Thornwick. Not because of Alice.

She sat up a little straighter. She would have a right to be here once she was married. A duchess herself. How lovely that would be. She would be addressed as “Your Grace,” and almost certainly, she would have grace. No more Bumblephee. She would glide and speak and fan herself most elegantly. Her sagging petticoats, her messy hair, her effort would all be things of the past. Like her once bitten-to-the-quick nails.

Because like her nails, she could grow. Change. She tugged at her skirts now, trying to hide her petticoat. She pushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She dabbed at her upper lip delicately with her wrist.

She cast a glance around the room. Yes, in the future, she would fit in here.

She saw Alice laughing at a remark made at the next table. The inimitable and indomitable Miss Alice Danforth. She fit in everywhere. She didn’t need a courtesy title. She didn’t need a husband.

How lucky Alice was.

Lady Huxley began to shuffle the cards for Alice’s deal. She arched an eyebrow at Phoebe.

“Our little bird has landed herself a duke, I hear.”

Phoebe averted her eyes from Lady Huxley’s beady ones. “Yes, my lady. I am engaged to be married to the Duke of Thornwick.”



“He is to be congratulated.” The plump Lady Fitzhugh, on her right, smiled. “I must say I am surprised that—”

“Yes, I know, it is very surprising, isn’t it? He’s so good-looking and tall and a duke. To think he picked me. Papa is so pleased.” Phoebe knew she was babbling but could not seem to stop herself. “Mother says she can’t believe that I, rather than Judith or Deborah or Abigail, will be a duchess. And she says she’s grateful never to have to chaperone me at a ball again. She says she spent half her time the last four Seasons finding my glove or tacking up my petticoats and could never really enjoy herself. She says all the thanks goes to my good bloodline—”

Then Phoebe did stop babbling. Because her mother was wrong. All the thanks went to Alice, didn’t it? Alice was the one who had thrown Phoebe in Thornwick’s path when he was looking for a suitable duchess. But she didn’t want to give Alice credit. Not when she was still angry at her. Phoebe would give credit to the lady on her right instead.

“But I think, Lady Fitzhugh, perhaps I owe it all to that little hint you gave me last Season.”

“Cut.” Alice shoved the cards at Phoebe who obeyed. Alice took the cards back and began to deal around the table.

Lady Fitzhugh looked confused. “Hint?”

“Soap under my fingernails.” Phoebe lifted her hands and showed the backs of them to Lady Fitzhugh and fluttered her fingers. She had left a glove somewhere—probably in George’s study—and had abandoned the other one, as one glove looked quite odd. “I apply the white soap three times a day, just as you advised, and I have been able to stop biting them. Finally, I have nails.”

Lady Huxley leaned forward, her eyebrows beetled. “You think Thornwick proposed because of your fingernails?”

Phoebe laughed nervously. “Well, he certainly wouldn’t have proposed if I were still biting them.”

No one else laughed. Lady Fitzhugh smiled again. “You entirely misunderstand me, my dear. Of course, the Duke of

Thornwick would want you as a wife. Although it's hard to believe he had the courage to make a proposal. No, no, my surprise is entirely related to the fact that you accepted him."

"But—" Phoebe gulped. "He's so perfect."

"Yes." Lady Fitzhugh seemed far away. "But, you see, we all thought—no, no, never mind."

Lady Huxley harrumphed. "Never mind your surprise, Lady Fitzhugh. Pick up your cards, Lady Phoebe."

"Yes," Alice snorted. "Pick up your cards. You are delaying play. And Lady Fitzhugh is entirely right. There can be no surprise whatsoever that His Grace wants to marry you. You are wonderful. Always late, but wonderful. I am sure heaps of lords are envious of him."

Phoebe felt her face growing hot as she picked up her cards. She was ashamed now she had come to the whist party angry at Alice. She had no business being angry at Alice. How terrible Phoebe was. And, in stark comparison, how kind Alice was. To make sure Phoebe was invited to parties like this. To assist her in finding a husband. To compliment her in front of Lady Huxley and Lady Fitzhugh. To say Phoebe was wonderful when Phoebe had been so quick to blame Alice for her own stupidity.

Phoebe had left the Danforth town house an hour ago through the back garden, buoyed with equal parts exhilaration, relief, and delight.

Exhilaration because . . . George, oh, George. He was so beautiful. No. Glorious. And he would never know how much . . . it had all worked out wonderfully. And they would be friends forever. She had giggled to herself at her cleverness as she had walked out of the alley.

The relief had come from the discovery that coupling—at least with George who had kissed her and touched her body just as she had wanted—was intensely pleasurable. Any discomfort had been slight and fleeting, more than adequately compensated for by the thrill she had felt. And so far, coupling

did not seem to require any special skills on her part. It had all seemed based on want and instinct. With George.

And the delight? Well, there was the sense of well-being she still felt throughout her entire body from her climax. But she was over-the-moon knowing there was a release possible when she began to ache and pulse in her nether regions. She had thought coupling would relieve that ache, but the revelation from George that her own hand could do so? It was akin to a miracle.

But why had no one told her of this? Her delight had turned into resentment and then anger as she had walked the five streets to Lady Huxley's. Anger at her mother, her married older sisters, her other lady acquaintances. And most of all, anger at Alice.

The way George talked, it seemed it was common knowledge no one had bothered to share with her. And she was a maiden of an advanced age. Two and twenty. She should have been told of this. The years she had wasted, curled up in her bed, her thighs pressed together, aching and pulsing and wanting and needing *something* and thinking she would never find peace until she married. It had taken George to teach her what other women should have told her long ago.

She arranged her cards. Dear George. Maybe she would still give him her first edition *Alphabetical Table* even though he had lost the wager. After all, he would need some consolation when she became far too busy as the Duchess of Thornwick to play chess with him on Monday nights.

And dear Alice. Phoebe should never have harbored any resentment toward her. Alice must have assumed Phoebe already knew about touching herself. Or perhaps Alice was as uninformed as Phoebe had been? No. Alice *must* know everything there was to know about amorous pleasure.

Alice cleared her throat. Phoebe jerked. It was her turn. Thank goodness whist was so easy. Almost mindless. Almost. *Concentrate, Phee, concentrate.* George's voice in her head, counseling her. This was the first trick. Trump was spades. She had very few. She played a refuse card. Alice picked up the

nine of spades that had declared the trump and then played it and took the trick.

Lady Huxley glared at Phoebe.

“Have you set a date, my dear?” Lady Fitzhugh asked.

“N-no.”

“I think long engagements are best, don’t you?” Alice said in a very definitive fashion and thumped down the first card of the next trick. Phoebe looked at her friend. She had not known Alice had any opinion on engagements, long or short.

Lady Huxley scowled at her cards. “Why is that, Miss Danforth? I would think you, of all people, would believe in a headlong rush towards passion.” Lady Huxley laid down a card.

“You think that despite the fact I am unmarried?” Alice sniggered. “You must believe the worst of me.”

Lady Huxley cackled back. “If I believe anything, it is only what you have led the entire *ton* to believe.”

“What does your betrothed have to say on the matter of the length of your engagement, Lady Phoebe?” Lady Fitzhugh played her card.

“Thorn—” She stopped herself. George had thought it odd she called Thornwick by his title. “His Grace has not said anything, as of yet.”

“Have you made the acquaintance of his mother?” Lady Fitzhugh asked.

“No.”

“We were friends long ago. She was very interesting back then,” Lady Fitzhugh mused. “I have not seen her in—what? Forty years. Not since she married.”

“You are purposely distracting my partner, Lady Fitzhugh,” Lady Huxley snapped.

Phoebe played her card and took the trick. Interesting? What a weighted word. How could a duchess be *interesting*?

As a group, they were quite like Phoebe's own mother. Elegant. Regal and authoritative. But rather dull.

Lady Fitzhugh rattled on about the weather, a recent concert she had attended, Lady Huxley's rose garden, the death of her husband's cousin's husband. Alice occasionally threw quips over her shoulder to the ladies at the neighboring tables.

Phoebe and Lady Huxley won the hand and the next and finally, the game. Of course, they did. Wasn't that Phoebe's purpose at these card parties?

But Phoebe dreaded the final trick because she knew Alice would corner her and question her about the cause of her even later-than-usual entrance to the whist party. Would she be able to keep her bedding lesson a secret from Alice?

She must.

Alice immediately seized Phoebe's arm as soon as they stood from the table and pulled her into a corner of the drawing room, away from the other ladies who were now mingling, drinking ratafia and eating macaroons, chatting sociably until the next set of whist games.

"You must tell me, Phee. What were you up to? Were you meeting Thornwick for an assignation?"

"Alice!"

Alice shrugged her narrow shoulders. "You're engaged. There's no harm in checking out the goods before you sign the bill of lading. In fact, I recommend it."

"Thornwick is a perfect gentleman. He would never!"

Alice raised her eyebrows. "You are quite flushed. Are you well?"

"Yes," Phoebe got out. "Yes, of course, I am well. I just stopped by to see your brother. You told me Lady Starling was out of town, and I know how he hates a disruption. I thought he might be a bit lonely and I might cheer him up. We played a game." None of that was a lie. It was just not the complete

story. And Alice had brushed so close to the truth already with her suggestion of an assignation with Thornwick.

“A chess game?”

“Yes. What else would we do?” Phoebe could feel herself blushing horribly. Alice would be sure to worm her secret out of her momentarily.

But suddenly Alice did not seem interested. She looked away from Phoebe. “What a dreadful color that is for Lady Phyllis, don’t you think?”

Phoebe followed Alice’s gaze toward the green-yellow gown of the young woman in question. “Uh, I suppose.”

“Who won?”

“Pardon?”

Alice turned her gaze back to Phoebe. “Who won the game?”

“I did.”

Alice sniffed. “I don’t think that probably cheered George up much.”

“No, I suppose you’re right.” Phoebe allowed herself a gleeful smile. Alice would think the smile was due to her win. And yes, she was glad she had won the game and gotten what she wanted from George, but she also couldn’t wait to get home, get into her own bed, and find out if she could work the same magic on herself George had.

And she was glad she had forgiven Alice for forgetting to tell her such a thing was possible. All was right with the world. And someday soon, she would be a duchess.

“I do wonder . . .” Alice started.

“What?”

“I do wonder why you’re not marrying George.”

Marry George? Her oldest friend? Her teacher? George didn’t see her that way. She’d had to win a wager to get him to bed her. He would never marry her.

“George doesn’t love me.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, well, he doesn’t love me like a wife.”

“Are you sure? And do you think Thornwick loves you? After such a short acquaintance?”

“No. But he asked me to marry him. And that counts for an awful lot.”

“Yes. I’m sure it does.” Suddenly, Alice’s tone of voice was sad, almost wistful.

Phoebe touched Alice’s elbow. “You’re only twenty, Alice. Every young man we know is bewitched by either you or Lady Olivia.” She nodded at the back of the nineteen-year-old Lady Olivia Radcliffe, the widely-acknowledged beauty of the *ton*. “I’m sure you’ll have your own proposal soon.”

But Phoebe had misread her friend.

Alice chortled. “I have been proposed to dozens of times, Phee. I’m not interested in marriage, you must know that. Not when there is so much fun to be had.”

Again, Phoebe was struck by how kind Alice was. Her friend had received dozens of proposals. Well, of course, she had. It had been quite obtuse of Phoebe to think she hadn’t. Men were mad about Alice. But Alice had never mentioned the proposals until now. It must be because she knew Phoebe yearned for a proposal but had not yet received one. But now that Phoebe was engaged, Alice could tell her without fear of hurting Phoebe’s feelings.

How sensitive Alice was, deep down. Everyone misjudged her, including Phoebe who should know better.

Yes, Alice was wild. Everyone said so. She had done things that would have caused any other young lady in the *ton* to be shunned forever. But when Alice broke some rule, flouted some long-held dictum regarding proper behavior, the matrons and the mamas and the crotchety old gentlemen just shrugged and said, “That’s Alice.”

And the young gentlemen said the same thing. They said “That’s Alice,” but they said it with waggling eyebrows and leers. It was seen as a rite of passage for young lords to be linked in a scandal with her friend Miss Alice Danforth.

And the list of scandals was long.

Licking an ice from the same spoon as a gentleman. In public, at Gunter’s. That was with a Marquess of Leitchbury and the heir apparent to the Duke of Hindmouth. Shocking.

Riding astride a horse with a man— “The same horse, at the same time!” the dowagers had exclaimed—racing along Rotten Row in Hyde Park, Alice’s small bottom nestled against the groin of the Earl of Temblebury.

Staying out all night on a stranded punt on the Cam with the oldest son of the Viscount Farnborough, causing him to miss an exam. Horrors.

Yes, Alice Danforth was wild.

But Alice Danforth was not pretty. Everyone said so. However, everyone also paused when they said this and more often than not, they would add, “But there’s something about her.”

There certainly was something about her, Phoebe thought, studying her friend. Alice was more than pretty. Pretty was piffle compared to Alice. Alice was vivacity itself. One couldn’t take one’s eyes off her, even if you were another young female of the *ton*.

Many an unfortunate debutante had tried to imitate Alice. Her unfashionable coronet of chestnut plaits, her flat chest and wiry frame, her throaty laugh, her unrelenting stare that men seemed to find more seductive than a downward-cast gaze and fluttering eyelashes. Toward the end of Alice’s and Phoebe’s first Season, a few young ladies had even attempted to draw on their faces an imitation of the unapologetic sprinkle of red-brown freckles that covered the otherwise pale skin of Alice’s nose and cheeks. Alice’s freckles matched her eyes and hair, and Alice had all her gowns made in the same reddish-brown tint.



“God thinks this color suits me,” Alice always said. “Who am I to contradict him?”

And indeed no one else looked well in the color despite going to Alice’s modiste and demanding an exact replica of one of Alice’s gowns. One could see three young women at this afternoon’s gathering wearing an imitation of Alice’s red-brown dress with clearly strapped-down bosoms and looking quite drab. Whereas Alice sparkled.

“Are you sure you’re well?” Alice’s voice broke into Phoebe’s reverie. Alice was looking at her with concern. “You are somewhere else entirely, I think.”

Phoebe linked her arm with Alice’s. “After we finish playing, I shan’t stay for the dinner.”

“So the assignation with Thornwick is tonight?”

“Stop.” Phoebe playfully hit Alice’s hand and they laughed and went to find the servant with the silver tray of macaroons.

Alice was half-right, Phoebe mused. The assignation was tonight. But with *herself*.

## SIX

Phoebe slid into her seat at the breakfast table only a quarter of an hour late. Not too egregious considering how blissfully occupied she had been this morning. She had to hide the smile that bubbled up when she thought about the bower of pleasure her own bed had become since last night. She knew the smile would come off as a smirk to her mother.

Thank goodness no one commented on her lateness to the breakfast table. Her mother and father had become resigned to it, she supposed. And she really did not want to be reprimanded as if she were a child any longer. Soon she would be the mistress in her own house and she would choose the breakfast hour and she would never be late again.

Her mother and father were still eating, but her brother Andrew had already finished his breakfast and his plate had been removed. However, Phoebe knew that his speed in eating was only because Andrew was at the breakfast table on sufferance. His own, that is. He despised mealtimes. He likely had eaten one egg and one corner of toast and declared himself stuffed. Phoebe looked down at her own plate, piled high now with ham and bread and butter and honey cakes. She was going to eat it all. She was hungry. Being a satisfied woman did that to you, she supposed. No wonder matrons grew fat.

“Good morning, Mother,” Phoebe said.

The Duchess of Abingdon turned her head to look at Phoebe. Her own mother had not let her waistline grow in the years since her marriage. Mother was as slender as ever.

Andrew took after her, of course, and Phoebe got her more generous figure from Papa's side of the family.

What did her mother's willowy form mean about what she and Papa did behind closed doors? Papa was a bit stocky and so affectionate that he must still bed his wife. But maybe her mother did not enjoy it. And perhaps her mother also did not know about self-pleasure.

"Such a large breakfast, Phoebe." A mild rebuke.

"The honey cakes are particularly good this morning, dearest girl," her father said and belched.

"Abingdon," her mother said reprovingly.

Oh. That's why Phoebe called Thornwick by his title. Mother did the same to Papa, not using his given name of Erasmus. "A ridiculous name," she had heard her mother say one time to Lady Huxley. No wonder her siblings had such dull names. Her three older sisters, the twins Judith and Deborah as well as Abigail, and her younger brothers, Andrew and Daniel. Like her mother's own name of Esther, all from the Bible, save Phoebe. Papa had been the one to insist on the name Phoebe, from the ancient Greek. Although, come to think of it, there was a Phoebe mentioned in the Bible, too.

That was the first thing she was going to do this afternoon when Thornwick called on her: get permission to call him Arthur.

"Mother, when His Grace visits this afternoon, may we be in the drawing room?"

"Certainly, Phoebe. Where else would you be?"

"May we be in the drawing room, *alone*?"

Her father smiled and chuckled. The duchess gave him a glance as if to say *leave this to me*. Phoebe looked to her brother for support, but Andrew was gazing toward the windows, playing with a teaspoon in his right hand, sawing back and forth, changing the angle slightly with each movement, the fingers of his left hand pressing down on the table as if it were the fingerboard of his violin. He was clearly itching to escape to the music room.

Phoebe turned back to her mother. “Thornwick had to suffer the entire family last week after he proposed. Can’t we have some time alone together? After all, soon we will be alone together all the time.”

Her father laid his hand on top of her mother’s. “I seem to remember your parents allowing us some lovely time alone together before we were married.”

Her mother said stiffly, “We had a chaperone.”

Her father laughed. “Your blind and deaf great-aunt. A figurehead of a chaperone. A chaperone in name only, dear. Do you remember—” He got out of his chair and whispered something in his wife’s ear. He was grinning even more broadly when he resumed his seat.

The duchess did not smile but she looked at her husband. Fondly, Phoebe thought. Well, as fondly as Mother was capable of.

“I remember,” the duchess said.

“I thought you would remember. We nearly started the twins that afternoon.”

The duchess’ nostrils flared. “Abingdon!”

*Please Papa, you are injuring my case rather than helping it right now.*

Phoebe said quickly, “His Grace is not a rascal like Papa was. He would not do anything improper.”

Her mother took a deep breath. Her father raised his eyebrows.

Phoebe wondered why she had not argued she herself would not do anything improper. *Because it’s not true. After yesterday, I’ve become a wanton. And I want everything.*

“Please, Mother!” She could hear her own voice was on the verge of a whine. “He will only be here a half an hour at the most.” Although a half an hour was more than enough time to make a baby. If she and George had not wasted time with kissing and arguing and her own climax, George could have easily spent inside her in a quarter of that time.

But he had not spent inside her, had he? Even though they had both been quite wild at the end. How like George to be able to control himself in that way.

Her mother studied her. “Do you promise to press His Grace on the matter of the wedding date?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“I mean it, Phoebe. I want a date to be set today. I don’t like undecided things. And men, particularly dukes,” her mother cast a glance at her father, “have no sympathy for what a long engagement can do to a young woman.”

Her father grinned unrepentantly through his mouthful of honey cake.

“Thank you, Mother.”

The clock chimed ten. Her brother stood from the table abruptly. “I’m off. Tell Thornwick I’ll thrash him if he takes any liberties with you, Phebes.” Andrew winked.

It was a joke, of course. Her brother might have her mother’s height but he was a thin and spindly thing. Completely uninterested in sport or physical activity of any kind. Never had a boxing or fencing lesson. Part of that had to do with his horrible eyesight, bad since childhood and apparently worsening all the time. No wonder he loved music so much.

Yes, Andrew wouldn’t have the strength to thrash Phoebe, let alone Thornwick.

“Or I’ll get Daniel to do it,” Andrew said. Daniel was her even younger brother, the one who was not the heir. The one in the army. The one with muscles. Then Andrew added, “Or George can step in as *de facto* brother since Daniel is off doing maneuvers.”

Who then would thrash George for taking liberties with her? She giggled and lifted a cake to her mouth and took a bite. Oh, Papa was right. The honey cakes were particularly good this morning. And wafting up from the kitchen, the aroma of the beefsteak-and-kidney pie being baked for luncheon filled her nose. Her mouth watered in anticipation.

It seemed all of her sinful appetites were increasing in step with each other. What next? Would she become a tippler and take up smoking cheroots and playing Hazard and sleeping until noon?

Goodness, if Phoebe weren't engaged, she might become a hellion to rival even Alice Danforth.

## SEVEN

After a morning spent going through her trousseau with her mother, followed by quite a good luncheon, Phoebe changed her dress and made her toilette for Thornwick's call. She could sense her activities—both with George and by herself—had already wrought some changes. She had always bemoaned her short stature, but look, she was sitting taller at her dressing table. Her skin was glowing and her eyes had a bit of a sparkle. She felt carefree and confident. She was magnificent and beautiful. She was well on her way to becoming a duchess.

If only her hair could be made aware of that fact. She sighed as her lady's maid struggled with the thick, heavy, straight tresses.

"I'll do it, Dawson. You know I might have a better chance of getting it arranged than you do."

"Yes, my lady."

Finally, her hair was up. Please let it stay that way. Phoebe cast a glance at the mantel clock. Thornwick would be here soon. Very soon. Her hair had taken so long. What jewelry should she wear? She fussed with her necklaces, unable to choose.

Because of the heat, windows were open all over the house. Sound from the street wafted up into the room across the hall and Phoebe could hear a carriage come to a halt in front of the house. Thornwick was here. She mustn't be late. She jumped up from her dressing table and as she did so, one

long strand of her hair fell down around her face. Oh, well. Thornwick would know soon enough that her hair did not behave.

And she, Phoebe, had no plans to behave either.

She met the duke in the front hall. The butler Chapman had just taken his hat so she had not made her betrothed wait very long. Her breath hitched. He was so handsome.

“Your Grace.” She curtsied.

“Lady Phoebe.” He bowed. “Good afternoon.”

She led the way into the drawing room. He raised his eyebrows when she shut the door behind them.

“Mother said we could.”

“Ah.” He gazed at her.

A silence. Surely, that wasn’t normal. Shouldn’t engaged people have heaps to say to each other? Well, first things first.

“Your Grace, I do wonder what I should call you.”

Thornwick tucked his chin back. “What do you mean?”

“Shall I call you Arthur?”

“There’s such a lot of baggage with the name. Legendary boy king and all that.”

“You’re no boy.”

“Still. No one calls me Arthur. Not even my mother.”

“What does your mother call you?”

Thornwick hesitated for a moment. “My boy.”

“Well, that won’t do. For me, that is. What’s your next name after Arthur?”

“Henry.”

“I rather like the name Henry. May I call you Henry?”

“No. Still a king problem. Too many kings named Henry.”

“What is your next name after that?”



“George.”

“Oh.” She could *never* call him George.

“Yes, the name of three more kings. And the next king, too. My lady, what is your objection to Thornwick?”

“If I am to marry you, I don’t want to call you by your title. How would you like it if I said you had to call me Thornwick once I was your wife?”

“I wouldn’t like it all. What should I call you?”

Not Phee or Phebes. Not Bumblephee. She needed to leave all that behind. “I assume Phoebe. You call me Lady Phoebe now. Surely it won’t be that difficult to drop the honorific when we are alone.”

“As we are now. Phoebe.”

She felt herself blush. Would he kiss her? Yes, he would, she decided as he came toward her.

“May I kiss you?”

She looked up at him. He was so handsome. Those heavy-lidded blue eyes, those golden curls, that good nose.

“Yes, please, Arthur.”

He cupped her face in his hands, bent down, and kissed her.

Lovely. His first kiss was just like George’s first kiss. Sweet and gentle. But he didn’t smell quite right. Not bad or anything. But not quite right. What would the inside of his mouth taste like, she wondered. And then he kissed her again. The second kiss was quite like the first one. Both of them too light and delicate to cause any stirrings below.

Although George’s light and delicate kisses had caused stirrings that had made her quite desperate and had led her to grabbing George’s neck and kissing him back.

Perhaps it was just that she was an experienced kisser now and inured to the thrill of a light kiss. She would kiss Thornwick and show him how it should be done. With open mouths and the tongue included.

But she remembered George's prohibition against giving. She should receive, only. Until she could better gauge Thornwick's desires.

He spoke. "I think I rather like your calling me Arthur."

"Yes, Arthur," she breathed.

He kissed her a third time. "It makes me think I could be a king when you call me Arthur. Will you be my queen, Phoebe?"

The third kiss had caused no excitement but Thornwick's question had. Would she be his queen? He was so romantic! Of course, she would. She began to feel the achy pulse she had felt with George.

"I will, Arthur."

*Now he will kiss me again and I will have the pulsing achiness and his kiss at the same time.*

But he didn't kiss her again. He released her face and smiled at her. That pleasant smile that had no component of a grin to it.

"At least I have no fear you will pursue Guinevere's course."

Guinevere. King Arthur's consort. The one who had committed adultery. A traitorous, lustful queen.

"You're so sweet, Phoebe. So without pretense or deceit. You would never betray me."

She took a step back. She had never considered . . . she had not even thought . . . after all, she and Thornwick were not yet married. What she and George had done—was it adultery?

A hand began to wander up toward her mouth and she jerked it down and clasped it in her other hand.

No, no, surely not. Being engaged was not the same as being married. Being engaged was the promise of a promise. It wasn't the promise itself. Was it?

No matter. It was done. If she had committed a sin, she had committed it. And she had undertaken the coupling with

George to benefit Thornwick, hadn't she? So she could please him, her husband. So the duke wouldn't have a frightened mouse of a wife on the first night of his marriage.

That wasn't the only reason, but that was the unselfish reason she could allow her mind to dwell on.

She searched for something to say. Something safe. Something banal. "I was at Lady Huxley's whist party yesterday."

"Were you?" Thornwick had a quizzical look. He gestured at her face. "You have a bit of hair hanging down. Is it supposed to be there?"

"No." She reached up and touched the unruly strand.

"Do you want to fix it?"

"I know it will just fall down again. Or another piece will. Would you like me to fix it?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Will you have to leave the room to do so?"

"No."

"Then I would like you to fix it. So I can see your adorable face."

He didn't want her to leave the room and he thought she was adorable. Worthy of adoration. Blushing once more, she turned to one of the mirrors in the room and found a hairpin in her hair she thought she could remove and not cause worsening damage. She worked it free carefully and used it to pin the loose strand back up.

"Would you say that again?" she asked.

"Say what again?"

She looked at him in the mirror. He stood behind her and put both hands on her waist, as if he were measuring her, estimating her girth. He was looking down. At her bottom, maybe.

“Are you teasing me?”

“No.” He raised his eyes and met her gaze in the mirror.

“Would you say I’m adorable again?”

“That depends. Will you believe it this time?”

She bit her lip. She raised her chin. “Yes.”

“You are more than adorable, Phoebe. You are enchanting.”

It was the perfect thing to say. Perfect, like Thornwick himself. But strangely, despite her promise to him mere moments ago, she did not believe it. Not a bit. Not as she had when George had said she was beautiful. And magnificent. Of course, George had shown her his hardened shaft right after that. Demonstrated to her the proof of his opinion.

That had been so like George, wanting to show her the evidence. Just as he had when she was eleven and he had pulled out a copy of Philidor’s book on chess strategy to show her how stupidly she was sacrificing her pawns.

She backed up slightly into Thornwick now, crowding his groin with her backside. Of course, he was much taller than she was so she was really nudging his thighs. But surely, she would feel some proof that she was enchanting, wouldn’t she?

But she didn’t. And he took two steps back and released his grip on her waist. “Pardon me.”

“Oh, no.” She turned to face him. “That was my fault, entirely.”

“I won’t argue with you.”

She smiled and reached out and took one of his hands. “Good.”

“Yes.” He smiled back at her.

“It’s settled then. I am to blame.”

“Yes.” His smile faded. “I don’t like arguing.”

“No. Who does?” She began to giggle and then stopped abruptly.

Because she did. She liked arguing. Very much. With George, of course. Who encouraged her disagreement. And who was very good about conceding a point, fairly won.

That didn't mean she had to argue with Thornwick, but was her marriage to be one of placidity and total agreement?

"But perhaps, if you felt strongly about something, you *would* argue, Arthur?"

"Of course."

She stepped closer to him and grasped his hand a little more tightly. "Or even, perhaps, if you didn't feel strongly about something but thought a little back-and-forth on a trivial issue might be a bit of fun?"

"Fun?"

"You know . . ." Suddenly, she felt awkward. The duchess feeling, the one her climaxes had bestowed upon her, had fled. "Friction can be enjoyable."

"I hate to disagree with you when I just told you I don't like disagreement, but I don't see argument as fun." He put a finger under her chin and tilted her head up. "Do you?"

She would say no and everything would go back to being wonderful. As it had been before.

"Perhaps we could agree to disagree on this matter, Arthur."

He took his finger away from under her chin. "As I told you, I won't argue with you." He dropped her hand and crossed to the other side of the room.

"We should discuss our engagement." She put her right pinky in her mouth.

He was looking out the window, the edges of his golden hair shining in the bright summer sunshine coming into the room. "You said you had gone to Lady Huxley's whist party yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Was it diverting?"

Oh, no. She whipped her finger out of her mouth. Oh, no. Oh, no. Without thinking, she had bitten the pinky nail right down to the bed despite the foul-tasting white soap under her nail. It would take her more than a fortnight to grow it to the same length as before.

“Phoebe?” Thornwick turned away from the window to look at her.

She swallowed the crescent of fingernail and managed not to gag. “Yes, yes, Lady Huxley had me partner her, of course, as she always does, and we won ever so easily.” She balled her right hand, hiding her fingertips in her palm.

“I see.”

“Yes, I’m terribly good at whist.”

“It was not a social occasion for you, then.”

She faltered. “Yes, well, well, yes, I chatted with the other ladies. And Alice, of course, was there and it’s always good to see her.”

“Miss Danforth.” His voice was flat, his words uninflected.

“She’s awfully good at whist, too, when she puts her mind to it. If Lady Huxley ever let me partner someone else and I drew Alice, I am sure we would win even more handily than Lady Huxley and I do.”

“It’s very good of you to make sure your hostess wins.”

“Yes, well, it’s not really good of me. I wouldn’t want to lose my invitation, would I?” She giggled. “And I do like winning. In and of itself. Even though whist is quite a simple game.”

Thornwick moved his head very slightly. She couldn’t see his face well since the sunlight was behind him.

“It’s important to know how to lose, too, Phoebe. Graciously.”

“Yes. Believe me, I have heaps of experience in losing. Did you know I had played almost a thousand games of chess against Geor—I mean, Lord Danforth—before I won one?”

“A thousand games?”

“Nine hundred and seventy-six. Of course, we started playing when I was eight.”

“But to play a thousand games. I would have thought a girl would have given up long before getting to that number.”

“Oh, but I was determined, Arthur.”

How she wished he would move away from the window so she could tell from his expression what he was thinking. She crossed the room, getting closer to him, looking up at him. As always, his face was pleasant. Mild. Charming. No furrow in his brow. She stood in front of him and reached up impulsively to touch one of his curls.

“I do like your hair.”

He reciprocated by brushing her hair with a fingertip. “And I like yours, too, Phoebe. But I must admit, I’m afraid of touching it and causing more of it to fall down.”

“It’s all right if you do, Arthur. I’ll fix it again.”

“Our children will likely be fair-haired.”

*Our children.* A thrill passed through her. She felt his hand on the side of her neck. She held her breath. Now he would kiss her again.

But he didn’t. He just looked at her with his heavy-lidded, almost-sleepy blue eyes fringed by blond lashes.

*I want to kiss him but I can’t. George said I shouldn’t. Receive. Receive. Don’t give.*

She filled the silence. “Lady Fitzhugh was at my table for the first game and she told me she had been friends with your mother when she was younger.”

He moved his hand from her neck to her shoulder.

“I am so looking forward to meeting your mother, Arthur.”

“Yes, well.” He took his hand from her shoulder. “I’ve been thinking I should have a little house party at the end of next week. I know it is still officially the Season, but the estate

is only half a day by carriage from London, and it's been so hot here in town recently. It's always a good deal cooler in the country. And perhaps a house party might be an appropriate occasion for you to meet the duchess. Before you make her a dowager by becoming the duchess yourself."

How delightful! She would get to see the house where she would be mistress and explore the whole estate with him, see the famed gardens and lawns, and meet his mother. And get away from the swelter of London? That would be perfect.

"That would be perfect," she breathed, almost giddy with excitement.

"You don't hide your enthusiasm, Phoebe. I quite like that about you."

"Why should I hide it?"

"No reason at all."

He took her hand. Her right hand. He looked at it.

*Her right hand.* A wave of nausea passed over her. But if he saw that the nail on her fifth finger was bitten down, he said nothing.

He left shortly afterwards, briefly pressing his lips against hers once more, promising to get permission from her father to take her out for a drive on Wednesday.

Still no stirrings down below with that final kiss. And to have to wait until Wednesday until she saw him again? Ugh.

What an impatient, needy girl she was.

Alone in the drawing room, she flopped onto a sofa. Her mother was sure to admonish her. Nothing had been settled about the wedding date.

But a house party? And to meet his mother? That must mean a short engagement. And if not, perhaps she could induce him to compromise her? A house party would be perfect for that. But he would see through her. She was no good at connivance. She was transparent, as George always said.



And what did it mean that she had been more upset Thornwick might have seen her bitten fingernail than she had been over the idea she might have betrayed him with George?

Because she couldn't believe what George and she had done together yesterday was wrong. It had felt natural. Intensely thrilling but natural. It felt like what men and women were meant to do together. Now she wondered why people were not copulating all the time since it was so pleasurable. In fact, it would be lovely to be naked in bed with George right now.

She wrenched her hand from her mouth. The nail from her left pinky was now gone, too. Drat.

She needed soothing, but chewing her fingernails was not the answer. Fifteen seconds of pleasure and relief and then two weeks of guilt while waiting for the nail to grow again.

But she might pursue soothing of an entirely different sort.

Because how comfortable this sofa was. And the door to the drawing room was closed. She sighed. It seemed the more she satisfied her urges, the more insistent the urges became. But it would be such a delightful way to keep her hands busy and out of her mouth. She pulled her skirts and petticoat to her waist. She put a finger in her cleft. She took her other hand and wedged it into the top of her dress, getting her fingers under the cup of her stays and on top of her bosom.

It had been such heaven when George had sucked at her breast. She couldn't do that for herself but she could pluck at and rub her peak while she rubbed her other place. Oh, and how George had kissed her as he touched her. And then when she had felt his hardness against her cleft before he had penetrated her. And how exciting that penetration, that coupling had been. Yes, it had hurt but it had still been thrilling, to know how aroused he was and that he was inside her and to have him on top of her, so close. And how beautiful George was, his chest and his arms and how he kissed her and squeezed her bottom and how delicious his smell was and how much she had wanted to touch him everywhere but particularly

on his head and, oh, George, George, George, George, George, *huh, huh, huh.*

Curled over herself, a clenching passed over her body like a gust of wind. And then . . . a peaceful emptiness. She felt clean. She felt light. She was a piece of dandelion fluff wafting in the air.

For three seconds.

Suddenly, for absolutely no reason she could fathom, she began crying. Big tears rolled down her face and fell on her still exposed thighs. Sobbing, she quickly pulled her skirts down. She felt a huge wail coming on so she turned and muffled her face into one of the embroidered cushions.

She was going mad.

# EIGHT

George wallowed in a deep vat of misery. Oh, to go back in time to when he had only been discomfited and blissfully ignorant of the reason why he was out of sorts.

Because now he knew the source of his unease and his bad feelings. And his bad feelings were no longer bad, they were harrowing.

Phoebe.

It was all to do with Phoebe.

He cursed himself. Why hadn't he seen it earlier? Why had he been so bloody blind? How could he have missed noticing his Phoebe's charms? Her kissable lips. Her marvelously expressive face that betrayed her every thought and emotion. Her lush body that was everything feminine and beautiful.

The time he had wasted, the chances he had wasted. Those hours he had spent trying to outmaneuver her on the chessboard when he should have been fondling her, kissing her, undressing her.

He spent the night sweating and flipping from side to side, seeking a comfortable position on the mattress. But Phoebe's scent on the sheets and the pillows taunted and teased him. He would fall asleep for a few seconds only to jerk awake, thinking she was next to him and he needed to grab her to keep her from getting up and leaving his bed.

Finally, morning came and he pulled himself up and dressed and walked to get his horse. He rode for several hours,

the already warm air presaging another hot day. But no escape from his suffering was found on the back of Apollo, rampaging over Hampstead Heath.

Phoebe flooded his thoughts in a way no other woman ever had.

Her touch on his head. The taste of her mouth and her skin. Her huff with her release. How right she had felt against him, under him, surrounding him. As if she had been made for him.

Maybe she had been.

After all, he had thought that very thing when he was four, looking at her in her baby basket. He had hoped for a little boy like himself, already his age, when he had been told he was about to meet the newest member of the Finch family. He had wanted a playmate.

But when he saw baby Phoebe, his wish went right out of his head. She was so little. So pink. She opened her eyes and looked right at him. This baby is for me, he thought.

*She's for me.*

A largely uneaten luncheon with his damnable sister staring at him over her plate.

“You look dreadful, George. I didn’t know the absence of a mistress could make one ill. It might make one’s testicles ache, yes, but it surely should not make you distraught. You are such a slave to your routine.”

“Your mind lives in the gutter,” he snapped.

“Or maybe it’s due to losing that chess game to Phee yesterday?”

George clenched his jaw. What did Alice know? These girls told each other everything. Didn’t Phoebe realize how foolish it was to give her secrets to Alice who thought nothing of being the center of gossip and scandal?

“Phoebe was horribly late for whist, and Lady Huxley was in a bit of a temper. I soothed Lady H though by reminding her Phee had just gotten engaged and was likely taken up with her betrothed and Lady Huxley was lucky to get her to agree to

come to whist at all this week. There was a horrible moment when I thought Lady H was going to insist I partner her, but Phee arrived just in time to rescue me. Then she told me it hadn't been Thornwick at all that had made her late, but a chess game with you. She said she was worried you were sad with Lady Starling out of town. Despite being a future duchess, she is still the same sweet girl we grew up with, isn't she?"

Alice didn't know.

George gathered himself. "Speaking of that, I really wish you had not made Phoebe aware of . . . told her about . . ."

"Your mistress?"

"She doesn't need her mind filled with that sort of thing. Unlike you, she is an innocent."

"Is she?" Alice quirked an eyebrow. "Maybe not anymore."

Alice knew.

"Wh-what do you mean by that?"

"She didn't stay for the dinner last night. She said she was tired and going home. She left very early. But she wasn't tired. She was excited, George. Flushed. Starry-eyed. Quite looking like a woman in love. I think she was going to meet Thornwick."

Thank God, Alice didn't know. But his short-lived relief turned quickly into rage. Blinding, red-hot rage. Under the table, his hands tightened into fists.

Thornwick. The cause of all his pain.

Thornwick. The groom-to-be.

Thornwick. The vile man did not deserve to live.

Although George knew next to nothing about Thornwick except the size of his cock, the duke was clearly unworthy of Phoebe.

He had to be.

Had Phoebe really gone almost directly from his bed to Thornwick's? He could not and would not believe that of her. No. Not if he wanted to retain his sanity.

"You're breathing heavily, George. Are you upset about something?"

"The air is too close in this house." He pushed back his chair. "I'm going out."

He knew his exit would provoke suspicion from Alice. Saturday afternoons were when he normally did the accounts in his study, totting up each little expense so he could march into the office of his man of business on Monday morning and point out the errors the clerks had made.

But he couldn't worry about Alice and her canny mind right now. He needed to escape. And Alice made no demur, did not even raise her eyebrows.

But she made a suggestion. "You might drop in at the Abingdon town house. Didn't you have something you wanted to discuss with Andrew?"

Did he? Was there something to do with the musical society George needed to speak to Andrew about? Perhaps. If not, he would invent something on his way there.

Because he needed to see Phoebe. As soon as possible.

"You must have crossed paths with Thornwick in the front hall. He paid a call on Phebes. I heard him leave just minutes ago."

Andrew had gotten up and bowed when George had been announced into the music room. But his violin and bow stayed in his hands, the fingers of his left hand still moving over the neck of the violin, playing some unheard ghost music of his own.

George had forgotten Andrew devoted the entirety of Saturday to his violin and every spare hour of every other day of the week as well. The young man was single-minded in his avocation. But what else could poor Andrew Finch, Marquess

of Keldchester, heir apparent to the Duke of Abingdon, do besides play his music? He couldn't read or box or play cards with his eyesight as poor as it was.

At least George had other things in his life besides chess. His riding and his fencing and his monographs on the history of certain words like *walrus* and *quiz* and *shambles*. His speeches and votes in the House of Lords. Even this little nuisance job of being treasurer for the Mayfair Music Society although he played no instrument himself. He knew he had been nominated for the post since he found it so easy to elicit delinquent dues from his fellow lords. All he had to do was draw himself up to his full height, furrow his brow, and smolder. Then a pound coin or two was quickly dug from a purse. He performed the same job for the Audley Street Chess Club.

And, of course, George had the very large responsibility of his own estate which Andrew did not yet have since his father was very much alive.

George wished for a moment that his own father hadn't died and he could ask him what to do about Phoebe. But that was foolishness. His father would never have been able to offer any sound advice. In George's eyes, he had always been a weak man, completely in thrall to George's mother—a beautiful, frivolous, volatile spendthrift who had died when George was thirteen. His father had then been a shadow of himself for the last five years of his life, allowing the barony to fall further into unprofitable chaos.

When he had first inherited his title upon his father's death, George had frequently sought counsel from Phoebe's father, the Duke of Abingdon. His Grace had been generous with his time and guidance and had given George the knowledge he needed to begin to rescue the barony. Now, if it were a different matter, one not involving Abingdon's daughter and George's all-consuming desire to bed her again, he might go to the duke.

But that wouldn't do in these circumstances. Not at all.

Andrew came closer to George, peering at him. “Is something different about you, George?”

George put his hand to his head. He had forgotten his wig. This was the first time in four years he had been out in public without his wig. No, this morning. He must have ridden Apollo all over Hampstead Heath bareheaded.

“I’m not wearing my wig.”

“Decided to come into the nineteenth century, eh?”

“Something like that.”

Now George realized Andrew also looked different. “Where are your spectacles, Andrew?”

“I really only wear them so people remember how blind I am. The spectacles don’t help much anymore. Everything is still a blur. The blurs have a bit more definition, but...” Andrew shrugged and felt his chair with the back of his legs and then sat down. “I can still read music with a magnifying glass if I hold the score four inches from my nose. And there’s nothing wrong with my memory. Please do sit, George.”

George looked around. There were no other chairs in the music room. He sat on the bench of the pianoforte, having decided the stool by the harp was too fragile to bear his weight.

“Thornwick was here, you say?”

“Yes. As you can imagine, there has been a great deal of fuss about the house lately.”

“Yes.”

“Even more fuss than when my other sisters were getting married. I suppose because Thornwick is a duke, and Mother was not really prepared for Phoebe to get engaged. To anybody.”

“Why not?”

Andrew shrugged again. “She had almost four Seasons with nary a bit of interest until now. Phebes very nearly decided not to go to any balls anymore, you know? Spoke



about putting herself on the shelf. I can't understand it at all. I'm rather disgusted with my fellow lords. Not very discerning, are they? I can't imagine what put them off her for so long. Almost as if something or someone had scared them away. Of all my sisters, I would have thought . . . I mean, this will sound strange, but I have sometimes wished I could marry Phoebe myself. She'd make such a companionable wife."

George shrugged, realizing only too late Andrew likely couldn't see the gesture.

Andrew laughed. "Well, I and everyone else always thought you would marry her, George, so there was never any chance for her real brothers, was there? Now, what did you need to speak to me about?"

Everyone thought George would marry Phoebe? Nobody thought that. He and Phoebe were just the best and oldest of friends. Although he had lusted after her in his youth, hadn't he? And now . . . and now . . . now all he could think about was getting her in his bed again. And murdering Thornwick.

"What do you think of Thornwick?"

There was a silence. Andrew peered at him. "You came to speak to me about Thornwick?"

George forced a guffaw. "No, no, no. I was just wondering. I'm here about the music society. Do you think we should start having assemblies every week rather than every fortnight?"

As Andrew gestured with his bow and discussed the pros and cons of increasing the frequency of the assemblies, George wondered how he might work the conversation around to Thornwick again.

Because if he could rally the rest of the family in opposition to the match, Phoebe might break it off. And there had to be something amiss about Thornwick. There just had to be.

"I think with so much of the *ton's* focus being on balls during the Season and with so many wonderful professional musicians here in London just now, there really is no call for having more assemblies to listen to amateurs like me."

“Uh, certainly. But don’t call yourself an amateur, Andrew. You are every bit as good as some of these imported maestros who play the big concerts.”

“There’s no shame in being an amateur.” Andrew smiled. “You know the origin of the word.”

Yes. Amateur. From the Latin. *Amare*. To love.

George put a finger on the key of the pianoforte and played a single note. Idly. “Is the Duke of Thornwick a music lover, do you know?”

“I hope not, for his sake. Phebes is wholly tone-deaf. I had to convince her years ago to mouth the words to hymns in church on Sunday. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been able to bear being in the same pew as her.”

George bit his tongue to prevent himself from correcting Andrew’s *her* to *she*. “Is she around, do you know? Your sister?”

“No earthly idea. Probably. Go down to the front hall and ask Chapman. He’ll know.”

Andrew said it very politely, but George could tell he was itching to get back to his violin. Indeed, as soon as George left the music room, he could hear the violin starting up again behind the closed door. Bach. One of those concertos. What a shame Andrew would never play it accompanied by a full orchestra unless he hired it himself. But such things were never done. Not by a future duke.

George went down to the front hall in search of the Abingdon butler. He passed the drawing room door. It was closed but he heard a very faint sound. Could it be a mewl? He looked around and found the hallway empty. He put his ear to the door. Yes, a little mewl. And then a moan. And could it be? A huffing. Very like the huffing Phee had given out yesterday when she had spent. For the first time in her life. Under his own hand.

He recoiled from the door. Andrew was wrong. Thornwick hadn’t left the house yet. Thornwick and Phoebe were in the drawing room together. And Thornwick was doing something

to Phoebe to make her huff that way. That beautiful huff. That was George's huff, damn it.

And now there was another sound. A new sound. A keening. Was it the sound of Phee reaching an even higher level of ecstasy with that . . . that . . . that duke?

He took a deep breath and threw open the door. He was prepared to find Thornwick touching Phoebe. Perhaps even fucking her, Phoebe bent over an arm of a sofa, Thornwick behind her, with his hands on her hips, her skirts thrown up. George was prepared to be devastated. To face his pain head on. To pour salt on his own wounds. To tighten the noose around his own neck. Because discovering the two of them *in flagrante delicto* would not end the engagement. It would only hasten the marriage.

But what he saw when he opened the door was his Phoebe, alone, crying, her back heaving, her face in a pillow.

George knew if he were a decent man this would be as distressing to him as finding Thornwick's cock buried in Phoebe. But he was not a decent man. Her crying was glorious, like manna from heaven. The engagement must have been broken off, and Phoebe was having a bit of a blub about it. But he'd soon find a way to make her forget Thornwick.

She raised her head from the pillow. "George!" She stood, her hands clutching her skirts, her nose running, her face red, her hair hanging down.

"Oh, Phee."

He closed the door behind him. The very vile man in him closed the door. Yes, he wanted the door closed. Definitely.

"What's wrong? Why are you crying?" He crossed to her, forcing his voice to be gentle instead of predatory. He would take her in his arms, feel her soft body against his, let her cry. And after a bit, he would pull her face away from his chest and kiss her. Tenderly, at first. Sweetly. And then with a bit more force. Show her his desire for her. Like a lover. So she would know his intentions. No more brother George. No more teacher George. He was George, the ravisher.

“I’m fine.” And indeed, in just the few seconds between when he had barged into the room and when he reached where she stood by the sofa, her tears had stopped flowing and she was smiling. A real smile. Her nose was still running, her face was still red, her hair was still hanging down, but she was smiling.

“How lovely to see you. You wouldn’t have a handkerchief I could borrow, would you?”

Mutely, he dug into the inside pocket of his tailcoat and pulled one out and handed it to her.

She wiped her face and blew her nose. “Thank you. That’s much better. I’ll get this back to you after it’s laundered.”

“You’re not fine, Phee. You were crying.”

“Oh, you know me. I must have a cry every once in a while. You know that.” She folded the handkerchief.

No, he didn’t know that. Phoebe didn’t cry in front of him.

“I heard Thornwick was here. Did he make you cry?”

“Oh, no, not at all. In fact, he has promised to have a house party at his estate. Doesn’t that sound wonderful?”

No, it sounded awful. “Yes. Wonderful.”

She tilted her head. “Why did you call, George?”

“Uh, I had to talk to your brother. Music society business.”

“Oh. So you weren’t here to see me?”

*I’m not here to see you, Phee. I’m here to kiss you, tear your clothes from your body, and take you here on the sofa in the drawing room of your father’s town house.*

The air had become very close and hot in the room. He was having a hard time breathing. He backed away from her. “No, of course not. I’ll see you Monday for chess.”

“Yes. Monday.”

“Goodbye, Phee.”

“Oh, George?”

“Yes?” He paused before opening the door. *Tell me you want me.*

“You look very handsome without your wig.”

He ran his hand over his pate, smiled weakly, and went out of the drawing room. The butler Chapman fetched his hat, and he left the house.

He walked home. Empty. Lost. Still miserable.

He drank a great deal of rum that night, thinking over the events of today and yesterday. He never drank spirits. Didn't like the loss of control that came with alcohol. But he was already out of control, wasn't he?

He paid the price the next day with a hangover and stayed in bed.

Alice looked in on him at one point during the day, knocking loudly and then putting her head around the door.

“Go away, Alice. My head hurts.”

“You're a fool, George Danforth. A fool. A scowling, useless fool. Do I have to do everything myself around here?”

As far as George knew, Alice did nothing but cause scandal. But he did not have the strength to argue with her. “Yes!” He threw a pillow at her, but she ducked out the door and he knocked over a vase instead.

It shattered on the floor.

He groaned and laid back and closed his eyes. Yes, he was a fool. A fool for Phoebe. What was he going to do when she married Thornwick? He couldn't tear his hair out, it was already gone. He turned on his side and inhaled through his nose. He could only smell himself and last night's rum on the sheets. Her scent had completely disappeared. She was gone.

He had lost her.

But not completely. At least he would still have their chess games on Monday to look forward to. His little bit of her.

Monday. Tomorrow. He opened his eyes.

His little bit of her. His little wedge in her life. Could he take that wedge and widen it, exploit it? Spread it as she had spread her legs to his touch two days ago? Get her to see that she belonged to him? In his bed?

He would seduce her tomorrow night. Now that she had experienced a release, now that she had had a taste of carnality, of kissing, of coitus, he would use it. Like small beer leads to rum. Like laudanum leads to unadulterated opium. He would intoxicate and addict her to her own pleasure, making her incapable of anything besides lusting for him.

His cock grew hard. He took himself in hand, imagining her lips, her breasts, her spectacular bottom.

He thought of what he would do to her tomorrow.

He imagined how he would seduce her in his very particular way as he had his five previous mistresses.

After all, it had worked every single time.

It disturbed him a little that, in his imagination, she giggled the entire time he touched her. A little. But not enough to blunt the rising tide of his release. And it disturbed him even less that as he came to his own ecstatic ending, the words on his lips were not her name, but a grunting out of “Check . . . and mate.”

# NINE

## 1811. THE DUCHY OF ABINGDON.

It was going to happen. Phoebe could barely tamp down her excitement. He had a rook. She had a rook and a pawn. They both had kings as well, of course, since the game would be over if one of them were to lose a king. As George was about to lose his. She was sure to win with her superior number of pieces. She allowed an exchange of rooks, knowing she would take him with her pawn. Finally, finally, finally, after six years of playing George, she would finally win.

But she didn't. He forced a draw. A draw had happened before in their games. It was nothing to celebrate, not like a win would have been.

Carefully, he explained her error, how she should have gone for the Lucena position and then she would have won.

She noticed him looking at her several times as he talked and expounded in his George way and moved the pieces on the board. He had looked at her several times in much the same manner during their game, his eyes resting for long periods of time on a spot just a little bit lower than her face.

*My breasts. He has been looking at my breasts.* A flush of something ran through her. Who cared about the draw? George was looking at her breasts.

Finally, he stopped talking and sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

“I don't think you've been paying attention to me, Phee.”



Her face grew hot. "Of course, I have." Then, in as brave a voice as she could muster, "Have you been paying attention to me?" She looked down at her own chest and then back up at him meaningfully.

He averted his eyes and blushed. George never blushed. Yes, his face went red when it was summer and he had been horseback riding for a long time. Or when he had been fencing on the lawn with his fencing instructor. But he did not blush, not sitting across a chessboard from her.

"Yes," he said. "And I think you had better wear a higher-necked dress from now on, Bumblephee. For your chess lessons. When you lean over the board."

She fled the room, wracked by shame.

Two days later, when he came again to play with her, she wore a dress that came up to her collarbone as well as a fichu. As she came into the library, he nodded, his face grave. It was his only acknowledgement that she had chosen well for her lesson.

She sat. He sat. They played. He won. She congratulated him. He showed her blunders to her. She listened, she nodded, she paid attention to what he said. But she also paid attention to the woodsy, cedary smell of him. How big and strong his hands were, moving the pieces on the board, as he explained something to her. How deep his voice was. The fluttering feeling she got when he praised a particular move she had made.

Six weeks later, she won her first game. He looked up from the board and grinned at her.

"That was bloody brilliant, Phee."

She pushed her chair back and ran around the table and threw her arms around his neck.

"I won."

"Yes, you did." His voice was muffled by her chest. "Congratulations." She pulled away and he looked up at her and smiled. "Well done, Phee."

He was happy. Happy for her.

“I knew it was coming,” he said. “You almost did it six weeks ago. I’ve been holding my breath for ages, waiting for you to vanquish me.”

“You didn’t let me win, did you, George?”

“Of course not.” He was suddenly serious and took both of her hands in his. “I would never do that. That would be dishonest. That would lessen your accomplishment.” Then he grinned again. “You won fair and square.”

She trembled, her heart raced. She had won. He was happy for her. He was holding her hands.

*And I’m in love with him.*

She was fourteen, after all. She had breasts and monthly courses and was a woman now. She felt well able to say she was in love with him.

“It’s all to do with your teaching, George.” She squeezed his hands. Suddenly, she realized her breasts were at his eye-level and moments ago his face had been buried in them.

He looked away from her and let go of her hands. “You shouldn’t say that, Bumblephee. You are very good. At chess.”

There was a finality to his words, and he began to replace the pieces, setting up the chessboard as he liked to leave it, eleven moves into Philidor’s 1783 bishop’s opening against Bruehl.

Her joy evaporated.

“You won’t stop playing with me now, George, will you? Now that I’ve won?”

“Like hell I will.” He glared at her. “I finally have someone decent to play against. I’ve invested six years in you, Phee, and I intend to be paid back.”

She wished she could summon the courage she had possessed a month and a half ago when she had flirted with him for the first and only time in her life. Courage that would

allow her to say, “And how would you like to be repaid, George?” and put her hand on the back of his neck.

And he would turn to her and kiss her.

But that wasn't real.

She already knew what would happen if she did touch him and ask that question. He would grimace, shrug her hand away, and say, “You can repay me in games, of course.” Or he would level her with another glare, leave the room, and never come back.

She moved around the table to face him. “I'll pay you back, George. By winning.”

He looked up at her. “You better. You better win so much that I'm scared to play you.”

“We won't play again? Right now?”

“As much as I want a rematch, I think we had better stop for today.”

“Oh.”

“Attention must be paid. This is not a moment to gloss over. You won the game, Phee. Let's let the victory linger. I want you to enjoy it. Because you are *not* going to win the next game. There's a fire in my belly now.”

“And I lit it?”

He stood abruptly, pushing his chair back. “I must go.” He left the library with none of his usual courtesy, no farewell, no reminder to her to be on time for her next lesson.

She looked down at the chessboard. Despite her restraint, she had said something wrong. She went over her words in her head. Maybe the reference to a fire in his belly was something wicked? Something like the achy pulsing she got between her legs at night in her own bed when she thought about him?

She would have to be more careful from now on. George didn't see her as a woman. She was Bumblephee to him, the little neighbor girl he had taken on as a pupil. Teaching her chess. Vocabulary. Grammar. Riding astride, wearing a pair of

his old breeches. And her own family all said George had taught her to walk when she was one.

She mustn't push him away with her breasts. Or by showing she had feelings he didn't share. He would run away, just as he had now. And she wouldn't be able to bear losing him, her best friend in all the world. That would be too awful.

From now on, she'd be what he wanted. His student, his chess protégé, his friend. She could do that. She could do anything if it meant keeping him.

Three days later, he was back, the same as always. She wore one of her high-necked dresses. She paid attention to the chessboard. They played three games that day, and she won one. Again, he was delighted for her. And she was relieved. She had not scared him away.

Two weeks later, his father died and he became the Baron Danforth. He was very busy now and even more serious. But he still made time to play chess with her. "It helps me, it relaxes me," he said. And she felt some pride that she helped him that way.

Six months after that, Phoebe overheard her male cousins talking about George's mistress, an actress living in London.

He was well and truly a man now. And she was still a little girl to him. But she was only six years away from being twenty. Six years away from being very old for a woman.

# TEN

“G ood evening, Wynn.”

“Good evening, Lady Phoebe.”

Phoebe stepped into the front hall of the Danforth town house.

“It’s been so hot, hasn’t it, Wynn? I can scarcely believe it’s evening when the sun is still so high.”

“Yes, my lady. May I take your hat?”

“Oh, yes, let me unpin it. Lord Danforth wouldn’t like it if I wore a hat while we played chess, would he? He would claim it distracted him. Then I would be to blame if he lost the game.”

“Yes, my lady.”

She finally got the dratted hat pin out and took her hat off. Of course, some strands of her hair came loose at the same time. “Oh, goodness.”

“May I be so bold as to congratulate you on your engagement, Lady Phoebe?”

“Oh, yes, of course, you may, Wynn. Thank you.”

Phoebe looked at herself in one of the mirrors in the hall. Not only was her hair hanging down, but her whole face was red. She bit her lip as she stuffed the wayward hair into the pins that still clung to her head. She shouldn’t have spent all of Sunday afternoon practicing her archery when she knew the bow did not allow her to wear a wide-brimmed hat that would

shade her face. Thank goodness, she had two more days before Thornwick would see her again. Maybe the redness would fade before then. And she didn't need to worry about how she looked this evening. It was just George.

Phoebe took one step down the hall toward the staircase that would take her to the kitchen. Then she hesitated. She always went to see Mrs. Hay before going to play chess with George. But when she went to see Mrs. Hay, she inevitably ate biscuits. And she had thought perhaps she had better stop eating biscuits, at least until the wedding. Thornwick himself was so perfect. So tall. So trim. Surely, he wouldn't want a plump bride. They would look so odd together. And her own mother had clucked her tongue over the size of Phoebe's hips only two days ago.

She turned. "Wynn, will you give my regrets to Mrs. Hay tonight? Please tell her I am too afraid of the temptation of her biscuits. I'll go right to his lordship's study instead."

Wynn bowed. "Yes, my lady, I'll tell her."

Outside the door to George's study, Phoebe felt even hotter than she had felt on the street. Sweat was beading between her breasts. She so very much needed a cold cloth right now. And to be out of her stays. She was so sticky.

She stepped into the study without knocking. She never knocked on the study door. George knew to expect her. But George was not in the study.

She called out, "George? I'm sorry I'm late."

"In here." His voice sounded far away, coming from his bedchamber.

She crossed the study, noting the chessboard was not even set up yet. How very strange.

She came into the brightly lit bedchamber. George was sitting on the edge of the bed in just a shirt and trousers.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you weren't dressed—" She turned to go out.

“No, wait, Phee, don’t go.” He must have bounded off the bed because she felt his large hand with its square fingers on her forearm, arresting her movement. For some reason, she was nervous about turning and looking at him. But she forced herself. His eyes, round and deep like his sister’s but ever so dark, stared down at her. He looked almost feverish. Distraught.

“Are you not well, George?”

“I’m well, I’m well. Now that you’re here, I’m well.”

This was so unlike him. “You are usually waistcoated and tailcoated and cravated when I come for chess.”

“About that. I wondered if we might not play chess tonight.”

“Not play chess?”

George’s shirt was unbuttoned at his neck and she could see a hint of the muscled chest he had shown her three days ago. And now with him so close, she could smell that wonderful George smell. That musky, cedar wood smell. Despite having pleased herself only an hour earlier, she began to feel a pulse and a slickness down below and quite without meaning to, she put her hand up to the opening in his shirt and lightly touched his warm skin and the dark hair there.

His voice was a little strained. “I realized maybe I hadn’t really taught you everything you needed to know. About bedding.”

She brought her fingers down the midline of his chest until she hit a button on his shirt. She undid that button and could slide more of her hand under his shirt, feel more of his chest.

“What is left, George?”

“I think it’s better if I show you rather than talking about it.”

The pulsing down below had become a horrible throb. A maddening second heart. She unbuttoned another button on his shirt. “Should I undress you?”

“In fact, no, Phee. You shouldn’t. I’m going to stay dressed.” He captured her hand in his own. “But I would like to undress you.”

Despite her throb, her mind protested on several fronts. First, she was so sticky and sweaty. Wouldn’t she be disgusting to George? Second, she didn’t need practice in being undressed by someone else. Wasn’t that what her lady’s maid did for her every night? Third, she wanted to learn how to touch a man. How could she do that if George stayed dressed?

“Will you teach me what to do to your organ tonight?”

“There are some other lessons you need first.”

“Really?” Without thinking about it, her other hand reached up and she started rubbing his head. How terrible she was, doing this without asking him first. But he seemed to like it. He wasn’t giving her his stern look, the one he used to try to scare her. He was almost like a cat, closing his eyes and stretching his neck to keep his head in her hand.

“What kind of lesson can I have with your clothes on, George?”

“Well,” he groaned and opened his eyes. It seemed to take a moment for him to focus on her. “I think it is important you have a lesson in your own pleasure.”

Should she tell him? Yes, she decided. George had been the one to tell her about it and to demonstrate it to her, after all. He deserved to know what a good teacher he was.

“I have learned a great deal about pleasure since our last lesson.” She brushed the top of his ear and touched the delicate skin just behind it.

His whole body went rigid and his jaw clenched. He was scowling at her. This was the *very* stern look. The one she got when she was more than half an hour late. She hadn’t anticipated this at all. She took her hand off his head.

“I only did what you said was possible, and I have discovered you were quite right. I can give myself a climax with my own hand, just as you said.”



Now she got the reaction she had expected. A slight upturning of his lips. A look of praise in his eyes. His body visibly relaxed. “That’s very good,” he murmured. “But you still have things to learn. Will you turn around for me, Bumblephee?”

She turned around, her eyes on the floor. Bumblephee. What he had called her since she was a little girl. He always said it was because she was a buzzing little thing, flying about and never landing until he forced her to be still. But she also knew it was because she was clumsy, messy. A bumbling fool. Following behind him when she was five and he was nine, wanting to do everything he did and do it as well as he did and failing.

“You see,” George said in her ear as he started undoing her buttons, “last time, I became very involved in my own sensation and I think if I stay dressed, I have a better chance of keeping my attention on you.”

She reached up to her shoulders to start to pull her dress off.

“No, I’m going to undress you. You aren’t to do anything, Phee.”

She let her arms fall to her sides. She felt his fingers push the dress off her shoulders and down her arms to her waist and he was squeezing her bottom through her petticoat and then stooping down and having her step out of her dress. Then his fingers were on the laces of her stays.

How heavenly to have the stays loosened and taken off. Her breasts felt so much better unconstrained, under just her chemise.

“Don’t move, Phee. I don’t know how women can stand these restrictive things when it’s so hot out.”

“George.”

“Yes?”

“Earlier, walking here, it was so warm, and I perspired a great deal.”

“So?”

From behind her, George reached around and cupped her breasts through her chemise. She shuddered. His touch was so much better than her own. She leaned back into him, putting her head on his chest, nestling her bottom against him, feeling a bit of his hardness poking at her back.

“That’s right, lovely girl, just relax. I’ve got you. And don’t worry about the perspiration. You smell divine. Like Phoebe times ten.” He put his nose and mouth against the side of her neck and she could feel her nipples hardening and aching under her chemise as he held her breasts. “And I intend to make you perspire a bit more.” A long, soft lick of his tongue on the side of her neck and she shuddered as his fingers very lightly scraped over her erect peaks. “You taste even better than you smell. And I am going to taste you everywhere.”

Just a moment ago, she had been limp, a puddle of melted butter in his arms. But what he said . . . anxiety began to claw at her.

“George.”

He was kissing and nibbling at her neck. “What’s wrong, lovely girl?”

She pulled away from him slightly. “What do you mean by *everywhere*? Tasting me *everywhere*?”

He continued to play with her breasts through her chemise, very lightly touching and fondling them, not just her peaks but the undersides, the tops, the sides. She was a little sore on the outer part of her left breast, but not much.

He growled. “I shouldn’t have said anything.” Then, softer. “There’s no reason to worry.”

She bit her lip but his hands were so wonderful and she felt so in need now and it was George, after all. If she couldn’t trust George, whom could she trust? But something else was nagging at her.

“Maybe you shouldn’t call me *lovely girl*.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not really a girl, any longer. And you’ve never called me that before.”

He was still for a moment. Then he went back to stroking her nipples and kissing her neck. “No, but I’ve thought it.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Are you having that pulsing achiness, Phee?”

“Y-yes.”

“Let’s have you lie down on the bed.”

George released her breasts and a small sound escaped from her lips before she could stop it. And George must have heard it because he smiled slightly as she turned. He pulled the counterpane off the bed and she got up on the mattress awkwardly, still in her chemise and petticoat. The sheet under her was strangely cool and delicious.

“Get comfortable.”

“Yes, George.” She lay on her back.

He got up on the bed next to her. “Just remember, there is nothing for you to do.”

“But—”

He put a finger to her lips. “Not this lesson.”

“Can I touch you at all?” she asked, muffled only slightly by his digit on her mouth.

He took his finger away. “I see there’s no keeping you quiet, is there? I should know better. No. You can’t touch me.”

“Not even your head?”

“Especially not my head.”

“Oh.”

He began grazing his fingers over the tips of her breasts through the chemise, using the soft muslin as the gentlest of friction against her nipples, making them so hard. Piercing

sensations ran down her body from her breasts to the place between her legs.

“Does it feel good, Phee?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good.”

The light rubbing went on for quite a while. He looked down at her still covered breasts every so often to see her erect nipples pushing against his touch, but largely he looked at her face. And she looked at his. He was watching her, assessing her, studying her. It was just like a horizontal chess lesson. She pressed her thighs together.

“Do you like this, Phee?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to keep going? To take off your chemise and your petticoat?”

“Y-yes.”

He leaned down and whispered in her ear. “I won’t do it until you can’t bear me teasing you this way any longer and you beg for it.”

“All right.” She sighed.

His hand stilled. “What’s wrong?”

“I’d like it a great deal better if you’d let me touch you.”

“Oh.”

“And if you kissed me. Or let me kiss you.”

His expressionless face. The one he had when he considered all possible moves on the board.

“Please, George.”

“I wanted this to be about you, Phee.”

“How is that coupling?”

He frowned. She turned on her side toward him and brought her hand up to his head. “Let’s think of this as like chess.” She ran her fingers over his scalp.

“Unhh.” His head tilted slightly toward her hand.

“If you make all the moves and I can’t make any, then there’s no game.”

“That’s true.” His mouth hung open a tiny bit, his stern look softened.

“And besides . . .” She bit her lip. Should she tell him this? “I think your excitement makes me excited. Otherwise, it’s rather selfish, isn’t it? And I like your excitement. I mean, I like the other things, too, but I like knowing you want me.”

“Oh, Phee.” He kissed her then. A deep kiss, his tongue in her mouth, fierce and wild, the bulge in his trousers pushing at her hip.

“Yes,” she gasped when he was done. “Yes. Yes, that’s it.”

His mouth covered hers again and his hand clutched at her breasts, kneading them now, first the right and now—ouch—the left.

He pulled away from her. He was panting. “What’s wrong? I thought this is what you wanted.”

“Yes, yes.” She put her arms around his neck and tried to pull him down to her mouth again, but he resisted.

“You winced, Phee.”

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s something. What’s wrong?”

She sat up. “I’ll show you.” She pulled her chemise off over her head and raised her left arm and twisted her body toward him. “See? It’s just a little tender here.” She pointed to the vertical welts on the side of her left breast.

George’s eyes widened and he sat up, too. Words roared out of him. “Who did this to you? Are these Thornwick’s marks? Did he whip you? I’ll murder the villain!”

*What?* “No! Of course not. Arthur hasn’t even touched me that way. I’m not even sure he— And why would he whip my breast?”

George didn't answer. He was trembling all over. There was something in his eyes she had never seen before. She needed to reassure him. Her friend, her protector.

"It's from my archery. My bowstring. I've told you before about how it thumps me. I practiced for ages yesterday, that's all." George's ragged breathing gradually calmed. His clenched fists relaxed.

"And now, please, let me touch you. Please, please." She put her hands on his chest and dragged them down his torso to his lap. "Show me what to do."

"Phee." He groaned. "What is your obsession with touching my cock? You're driving me mad."

She rubbed him through his trousers. "I am? Good."

He was sweating now, grinding his teeth, eyes closed. "I'm going to lose control."

"Yes, please. I don't want you to have any control. I want you to show me what to do to make you lose control."

"If."

"Yes?"

"If I show you what to do, will you let me do what I want to you?"

"Yes."

"All right." He put his hands to his fall and began to unfasten his buttons.

She giggled. "Of course, I would have let you do that anyway."

He laid back and lifted his narrow hips and pulled his trousers off. "You are the world's worst negotiator."

She undid her petticoat and wriggled it down. "Shirt off, too."

"Now you're just being high-handed." But he sat up again and crossed his arms and grasped his shirt.

"Please."

He lifted it over his head and was grinning as he threw it on the floor. "That's better."

"Yes. Much."

He lay before her naked. His organ was standing almost as tall as it had been on Friday. She reached out and lightly brushed the dark nest of hair that sat at the base. How strange that George would lose the hair on his head and nowhere else on his body. Her fingers trailed down to his scrotum. What a funny soft thing, not at all like his cock. Which was not the least bit soft or funny right now.

She lifted her hand and touched the shaft itself. She ran her fingers over it. Yes, the skin was as satiny as she remembered. And there were veins visible and the top flared out. She took a firmer grasp and went up and down his length with her hand. Just once. He shuddered. She felt the shaft grow harder and larger. And yes, it was darker now.

She had done that.

"See, you already know what to do."

"What do I do with my mouth?"

He moaned. "I don't know."

"You do know."

"Kiss it," he mumbled.

She got up on her knees and hovered over him.

"Get on my left side," he said clearly.

"Now who's being high-handed?"

"Please."

She did as he asked as he shifted over to his right to give her room. "Why?"

He reached down and held her breast as she leaned over his shaft again. "So I can touch your right breast instead of your sore left one. Without fear of hurting you."

She smiled at him. George was so considerate, as always. But he looked so serious.

“I’m not an executioner, George.” And then she turned to his cock—thank goodness he couldn’t read her mind, he frowned every time she said that word even though that’s what *he* called it—and kissed the tip. And then she kissed it again. A kiss like this seemed unlikely to produce the effect she wanted. But perhaps a deeper kiss.

“I want to tongue kiss it.”

A long sigh. His hand moved on her breast, a tighter grip now. “Yes.”

She took his cock in her mouth and swirled her tongue over the bulbous top part. Well, as much as she could. She licked the ridges. It was musky with a taste that matched George’s cedar smell. Wonderful. And from the groan she heard, she had done something right. She did it again. And again. Then she remembered something Alice had said and what she had done to George’s finger three days ago, and she took him deeper into her mouth and then pulled her head back, sucking and using her tongue at the same time. He had too much girth for her to make a satisfying pop with her lips when she took her mouth all the way off of him, but his phallus was so big now. So hard.

“Phee.” His head lifted and his eyes bore into her. He looked savage. His other hand came to her own head and laced into her hair. “Phee.”

She didn’t have to ask. She knew he liked it.

“What else, George?”

His head went back. His voice seemed to be coming from very far away. “You . . . can . . . use your hand . . . in tandem with your mouth.”

It was time to assert herself. “George?”

He lifted his head. “Yes?”

“I want you to put your seed in my mouth.”

He mumbled something she didn’t hear because she had taken him in her mouth again and put her hand on him and she was rubbing and sucking and licking him all at the same time.



The clutching of her breast became disordered, chaotic.

She paused. “Am I doing it right?”

His answer was a moan and she went back to what she was doing before. Very little time passed before his hand fell from her breast and he clutched her buttock instead. His words became distinct.

“Phee. I’m going to spend.”

And then he squeezed her cheek with his hand and he screamed as he had on Friday, and she felt a warm pulsing in her mouth and tasted a slightly thick, slightly soapy fluid. It wasn’t unpleasant. In fact, it was positively benign.

But. Oh, no. Should she spit the seed out? And where? Before she had taken him in her mouth, she should have asked him if she could swallow it. She thought quickly. What had Alice said last year? Her stomach was not connected to her womb. She should not get with child from this. She swallowed.

Very carefully, she took her mouth off of him. She sat up. It hadn’t taken very long at all.

“What now, George?”

Strong arms grabbed her under her own arms, and he dragged her up toward his head.

“Now.” A sigh. “Now, you give a man a moment to recover.”

She giggled and put her head on the mat of dark hair on his chest and put her arm across him and held his flank on the other side. How wonderful. How easy it had been. How wrong she had been to worry.

“Thank you, George.”

“Thank me?”

She giggled again and lifted her head and looked at him. His eyes were closed. “I did well, didn’t I?”

His arm had been holding her very loosely to his side. Now it tightened and he pulled her against him. He opened his

eyes and looked at her. “You did marvelously well.”

“Good.” She put her head down again. She could see his cock—she whispered the word in her head—was losing its size, its strength.

“Why didn’t Morton come and knock, George?”

“Morton?” His hand idly stroked her back.

“When you screamed.”

“I gave the staff the night off and tickets to the theater. Everyone left just after you got here. I wanted to ensure our privacy. And Alice is at her literary society as usual, on Mondays.”

“Is screaming normal? I don’t scream.”

“I don’t know.” He sounded puzzled. He moved his arm and started sliding down the bed. “Now it’s my turn.”

“Oh, no. Oh, no.” She tried to grab him and pull him back up but her arms weren’t strong enough and her fingers slid uselessly over his biceps. “I don’t think that’s necessary.”

He growled. “You made your move, Phee. You have to give me a chance to make mine. Besides, you gave me your word.”

She had, hadn’t she?

“But you’ll be careful, won’t you?”

“I’m always careful, Phee.”

Yes, that was true. There could not be a more careful man than George. But still. She didn’t like the idea of him down there. She had gotten so sticky walking over and then being against his warm body.

But as soon as he settled himself between her legs and put his mouth on her, oh, oh, the softness of his lips, his tongue, and she forgot everything except the pure melting sensation that was his mouth.

It felt like she had become fused to him or he had become fused to her and everything was softness and wetness and just

every once in a while, a small amount of friction nudging at her little hardness. And over time, the friction grew, the nudging became a little rougher, a little more frequent. But she wanted that, she needed that. It was like George knew. He could tell exactly when he should incrementally increase . . . everything. She reached down and touched the top of his beautiful head and he looked at her and raised his eyebrows but didn't stop.

“Oh, God, yes, yes, yes, George!” she answered his unvoiced question. “Huh, huh, huh, huhhhhhhhhhhh.” And, oh, the clutching waves coming over her, crashing around her. Astoundingly sweet pleasure rolling through her body for long seconds. And now that wonderful, clean, empty feeling.

He had stopped. Which was good because she didn't think she could have tolerated his intense attentions for a moment longer.

Her breath slowly came back to her. “Come here, George,” she purred and reached out to him.

But he didn't move. “Phee, it's possible for me to continue.”

“I've spent. It was amazing and delightful, but I've spent.”

“Women have the advantage over men in this area. You might spend again. We should find out if you can. Part of your lesson.”

“But I don't need to, George. And isn't your tongue tired?”

“No.”

“Oh.” She had spent by herself just before coming here this evening and it had not diminished one bit her enjoyment of what he had just done to her. But could she release once more, so quickly? George wouldn't have suggested it if he didn't think it was possible. She shrugged. “All right.”

He started using his mouth on her again. Even more gently than before. But even more quickly than before, her arousal built and built and built until it was as tall as a mountain. Taller. And then she was tumbling down in a beautiful flurry, as satisfying as her previous climaxes, but different somehow.

She lay still. She breathed. Deeply. How delicious. And then she giggled. “You were right.”

“Yes.”

She lifted her head. He was still between her legs. He had been holding her bottom with his large hands but now he moved an arm up and caressed her right breast, lightly pinching her nipple. Oh. She took a deep breath, shuddering. “You’re always right. It’s so irritating.”

“Is it?” He looked hurt.

“No. It isn’t. I don’t know why I said that. Anybody else, it would be, but when it’s you, it’s actually wonderfully comforting. I wouldn’t change you for the world.”

A blush on his face. His deep voice. “May I do that to you once more?”

He was spoiling her, wasn’t he? Ha. In both senses of the word. “Yes, please.” How greedy she was.

He withdrew his hand from her breast and held her bottom again.

This climax took longer. But when he very surprisingly placed a finger inside her, in the same place where his cock had penetrated on Friday, she felt a wild desperation come over her and suddenly she was huffing and she could feel herself clamping down on his finger over and over and over again even as he kept his mouth on her. Again, an entirely new sensation.

“Oh, George.”

He came up beside her then, grinning.

“Oh, George, wouldn’t it be wonderful if men had a little tongue just above their cocks?”

Uh-oh. The word had slipped out. She looked at his face, sure he would scold her. But he was still grinning. He leaned down and kissed her and she tasted on his lips what she had recently discovered was her own taste. “You have a fantastic imagination, Phee.”

“Just think. It would be so efficient.”

“I’m not sure God had efficiency in mind when he made our bodies so enjoyable.”

And then he nuzzled his face under her right breast and took a bit of the skin there in his mouth and sucked on it for a long time. It didn’t hurt but it wasn’t really pleasurable either. But it was difficult to imagine anything being really pleasurable again after the three glorious releases he had just given her.

She was so at ease. And drowsy. Perhaps that was why only husbands and wives were supposed to have this intimacy. So they could fall asleep together afterwards. What heaven it would be to just stay here right now and fall asleep. But George was not her husband. She could not sleep in his bed.

“I have to go now.”

He moved his head back and gazed at the skin where he had sucked. “All right.”

She got off the bed and started looking for her undergarments. There, her petticoat was tangled in a sheet of the bed. And George’s shirt was crumpled on top of her chemise on the floor. Really, George was becoming as messy as she was.

## ELEVEN

George sat sprawled in his wing chair in his study, wearing just his shirt and trousers, the same ones he had worn with Phoebe last evening before he had stripped. He had stayed naked in bed all night after she had left, wanting to be surrounded by the faint trace of her smell that clung to the sheets, recalling the sensation of her mouth on him, her hooking one ankle around him and rubbing her foot up and down his backside as he held her own perfect bottom and seduced her with his mouth on her quim and his face wedged between her lush, soft thighs.

And the mark he had left on the underside of her right breast. The love bruise. Claiming her. Saying she was his. He had not been able to resist after he had seen the lines of redness on her other breast and thought Thornwick had left them there.

The bruise had been stupid. Impulsive. And he was not a man who usually operated under the influence of impulse.

But if Thornwick dared anything that might allow him to see Phoebe's breasts in the next week, he would see George's mark. He would know another man had been there first, had labelled her MINE.

But Phoebe wasn't really George's yet, was she?

Last evening hadn't worked out quite as he had planned. He had thought he would ensnare her as he had his previous mistresses. He would stay dressed. He would deny himself her touch, deny himself coupling with her, his own release. He

would encourage her to remain passive and to indulge in her own pleasure.

Of course, that hadn't worked with Phoebe. He should have known she would want more. She would want to engage. She would want to do something to him. Control him. Make him helpless. Make him whimper and scream. Take his king.

How incredible she was.

And how incredibly exasperating. Although she had seemed pleased with what she had done to him and what he had done to her, he did not sense he had really trapped her, addicted her to his tongue, convinced her to return to his bed over and over again. She had gotten up and dressed with no sign of longing, just as she had on Friday.

He rubbed his face with his hands. He was trying to come up with his next strategy and having a deucedly difficult time doing so. Perhaps he couldn't formulate his endgame because he didn't know his objective.

What did George Danforth really want?

Phoebe in his bed? Yes.

Phoebe not married to Thornwick? Preferably yes, because he didn't think Phoebe would dally outside her marriage. And George felt he was still, himself, somewhat a man of honor, having only bedded unmarried women and widows in the past. And the idea of Thornwick touching Phoebe made George ill. He wouldn't stand for it. No, she would not marry Thornwick.

So. Phoebe in his bed. Phoebe not married to Thornwick. Was there anything else?

Perhaps he should bathe and change his clothes. That might help clear his mind so he could plot his ruthless attack. But he was loath to do so. Thoughts of Phoebe filled his imagination and kept him from moving. Her tiny gloves littering his house. The darling way her hair fell down. Her sweet smile of delight when she promoted a pawn and when he touched her berry.

His reverie was interrupted by the remote rattle of the downstairs door of the special entrance. He leapt to his feet,

his heart hammering at his ribcage.

Phoebe. She had come to him. Again. He was wrong. He *had* captured her. She wasn't able to stay away from him. She wanted him as he wanted her. He didn't need a plan, after all. Now all he must do is demand she break it off with Thornwick if she hadn't done so already. Then he would take her to his bedchamber and make slow, careful love to her. Almost instantly, he was half-engorged at the thought of her skin against his, her lips moaning his name, her bottom in his hands, her beautifully pink, wet quim taking his cock.

*Wait.*

An idea of startling clarity swept over him, scouring away the muddle of feeling he had over the last four days.

It was crystalline, pure. Right. He teetered with the force of it.

He had to own her.

Legally. And forever.

Having her break it off with Thornwick and having her in his own bed on occasion was not enough.

He must marry her.

Her brother Andrew was right. Phoebe would make an ideal wife. Sweet and smiling and even-tempered, not mercurial and high-strung like his own mother or sister. Clever and able to argue with him without riling him. Soothing when he needed that. Always willing to read his monographs and to be an audience when he practiced his speeches before giving them in the House of Lords.

He saw himself and Phoebe in front of a fire, playing chess long into the night. And then retiring together, her yawning prettily, him with his arm around her waist and his hand creeping toward her bottom as they went up the stairs at the Danforth country house.

He would get a promise from her. Immediately. Then, they would consummate their betrothal. Next, he would go directly to her father. He would be demanding as only George



Danforth knew how to be. And he would apply for and receive a special license first thing tomorrow morning. They would be married by next week. No, two days from now.

Yes, it would cause a scandal for her to be married to him on the heels of the announcement of her engagement to Thornwick. But not nearly as big a scandal as the Duke of Middlewich's wedding last week. James Cavendish had married a woman seventeen years his senior, a former actress, a banker's widow. And visibly pregnant, if rumors were to be believed. No, the insignificant Baron Danforth stealing the youngest daughter of the Duke of Abingdon away from the Duke of Thornwick would barely warrant a whisper in the *ton* while the Middlewich *on dit* was still fresh news.

In some ways, the timing was perfect.

And, besides, he didn't care about a scandal. He wanted Phoebe married to him before she got it in her head to go off and get engaged to some other fellow without asking his permission.

Because she should be *his*, shouldn't she? She was meant for him.

A beautiful future stretched out in front of him, dotted with permission to touch her naked body whenever he wished. They would marry and have at least four—no, six—bald babies of their own and he would have two dozen pairs of gloves made for her, all the same, and she would never be without a matching pair again.

Perhaps it had better be five dozen.

The door that led to the private staircase opened and he heard the familiar greeting: "Hello, lover."

*No.*

It wasn't Phoebe. It was Lady Starling. Horatia. His mistress. The young Dowager Viscountess Starling. She was dressed in one of her fussy dresses which emphasized her large bosom, her pale blonde curls peeking out from under her hat.

"You look surprised, George."

He was lost. He was dizzy. “What-what day is it?”

“Tuesday.”

Tuesday? But Tuesday was when he was supposed to deliver his speech in the House of Lords regarding the outlay of expenses for the Royal Navy. And he hadn't done that, having spent the morning idling here in his study. He had completely lost track of his duties.

“You said Tuesday, remember? Since I could not come last Friday. You demanded it from me, you naughty boy.” She crossed to him, her hips swaying. “How very *dishabille* you are already. So unexpected. You must be very hungry for me.”

She stood in front of him, the miasma of her perfume washing over him. She had a quizzical look on her face before she broke into laughter.

“I've never seen you without your wig on. You look so virile this way.” Smiling, she reached up and touched his scalp. “How strange that your head reminds me so much of your cock.” She dragged her hand down the side of his face, brushing his unshaven jaw, his chest, and down to his bulge where she groped him firmly. “Yes, I see. Very hungry for me.” She leaned forward, her lips slightly open, ready to kiss him.

He grabbed her wrist and moved her hand off of him. Her touch on his head had revolted him. She had no business touching him there. That place was for one woman, and one woman only.

Her expression changed. Became calculating.

“I see you've heard.” She wrenched her arm from him and stepped away. “But it doesn't mean we can't have one last fuck, George. In fact, I had counted on it.” She reached up to unpin her hat. “I was going to tell you afterward, but it's good you already know. It will lend a certain sweet ferocity to our coupling. Our last time. For now. As you know, I don't like things to end in too final of a manner. Especially after seeing you this way.” Her tongue darted out and she licked her lips. “Rather too good to be true, you all rugged and unfettered and

scowling. I hope you take out all that wonderful rage on me.” She paused, lost in thought. “Perhaps I might manage both of you.”

“Heard what?” His mind raced. Had she heard something about him and Phoebe? Or about Thornwick and Phoebe? “Both of whom?”

“Oh, I see. You want to pretend. Fine.” She shrugged and put her hat down on a chair. Phoebe’s chair. “We’ll pretend. If that’s what it takes to salve your delicate male vanity.”

He lost any semblance of control over his temper. “Tell me what the devil you’re talking about!”

“Oooh. The bear has come out of its cave to play. My grumbly-wumbly bear, is it?”

He lunged toward her, his fists at his side. “Tell me. Now.”

Finally, he had gotten through to her. Her eyes widened and her mouth went slack. “I, uh—that is, I have taken up with Phineas Edge. You’re so serious, George, and you know I must have a bit of fun.” She trilled a nervous laugh. “I couldn’t help myself. He really is so much fun.”

“Phineas?”

“Yes, the Earl of Burchester and I were in Brighton this last week. Together. Such an unfashionable time to be there but it gave us wonderful cover. It was a trial period, you see? Just like you and I had. Now don’t be testy. I’ll talk to Phineas and see how he feels about my splitting my time between you two. He is a most accommodating gentleman.”

He felt nothing but relief. He would be rid of Horatia, thank God. He hadn’t even thought ahead to her return and that he must break it off with her. Immediately. And now the problem he had not even considered had been solved for him.

He kept his face menacing and his voice harsh. “Yes, I know you must have your fun, Horatia. And I acknowledge Phineas Edge is the perfect man for that. But I don’t fancy sharing your favors. Go, be happy. I give you my blessing.”

Lady Starling was unsettled by his response, he could tell.

“Your blessing?” she spat out finally as she grabbed up her hat. “I don’t want or need your blessing, you bookish, bald, old man. Yes, old! You’re old before your time. Phineas may be almost a decade your senior but he has given me more pleasure in the last five days than you have given me in the last five months. I have grown sick of your pedantic ways, your limited repertoire in bed given that you insist on keeping your wig on. And your sister? An attention-seeking cocktease. And that little friend of hers we all know you teach chess to? She’d be perfect for you, George. I’m surprised you haven’t taken up with her. Thank God, Thornwick will save that poor thing from having to play chess with you any longer. He won’t stand for it.”

George seized Horatia’s elbow and propelled her toward the door.

“We have established you’re well shut of me, Lady Starling. Now I will bid you adieu.” He pushed her out and shut the door and waited.

He heard a muffled “*Arsehole*” and more muttered curses as Horatia descended the stairs in high dudgeon. He didn’t breathe until he heard the door at the bottom of the staircase slam shut.

He turned and with his back to the door, he sank down until he was sitting on the floor with his knees up near his chin.

He was going to have to speak to Alice yet again and find a way to curb her behavior. Reduce her hat and glove allowance to pennies. He hadn’t known others thought of her or spoke of her as—the words were scorched into his brain—*an attention-seeking cocktease*. Hellion, yes. Cocktease, no. At this rate, she would never get married.

And then he was struck by the last thing, save *arsehole*, that Horatia had said. There would be no more chess with Phoebe in the future if she married Thornwick.

Yes, George had already realized he would not couple with her again if her engagement led to marriage. But the loss of her as a chess partner? He had never thought . . . he couldn’t

imagine...it would be a death blow. Playing chess with Phoebe had been one of the best things in his life for fourteen years.

*Stop lying to yourself, George Charles James David Danforth. Phoebe Finch has been the single best thing in your life for her whole life.*

But after she married Thornwick, she would be subservient to the duke, no longer guided by her indulgent father who saw no harm in her playing chess with her childhood friend.

Thornwick would well be within his rights to forbid the Monday nights.

For a moment, he was torn. Which would he prefer to give up? Copulating with her or playing chess with her?

He could not decide.

God damn it.

Neither.

He forced himself to stand. George would end this engagement between Thornwick and Phoebe if it was the last thing he did. And then he would woo her himself and secure the right to play with her, both in bed and over a chessboard, for the rest of his life.

## TWELVE

Phineas Edge, the Earl of Burchester, was sitting in *the chair* and reading a newspaper when George entered the reading room of the club. But he leapt up immediately as George stalked toward him.

“George. Perhaps we should take this somewhere else.” Phineas slipped off his spectacles and put them in a tailcoat pocket.

For the second time today, George was horribly confused.

Oh. Oh. Phineas thought George was seeking him out for a confrontation about Lady Starling.

“It’s all right, Phin. Today, you can have *the chair*.” George leaned forward and put his mouth to Phineas’ ear. “And you can have Horatia, too. I wish you luck.” He straightened up and held his hand out.

“Truly? No hard feelings?”

“None whatsoever.”

Phineas grinned and grasped George’s hand and shook it. “I’m glad there won’t be any unpleasantness. After all, it’s the lady’s choice. And she’s a rather fickle lady, too, isn’t she?”

“Yes. Quite.”

“You look good without your wig, George. Modern.”

George shrugged. He didn’t care about being modern. Only one person’s opinion mattered on this subject, and she

had said he was handsome without his wig. He'd never wear one again as long as she thought that.

George looked around the room at the usual batch of newspaper readers. "You haven't seen Thornwick about, have you?"

"He's in the card room."

"Do you know him?"

"Not really, not much, just the way you know someone at the club."

"What do you think of him?"

"I don't."

"Pardon?"

"I don't think of him. Really. Although—" Phineas ran his hands through his thick silver mane. "He is rather disconcerting, isn't he? Rather perfect and rather blond. And much too tall."

George snorted. Everyone was much too tall for Phineas who was always the first to tell you he was actually of average height, it was only that he was cursed with abnormally tall friends.

And *rather perfect* and *rather blond* were not inducements for a young woman to break off a publicly announced engagement. George would love to hear something rotten, something egregious to take to Phoebe in case Thornwick refused to back down. Or better yet, to take to her father. Phoebe would do what her papa told her to do. And her father had always liked George.

He steeled himself as he entered the card room. Thornwick was playing loo with a handful of other club members, including a grim-faced Viscount Dagenham.

George studied his rival from across the room. Yes, the man was tall and had that damnable head of golden curls. But really, what else did he have to recommend him? Oh, yes, the nose. A good nose. And he was a very good dresser. His cravat was tied in some newfangled way.

And, of course, he was a duke.

The loo game ended and Thornwick stood up and George strode over to him and stood in front of him, blocking his way.

The duke was taller than George by a fraction of an inch, but much slimmer in build. Narrow shoulders and chest. He was no village blacksmith, as Phee had called George.

*I could beat him easily in a bare-fisted brawl. George puffed out his chest. Think of his little cock.*

After the slightest pause, George bowed. “Your Grace.”

Thornwick bowed and said nothing, surveying George’s clothes.

William Dagenham, still sitting at the card table with his head in his hands, said glumly, “It’s George Danforth.”

“Ah,” Thornwick said, his expression adjusting ever so slightly as his eyes came to George’s face. “Lord Danforth. But no wig.”

“Yes.” George paused, suddenly feeling wrong-footed. The man hadn’t recognized him? Was this some new version of the cut direct? Should he be insulted? “I, uh, I’ve heard your news.”

“My news of what?”

Was that a gibe? No, Thornwick’s expression was serious. The man really did not seem to know what George had referenced.

“Your engagement to Lady Phoebe Finch.”

“Oh, yes. That. Of course. You know her. Neighboring estates, isn’t that right?”

George ground his teeth together. “I’ve known her since she was born. She’s my best friend.”

Thornwick raised his eyebrows. “Your best friend? A female? What do you talk about? Oh, yes. You play chess together. Lady Phoebe told me that.”

“Yes, and I must inform you—”



“It’s been very good of you to occupy her with that diversion all these years.”

“It’s not really a diver—”

“And, I hear, allowing her the occasional victory?”

“I don’t allow—”

”But it won’t be necessary any longer.”

“I think—”

“It’s just so unattractive, isn’t it?”

George was lost. Again. “What?”

“It’s her very worst quality. She’s very sweet, otherwise.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Her . . .” Thornwick made a vague gesture with his hands. “I don’t know, her wanting to win all the time. I am really going to have to do something about that. But it should be easy enough. She’s such a biddable thing. Very eager to please. But, see here. I am to have a little house party, and you and your sister should join us. Swell our ranks. It’s so devilishly difficult to get people away from London near the end of the Season, despite the heat.”

“Er, yes.”

“Good. That’s settled then.” Thornwick walked around George and headed toward the cluster of men who were drinking at the far end of the room. “Don’t swill all that brandy, chaps. I bought the bottle, after all.”

William Dagenham got to his feet shakily. He looked as miserable as George now felt.

“You all right there?” George asked, not really caring, but feeling he should say something.

“Nothing some good luck won’t fix.” William sighed. “Or a strong drink.” He raised his hand and George noted a tremble. “*Ave atque vale.*”

George skulked out of the card room as William made his way toward the not-yet-emptied brandy bottle, laughing

insincerely at barbs from the other men about his poor cards.

The meeting had not gone at all the way George had seen it in his head. He had thought he would tell the duke that Phoebe really belonged to *him*, George Danforth, and Thornwick had better retreat. Immediately. Instead, the other man had displayed the most shocking effrontery, pretending not to recognize George, talking over him, catching him off guard with his arrogant dismissals of chess, George and Phoebe's friendship, Phoebe's ability.

And to call Phoebe a thing. And biddable!

Damn Thornwick. Damn his blond hair. His nose. His superciliousness. And most of all, damn him for even daring to suggest there was something wrong with Phee and she needed changing.

Whatever he did to end this betrothal was justified. It wasn't just jealousy and possessiveness motivating him, was it? Thornwick categorically did not deserve Phoebe.

And Phoebe did not deserve a life chained to such a puny-pricked Pink.

George came through the reading room, trying his best to hide visible signs of his rage. Phineas stood and waved him over.

"I've been thinking about what you asked me about, George."

"What I asked you about what?"

Phineas studied him over the top of his spectacles. "Are you sure you're all right?" He lowered his voice. "About Thornwick. Could it be you are asking on behalf of your little sister?"

"Alice?"

"No, the other little sister. The one you're not related to? Lady—oh, shall we call her the Bright Little Bird? You know, the one whose dance partners at every ball are treated to your scowl? It's no wonder it took someone four years to work up the nerve to ask her to marry him when we all felt sure you

would thrash us just for taking her arm. And we all thought you would be marrying her, after all, and couldn't see what you were waiting for. And then you were away in May and Thornwick managed to slip in."

*Why does everyone think I was going to marry Phoebe when I only just realized it myself this afternoon? And I didn't scowl at Phee's dance partners. Did I?*

Phineas went on. "Perhaps you feel a certain protectiveness given the announcement last week? Although perhaps you or her father or her real brothers should have asked the questions before the announcement."

George cleared his throat. "It could be."

"Yes, discretion is the better part of *et cetera*. I've been thinking. The most telling things about a man are his proclivities in the bedchamber and his finances."

"Really?"

"You shouldn't be talking to other gentlemen at his club. Or to him."

"Oh."

"You should be talking to quite another group of people."

"Oh?"

"His whores. And his bankers."

"Oh."

"In that order." Phineas clapped him on his back and sat back down in *the chair* and opened his newspaper again.

# THIRTEEN

Something nagged at George as he left his club. Something he needed to do now. What was it? It was not something that was part of his normal routine. Well, that had completely fallen by the wayside since last Friday. But it was something . . . yesterday . . . ?

*Oh, yes.*

After a stop at his saddle maker to make a curious commission, George hurried to Madame Flora's, the most popular brothel for the lords of the *ton*.

"I wondered. A gentleman I know has had occasion to come here from time to time. I thought I might visit with one of the women he prefers? Oh, his name? Thornwick. Yes, His Grace. That's right."

He was speaking to one of the older whores in the outer parlor where the women displayed themselves for the gentlemen customers. And by older, he meant age thirty or so. Nancy, she said her name was. She was quite lovely, with large, sympathetic eyes and a shapely bosom. But even more importantly, large hands. Perhaps if he lost Phoebe to Thornwick, he might come back to Madame Flora's in defeat and ask Nancy to rub his head as consolation.

But no. That wasn't going to happen. He mustn't imagine defeat. He was determined. He could not be deterred. George Danforth would be victorious.

Nancy was speaking. "The Duke of Thornwick? Oh, he hasn't been here for ages, has he?"

George didn't like hearing that. Better that Thornwick be up to his neck in whores. That alone might put Phoebe off him.

Nancy looked around the parlor. "Let me think. He was partial to Lydia at one time. She's just over there." She indicated with a nod. "The brunette. She's quite popular with certain gentlemen. Would ye like to meet Lydia?"

"Yes. Please."

Nancy crossed to a brown-haired woman and touched her elbow and spoke in her ear. Lydia looked at George and nodded to Nancy. Then Lydia walked over to him and curtsied.

"Good evening, my lord."

"Yes, uh, good evening."

"What would give you pleasure?"

"Well, I hoped we might talk."

She looked at him suspiciously. "There is a charge for talking, my lord."

"Yes, yes, that's fine." She began to move toward a gilt-edged door. "Wait. I meant out here."

"Can't do that, my lord. Services are performed in private rooms."

"Oh, I see." He followed her through the door and down a hallway. She opened a door to a bedchamber.

Once in the room, Lydia took off her shawl and George observed the dress underneath was transparent and her small nipples were likely rouged. He looked away quickly.

"Nancy told me you're a friend of His Grace's." Her voice was suddenly low and honeyed.

George felt sweat beading on his head despite the fact that he wasn't wearing a wig. "Uh, yes, quite."

Lydia put a hand on his chest and looked up at him. "You want what he wants, my lord?"

He stepped away so Lydia's hand was no longer touching him. "Perhaps you might tell me what that is?"

She took a step closer to him again, but this time she didn't touch him. "He likes talk, too. He likes me to talk about what I do with other men. The naughty things they ask of me."

George stepped away again. "Does he really?" A stinging drop of perspiration fell into his eye, making him blink rapidly.

"Yes, my lord."

"And then what? You do those things to him?"

"Then I touch him. Down here." She darted forward and grabbed George's crotch. He was quite relieved he was not engorged. Just as he had done earlier that day with Lady Starling, he put a very tight grip on Lydia's wrist and moved her hand off his cock.

"Keep telling me," he said in his sternest voice, "what you do to him."

She wrenched her wrist away. "I told you, my lord," she hissed. She nursed her wrist in her other hand.

"You touch him?"

"I talk to him, and I stroke his cock. Until he spends. Or, at least, I used to."

"That's all?"

"That's all. But I can do anything you like."

"Tell me, does it get any bigger when it's hard?"

She studied him. "I see. You're one of those."

"One of what?"

"One of those men that . . . you know. Want other men."

Oh. His soft cock when she grabbed it. His interest in Thornwick's sexual habits and the size of Thornwick's member.

Suddenly, George wished he *were* one of those men who wanted other men. How deucedly simpler this would be. You

knew where you stood with a man. A man wouldn't get engaged behind your back. A man wouldn't cry and say it was nothing. Of course, there would be no children which would be a pity in the long run as he would hate for his cousin to inherit everything when he had worked so hard restoring the barony. There would also have to be the most fearful secrecy given the law and a possible death sentence, although it would be unlikely a lord would face that if he practiced a modicum of discretion. And George would hate to give up breasts. Even now, with no intention of dallying with this courtesan, he was glad she had breasts. They just made women so beautiful.

A little crying was worth it, if it meant breasts. Like Phoebe's.

*But wait.* A glimmering possibility.

"Is Thornwick one of those men?"

"I'm sorry to tell you this, my lord, but His Grace is not." Her tone was flat. Then she said coyly, "But perhaps a strong, handsome man like you could persuade him otherwise."

"But if he wanted you to talk about other men . . ."

"His mistresses are well known. And his activities with other females." She shrugged and George lost the battle to avert his eyes from the wobble of her breasts. Yes, he would never be immune to the draw of women's mammaries.

"Besides, he wanted me to talk to him as if he was one of the other men. As if I was doing those things to him."

George had to restrain himself from correcting her. Telling her she should have used *were doing* instead of *was doing*. Subjunctive. The woman in front of him likely had no interest in or use for grammar. "So, you would tell him you were doing filthy things to him while, er, touching him?"

"Yes." She sighed, obviously thinking he was a dullard.

"Why do you think he didn't want the actual filthy things?" It was a strange kind of vicariousness Thornwick sought. Perverted, almost. That gave George hope.

"I don't know. I suspect it's because he's mean."

“Mean?”

“Dirty talk and spending by hand are the cheapest of our services here, my lord.”

“But surely . . .” Surely Thornwick could afford a fuck? Could it be his financial situation was more precarious than anyone thought? And that he was after Phoebe for her dowry?

No lord had pursued Lady Phoebe Finch in her first three Seasons. And now, suddenly, Thornwick wanted to marry her. He must be desperate. George would see Thornwick’s banker first thing tomorrow and the engagement would end once Phoebe knew Thornwick only wanted her money.

How forlorn she would be. And how he, solid George Danforth with no need for her dowry, would comfort her. Already he was picturing the little kisses he would place on her forehead as she clung to him before he raised her chin up and took her mouth with his.

“But the supplemental services are not too expensive, my lord. And surely you deserve some pleasure. I can use my mouth and grunt in a very low voice and you can close your eyes and pretend I am His Grace.” She was reaching out to the fall of his trousers.

“What? No.” He backed up all the way to the door. “You—I didn’t mean—no.”

Lydia stared at him. “Is that all then? Are we done?”

“Y-yes.”

She muttered and turned away to pick up her shawl. “Another churl” was what George thought she said.

“I’ll pay now,” he said loudly. “As if I had had the supplemental services. And a little extra Madame Flora doesn’t have to know about. In fact, nobody need know anything about what passed between us in this room, eh?”

Lydia’s eyes were glinting as she turned back to him. He dug in his pocket for his purse. She held out her hand.

“No indeed, my lord,” she said.



## FOURTEEN

Phoebe tried to find a cool place on her pillow. Sleep had become so difficult the last two days. And it wasn't just the heat.

Her whole life was topsy-turvy now. In just over a week, she had gone from being an unwanted almost-old-maid to being the betrothed of a duke. And she had gone from a state of ignorance about her own body to one of rapturous enlightenment.

Those were the topsy parts.

But life as an engaged woman, a wanted woman, wasn't quite what she had expected it would be. She scarcely knew her own feelings. She was agitated, undone, uncomfortable, and even spending in her own bed did not soothe her now.

She had lost the nails of both ring fingers and her left middle finger in the last two days.

That was definitely turvy.

Sunlight was peeking around the crack in the drapery. It was Wednesday now. She would see Thornwick this afternoon. Her stomach twisted in knots.

She gave up on sleeping and got out of bed and dressed herself, sweeping her hair into something reasonably neat, not waiting for Dawson. She would, of course, have a bath later and need to do ever so much work on her hair before Thornwick's call. But a simple knot would suffice for going to see her father. She crept down the hall and rapped lightly on his study door.

“Papa?”

“Come in, dearest girl. You’re up so early and already dressed? Breakfast isn’t for another two hours.”

Phoebe’s father was sweating a bit, sitting in front of a pile of correspondence.

Phoebe closed the door and crossed to his desk. “It’s so hot that it’s hard to sleep, isn’t it? Are you well?”

Her father belched into his fist. “Just this damnable dyspepsia. Your mother is threatening to curtail all kinds of foods for me in the future. I shall be eating only the dullest things.” He patted his rounded stomach. “I might get this a little smaller, too.”

“Well, I might have to join you.” She smiled. “No more honey cakes. I don’t want Thornwick and I to look like Jack Sprat and his wife when we marry.”

“You are perfect, just as you are. You will be a beautiful bride. The most beautiful.”

She had been so right to come to her father. Already she felt better. “Oh, Papa, thank you.”

“Don’t let anyone tell you any different, eh? Including your bridegroom.”

“I won’t.” She fingered the edge of her father’s desk. How would she say this to him? She didn’t want to change his opinion of her. She wanted to stay his *dearest girl* forever. But she had no one else right now to turn to.

“Is there something I can do for you, Phoebe?”

“I wondered . . .”

“Yes?”

“On Saturday at breakfast, you hinted you and Mother—well, I wondered if you thought having intimacy before marriage was a sin.”

She had said it. Now, he might hate her. Or he might help her. She looked at him. Her father studied her, the smile gone from his face.

“I’m not a theologian, Phoebe. I can’t say if it’s a sin. But it is one of the rules of society. And often there are very good reasons for those rules. Has Thornwick ventured something that made you uncomfortable?”

“No.” She felt herself blush. “But, Papa, why is the rule in society only for women and not for men?”

“I think most would say it has to do with child-bearing. Women have to bear the consequences and men don’t.”

“Yes.”

“But it also has to do with men. We don’t like to share. We are possessive, acquisitive beasts.”

“I see. And women aren’t?”

“I suspect you are the more generous sex.”

“Maybe.” Although it seemed to Phoebe that between her parents, her father was the more generous one. At least, toward her. But maybe her father only meant in terms of carnal matters.

“Are you worried about your betrothed’s past peccadilloes?”

“Not really, no. I can’t change that. But he’ll be true once he’s married, won’t he? Like you?”

“One would hope. But it helps, of course, to keep a watchful eye.”

“If Mother didn’t keep a watchful eye, would you . . . ?”

Her father swept her hand up in his and squeezed. “I love your mother, dearest girl. I was completely infatuated when I was courting her. I was overjoyed when she agreed to marry me. And once we were married, I fell in love with her. I would never do anything to hurt her. I do not wander. She’s everything to me.”

“I know, Papa. You say it often enough, in front of everyone.”

“I want my duchess to be very sure of me and my feelings.”

“So you were sure of your own feelings before you married?”

“I’d like to say yes, but until you are husband and wife, it’s very difficult to know. You have to guess what it will be like to go through life with this person beside you. What are your feelings about Thornwick? I would have thought you wouldn’t have accepted him unless you thought the two of you might suit.”

“I scarcely know him.”

“Then a long engagement would be best.”

“No!” The word burst out of her. Her father raised his eyebrows in surprise. She took a deep breath. “I may not know Thornwick, but I know I want to be married. And I am attracted to him. And he’s a duke.”

“I didn’t think you cared about titles, dearest.”

“I don’t. But Mother does. Along with the rest of the world. And to have gone so long with no marriage proposals was so shameful, Papa.” She could feel her lip tremble. She was such a baby. “It rather makes up for no one wanting me for so many years that a duke wants me now.”

Her father was thoughtful. “Yes, but you see, I always anticipated . . . well, I was wrong. And there’s nothing for you to be ashamed of just because young men these days can’t recognize a treasure like yourself. If you want to get married and you like Thornwick, you know I’ve already given my blessing to the marriage.”

“Yes, Papa. Thank you.” She leaned down and kissed his cheek before leaving his study.

It was normal to be unsure before marriage. But once they were married, she would fall in love with her husband. How could she not? Thornwick was giving her what she wanted most, a chance to be important in someone else’s life, to be a wife and a mother. And to have a position in the world where she would be well-thought-of. So she might start to think well of herself, too.

Besides, his feelings superseded hers. Thornwick needed to love her, want her, desire her. She had to ensure that. No more settling for friendship. She needed devotion. She deserved devotion.

No. She didn't deserve it, but she craved it with every bit of her being.

Her own feelings would come in time.

"It would be highly irregular for me to do what you want, George." Sir Josiah Bastable wiped the back of his neck with a handkerchief. The two men were in his office, George having stormed the Lovelock bank as soon as it was open in the morning, demanding to see Sir Josiah.

Sir Josiah's father had been the founder of the Bastable bank, and Sir Josiah, after inheriting the bank, was knighted in reward for sizable loans made to the government to pay for the extremely expensive Napoleonic Wars. Sir Josiah had none of his father's financial finesse and, upon attaining his knighthood, quickly sold the Bastable bank and its assets to Edward Lovelock. But Sir Josiah still had a post, although largely honorary, in the Lovelock bank.

"I understand," George said. "And I would not ask if it were not for the interests of someone else."

"Oh." Sir Josiah's eyes brightened. "Oh, yes. I forgot. Lady Phoebe Finch, your other chess partner. You're so good to watch out for her. Although," he frowned, "I would have thought her father would be asking about Thornwick's finances, not you. And well before the public announcement of the betrothal."

"Her father, perhaps, has become forgetful in his dotage?" As far as George knew, Abingdon was as sharp as ever, but a misleading question was not a lie. "And a good family friend might be asked to stand in, as it were, after the fact?"

"Of course. Well, there are some sound fellows in the bank I might ask some questions of. Ones who keep their ears to the

ground and their eyes on the pennies. I'll poke around and tell you what I find out when I come to your house tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Chess, Danforth. Wednesday night. Are you well? You look so disheveled. And no wig. And you seem quite out of sorts."

He wasn't out of sorts. He was out of his mind. It was Wednesday? How had it become Wednesday?

"I'm well, damn it. I just . . . haven't slept much. And the heat is a devil of a thing. You couldn't do it now? Poke around?"

"These things must be handled delicately. I know everyone thinks I'm a figurehead, only here on the basis of my name, but I know a bit about this business of banking. One can't blunder about like a bull in a china shop."

Yes, like George was doing. He remembered to bow and thank Sir Josiah before he took his leave. Then he thought of something.

"Do you know anything about Thornwick's mistresses?"

Sir Josiah frowned. "Are you sure you're well? How could you forget?"

Yes, how could he have forgotten? George cursed himself under his breath as he walked out of the bank. Lady Starling had been Thornwick's mistress just before George had taken up with her at the beginning of this year.

"Said he's done with mistresses," Horatia had sniffed. This was two weeks after George had seduced her with his tongue. "Said he must get serious about finding a duchess. And I wasn't right for him. Too disobedient. Too strong-willed. Too demanding." Then she had cooed, "And I'm ever so glad now."

They had been naked in his bed at the time, her hand around his girth, stroking him. George had bitten his lip, not

absorbing anything she was saying as he was very close to his release.

“What a difference an inch or two can make, lover.”

George did not correct her despite knowing it was more than an inch or two.

“And I just love horsemen, like you, Lord Danforth. You’re so flexible in all the right places. Those rolling hips.”

He had turned then and taken her mouth, shutting her up, getting on top of her, ready to rut with her, not interested in her previous lovers.

Now he cursed himself and his own cock as he stalked down the streets of the City, away from the bank, the day already hot as blazes. He should have brought his carriage. He found his own handkerchief and wiped his head.

Why hadn’t he let Horatia rattle on about Thornwick in January? Let her tell him all of Thornwick’s foibles and peculiarities and things he might have done with a mistress that he wouldn’t do with a whore, since with a mistress the only cost would be a few bits of jewelry and some attention?

All the secrets George had missed hearing because he had wanted to spend. And because he had no way of knowing his future need for information about Thornwick’s sexual habits.

Blast.

There would be no going to Lady Starling with questions now since she was in such a fury at George. And Sir Josiah had not remembered with whom Thornwick had philandered before Horatia.

He must hope Sir Josiah found very few pounds in the Thornwick coffers.

## FIFTEEN

Phoebe checked her reflection in her dressing table mirror. The redness on her nose and cheeks from Sunday's archery session had faded, thank goodness.

Thornwick would be here soon. No, she meant Arthur. And he was going to take her out in his barouche, unchaperoned. With a driver in the front, he would have his hands free and there would be opportunities, even with the hood of the barouche down, even in Hyde Park, for him to touch her in some thrilling way that showed he desired her. On her hand, her leg, her lap. He would show her his need for her. And she could start to fall in love with him and get a sense of what it would be like to share her bed with a handsome duke for the rest of her life.

She made a concerted effort, nay, an enormous effort, to be waiting in the front hall when Thornwick's barouche rolled up in front of the house. She was very close to being on time but was still descending the stairs when he knocked.

"Don't answer it, Chapman," she hissed at the butler. Imperturbable as always, Chapman cocked an eyebrow and waited until she had come all the way down the stairs.

"How do I look, Chapman?"

"You look quite presentable, Lady Phoebe."

This was high praise from Chapman.

Phoebe preened a little. "You may open the door now."



And there was Thornwick in all his glory. He seemed even taller than he had been four days ago. His hair, more golden.

He smiled. She grinned. He bowed. She curtsied.

“Good afternoon, Lady Phoebe.”

“Good afternoon, Your Grace.”

He did not step all the way inside but stood on the doorstep and cocked his arm for her to take. “Shall we go for a drive?”

“Yes, please.”

To her disappointment, Thornwick—Arthur, she must think of him as Arthur—sat opposite her, facing backwards. Still, she could gaze on him this way.

He said something, but she couldn't hear him over the noise of the wheels on the cobblestones.

“Pardon?”

He spoke again, slightly louder, and she could hear him now.

“Still quite hot, isn't it?” he said.

An idea struck her. Did she dare? “I can't hear you, Arthur,” she said loudly. “I'm dreadfully sorry.”

He stood and turned and sat beside her.

“Can you hear me now?”

“Oh, yes, ever so much better. Thank you, Arthur.” She had to smother a giggle at her own cleverness.

“I said nothing of importance. Just a remark about the weather.”

“Yes, it's so hot, isn't it?”

“Yes.”

They lapsed into silence.

She looked down. He was ungloved, his hands resting on his long thighs. She slid her own glove off and put her hand on top of his. He started slightly but did not move his hand away.

She turned his hand over so the palm was up and laced her fingers with his, hiding her bitten nails under his hand. "I'm very excited about your house party and coming to your estate on Saturday."

"Yes."

"My mother will chaperone me, I think. Will it be a large set of guests?"

"Not too large, no."

"Well, I'm sure it will be lovely." She brushed her thumb over his thumb.

"I've invited your friends, the Danforths. I thought that might please you."

Alice and George. At the house party. Strangely, it did not please Phoebe to hear her two best friends were coming.

Phoebe would never win a bid for attention if pitted against Alice. Knowing defeat was inevitable, Phoebe had taken her hat out of that ring a long time ago and resigned herself to being in Alice's shadow at social occasions.

But this one time, she wanted to be the focus of Thornwick's regard. She wanted to be the guest of honor in her future husband's house. The one who was shown the gardens. The one toasted at dinner. And Phoebe couldn't compete with Alice's glamour or flirtatious wit. She knew she would lose.

And George. She was so grateful for his lessons in bedding, but would there be any awkwardness being around him and Thornwick at the same time?

No, these were foolish, pointless concerns. Alice wouldn't steal Thornwick's attention from Phoebe. In fact, she might distract the other guests so Phoebe could get him alone. And George almost certainly wouldn't want to come. A house party would interfere with his very full agenda and highly regimented round of duties.

"Thank you, Arthur. That was kind of you."

"Yes. Well, I thought you would like that."

He had done something because he thought she would like it. She wanted to cry. No, she didn't want to cry. She wanted to kiss him.

"I want to kiss you," she said.

"Yes, well." He took his hand from hers and her hand curled in on itself and she withdrew it to her lap. "We're in a carriage. We can't do that."

"If we were married—"

"It would still not be proper."

"Yes, but—" She had been about to say surely there were improprieties and then there were *improprieties*. What was a duke and a duchess exchanging a kiss in a carriage compared to so many other things?

But Thornwick did not like argument. "Yes, Arthur."

Just so long as he kissed her when they were alone, as they might be at his house party. In his own bedchamber. Or in hers. There might be kissing. There might be more. She squirmed ever so slightly in response to some flutters she felt down below.

Thornwick crossed his long legs. "And I've been meaning to speak to you about something. It's been on my mind since we spoke on Saturday. Something that came up then."

What could it be? Their blond children? How adorable or enchanting she was? Her meeting his mother?

"It would be more seemly if you were not so avid about winning all the time. It strikes me as very unfeminine."

Her heart began beating in her ears.

"So grasping. One doesn't like to see that in a lady. If your father were in trade, if you had some profession like an actress or an opera singer, it might be more excusable. But the daughter of a duke? I would not want *my* daughters to be so . . . competitive."

The flutters were gone, replaced by a horrible, sick feeling. He seemed to be waiting for her to say something. He did not

like disagreement.

“Yes,” she got out.

“A duchess cannot be concerned with achievement. She must not be interested in the outcome, but in the journey, the interchange, the delight of the thing itself. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to prove yourself to me. I want you to show me you can lose.” Before she could interject, before she could remind him she knew about losing, he went on. “And I don’t care about those chess games you played years ago as a child. Yes, you lost, but that was due to your inadequacy. As you yourself said, you were determined to win despite your incompetence. Are you going to Lady Huxley’s whist party on Friday?”

She had not thought that far ahead in her life. Her whole focus had been on this afternoon. Preparing to be with him again. Being perfect for him so he wanted her the way she wanted to be wanted.

He went on. “I need you to go to the party and lose on Friday. I have offered to marry you. Now this is a little offering you might make me.”

“But Lady Huxley will be so angry—”

He turned. He looked at her for the first time since he had moved to sit next to her in the barouche.

“You’re unwilling to give me this small thing?”

“N-no, Your Grace.”

“Good.” He shifted his gaze back to the passing scenery of the park.

“Wonderful news, Danforth!” Sir Josiah was panting, having come in the front door and climbed the stairs to George’s study. George reflected he might have to find a room on the ground floor in the near future to play chess with Sir Josiah. Or they might have to shift the game to Sir Josiah’s rooms.

“Do tell, Sir Josiah.”

“Let me catch my breath.” Sir Josiah collapsed into a chair and George quickly poured him a small glass of claret. Sir Josiah gulped it down and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“What is the wonderful news?”

“There is . . .” Sir Josiah paused and drew in a deep breath.

George took the man’s glass and refilled it. What would Sir Josiah say? A pending bankruptcy for Thornwick? Enormous debt? A gambling habit?

“There is to be a chess tournament in August! Hosted by our own Audley Street Chess Club. Because Valois is coming from Paris. I think you planned to be back at your estate then, but surely you can travel up for the occasion, what? I wouldn’t be surprised if you might be the one playing Valois in the final.”

Normally, George would have nodded gravely, puffed up a bit by Sir Josiah’s blandishments about his skill, and would have agreed this was wonderful news. But not tonight.

“You praise me too much, Sir Josiah. Have you found out anything about the Thornwick duchy. Is it in arrears?”

“That’s wonderful news, too!” George held his breath. “The Thornwick duchy and the Montague family’s monies are sound as a bell. Your friend can have no worries about marrying His Grace on that front.”

Of course, Sir Josiah would think that was wonderful news. He was not privy to George’s true motivation for his inquiry. Blast.

“Nothing hidden you know about?”

“No, not in his finances.”

George downed his own glass of claret and then another. Damn it all to hell. But wait. Had there been something in Sir Josiah’s voice just then?

“Is there something else hidden about Thornwick?”

The corners of Sir Josiah's mouth turned down. "One hardly likes to say. I would not want to repeat something untrue and cause the unhappiness of two young people."

"And I would not want my friend to be unhappy if it came out later, after the wedding. Once irreparable damage had been done."

Sir Josiah looked torn. George glowered at him. That did the trick.

"Well." Sir Josiah leaned forward and lowered his voice even though they were alone in the room. "There is an aunt. In an asylum. Madness. Perhaps a taint in the family blood."

It was thin. Very thin.

"And his mother was most eccentric. An artist of some kind. Very much not the kind of woman we think would make a duchess."

"Why do you say she *was* eccentric? She is still alive, I thought."

"Yes." Sir Josiah laughed. "But I have heard she is no longer eccentric. Only in her youth, apparently."

"Why did Thornwick's father marry her?"

Sir Josiah shrugged. "I have no idea, Danforth." He rubbed his hands together. "Now, shall we play?"

George had difficulty concentrating his mind on the game. He had pinned all his hopes on Thornwick's poverty, his being a fortune-hunter. An aunt's lunacy? He was not sure that would dissuade Phoebe.

What was an aunt's madness to thick, blond hair and a duchy?

Nothing.

He beat Sir Josiah. Barely.

"If you play like that in the tournament, George, you won't even make it into the quarter-finals."

"I am fatigued. The heat saps my energy."

“Well, take care of yourself, otherwise you’ll end up an old bachelor like me. There’s no hope when the best-looking mature women like Mrs. Lovelock—I mean Her Grace—are getting snatched up by young blades like Middlewich.”

George ushered Sir Josiah out, assisting him down the stairs while trying not to seem as if he was assisting him.

“Marry soon, George, while you still have your health and can service your bride as you should. You need to take a page from Thornwick’s book. He’s got the right idea. A lovely young woman like Lady Phoebe, that’s what you need.”

*No, damn it. I don’t need a lovely young woman like Lady Phoebe.*

*I need Phoebe.*

## SIXTEEN

Phoebe had her nightdress on and was about to get in bed and give herself a bit of pleasure. After her demoralizing afternoon drive in Thornwick's barouche, after his criticism and lack of affection, she felt she deserved that comfort. Just one time tonight though, she promised herself as she turned down the counterpane. Then she would sleep and everything would be better in the morning.

She heard *plickle-plickle-plick* and saw pebbles scattered across the floor. Hail? She picked one up. No, it was a stone, the same kind that made up the gravel walk in the back garden.

She went to her open window and heard "Phee!" being hissed at her by a dark figure. It was George. Oh, yes, when she had been ten years of age and burning with fever and forced to stay in her room, he had come under her window and thrown pebbles and she had gotten out of bed and opened the window and he had climbed up and sat with her.

"I'm coming up," he said from below her window and started climbing. Despite being so much more muscular now compared to when he was fourteen, it seemed a good deal more difficult for him to clamber up. Probably because he weighed so much more. He was sweating by the time he hauled himself over her window sill.

"Good evening," he said between breaths.

A week ago, if he had come through her window, she would have been scurrying to put a dressing gown over her



nightdress. But George had seen everything, hadn't he? And it was so hot.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered.

"I came to see you."

"It's the middle of the night."

"No, it's not. It's just gone eleven."

She looked at her mantel-clock. He was right.

"It's my bedchamber, George."

His gaze flickered away from her. "It looks different than the last time I was here."

Phoebe looked around her own room. Of course, the room was different. Her favorite dolls, the ones she could not bear to let stay in the nursery when she was a girl because they might miss her at night, were long gone. Her small bed was a large one. Her dressing table was littered with face powders as well as all the pins and brushes and unguents that helped control her hair. This was a woman's room, not a little girl's.

"From."

"What?" His eyes came back to her and rested just below her face. *On my breasts.*

"Different from, not different than." He had taught her that.

"Yes. Well, you've been in my bedchamber now, so I thought I should see yours again."

She sat down on the edge of the bed. "All right."

"And I thought . . ." He went into the pocket of his tailcoat and took out a handkerchief and wiped his perspiring head. "If you're not too tired, you might have another lesson."

She had a moment of confusion, imagining chess and thinking she needed to go get a chessboard and pieces before she understood what kind of lesson he meant. She felt her nipples tighten under her nightdress. Now she wished she had put on a dressing gown. But did she *need* another lesson?

“We’ve kissed and had coitus,” she said. “I’ve used my hand and my mouth on you. What else is there for me to know?”

He seemed baffled by her question. “There . . . there is a great deal more.”

“Like what?”

“Well. Well . . .”

She tilted her head. “I wouldn’t think I needed to know anything too advanced. Just what a husband and wife might do. Right?”

“Right. Yes. Of course.”

“I shouldn’t have been nervous. It was silly of me to think I needed a leg up and I had to know everything before I got married.” Thornwick’s words came back to her. “Very unfeminine. Grasping and competitive. Stupid.”

“No, you’re not stupid, Phee. Never say that about yourself. And what’s wrong with wanting to be good at something? Or a bit of friendly competition? May I take off my coat? It’s so hot.”

“Yes.”

He took off his tailcoat and put it on the back of her dressing table chair and then crossed to her and sat on the edge of the bed next to her in his shirt and waistcoat. There was that wonderful George smell. The pulsing ache between her legs started up. She pressed her thighs together and moved on the bed away from him a little.

“But I should have remembered animals have coitus, too, George, and I’ve seen them out in the country plenty of times. The stallion with the mares. If animals do it, how difficult can it be?”

She looked at him. His dark eyes. There was something in them.

He repeated what she said. “The stallion. And the mares.”

His hand covered hers on the counterpane between them. She looked down. His big hand. The skin brown from his time outdoors at his barony last month. The dusting of dark hair on the back of the knuckles of his fingers and a little bit creeping out of the cuff of his shirt. The square ends of his fingers with their perfectly trimmed nails. She had spent many hours watching this hand move pieces on the chessboard. She loved this hand.

She raised her face. He was still staring at her. Now she knew what was in his eyes because it was what she felt, too.

Desire. He wanted her.

“What about the stallion and the mares, George?”

He clenched his jaw. He spoke and his voice was even deeper than usual and there was a harshness to it. “A husband and a wife might do what a stallion and a mare do.”

“Yes. Coitus, like I said.”

“They might perform the act in the same position as horses do. The wife facing away from the husband.”

Her mind went back to Monday, George standing behind her while she was still in her chemise and her petticoat, him holding and touching her breasts. She had put her bottom against him, rubbed it against his thighs. He was too tall for his cock to be between her cheeks but there had been an itch for that, hadn't there? To feel his hardness against that part of her softness. To feel his shaft brushing near her achy empty place, but from behind.

“There would be no kissing with that kind of coitus, would there?”

“No. But I have been told it provides a different kind of pleasure for the wife.”

“Do you think it's important I know about that kind of pleasure?”

“Phoebe. You should have any pleasure you want.” His hand closed over hers and he gave a half twist to her wrist and

laid her hand back down on the counterpane, facing up. Then the tips of his fingers began to trace circles on her palm.

She shivered. She did not know her palm was so sensitive.

“All right,” she said.

“All right, what?”

“I want to be a mare. To see if I like it.” She already knew she would like it. The pulsing achiness that was usually so much in front was spreading to the back, to the places where her bottom met the bed.

And he wanted her. And she wanted to be wanted.

“May we kiss first, Phee?”

“Horses don’t kiss.”

“No, they nip and nuzzle, don’t they? But we’re not really horses, are we? I’m a man and you’re a woman, and I’ve been looking forward to kissing you again, very much.”

She looked at his lap. He was very large already, straining against his trousers. He didn’t need kissing. But he wanted kissing. From her.

“All right.”

A quick movement and he was against her, holding her head in both his hands, taking her mouth with his. Heat flared all over her body. Because now when he filled her mouth with his tongue, she could only think of having him inside her. Being his mare.

His hands were on her breasts, kneading, owning, even as he continued to ravish her lips. His square thumbs abraded her nipples through her nightdress.

He broke the kiss, his voice jagged and rough. “I’m not hurting you, am I?”

She could only shake her head and let out a guttural sound. Then she was holding his head and pulling him back down to kiss him. Her groin and her whole bottom ached as he pawed at her chest.

Not breaking her mouth's contact with his, she slid off the mattress and stood between his legs, she the taller one now, one of her hands stroking his head, the other grasping his length.

His hands left her breasts and he pulled her closer, clutching the cheeks of her bottom where the new ache resided, down at the lowest part, where her legs started.

"Teach me, George," she gasped.

Another abrupt movement from him and he was standing and pushing her down over the mattress, her breasts crushed into the counterpane. And his hands were on her legs through the nightdress, lifting her up, and shoving her forward.

His voice was harsh. "You're too short to stand. Get on your knees."

She moaned and trembled but got her knees under her and backed up toward the edge of the bed, looking over her shoulder at him.

His hands were on the waist of her nightdress.

"Phee—" he said and his face changed. His dark eyes had something in them besides lust. He was George. Her best friend.

"No! We're animals, George. I want to be an animal with you. Tup me."

He just looked at her face.

"Lift up my nightdress and tup me."

He didn't move.

She got off her hands and went upright on her knees and tugged at her nightdress, bringing it to her waist. Then she went back down onto her elbows, arching her back, very conscious that her bottom was bared and pointing right at him.

"Now," she said, trying to use the same kind of voice he had used when he had told her to get on her knees.

Phoebe kept her head forward, away from him. She did not look at him. She would not look at him. Something about her

face had stopped him in the middle of their passion after he had pushed her onto the bed, ready to take her.

And he must like her plump arse. He had seized the opportunity to grab it so many times in his bedchamber.

She spread her knees farther apart, backed up more, half of each of her shins now hanging off the edge of the mattress. A trickle of her arousal was on her thigh. She was dripping. She heard nothing but her own heavy breathing, her heartbeat in her chest. There was no touch on her skin anywhere from him. She didn't even know if he was still standing behind her. He could have gone back out the window for all she knew, frightened by her demand. Rejecting her again, as he had all those years ago when she had hinted he was looking at her breasts in her father's library.

She waited. A sound of pain, a rustling, and he was holding both cheeks of her bottom, squeezing them. His hard cock was against her, rubbing against her crack, between her cheeks, the tip going over her wet entrance.

"Yes," she said, but her word was lost in the room with his groan.

She turned her head and put her cheek on the mattress. She arched her back more, pushing against him.

Her fleshy sitting place felt his hard, flat abdomen. She thought she could feel his hair there, his linen shirt hanging down. She wished she had not quite so much flesh so she could get closer to him. Still he rubbed his shaft along her cleft and groaned.

But she was a mare and she wanted to be mounted by her stallion.

She put a hand between her legs and grabbed his cock. It was so hard, so big in her hand. She went forward a little, put the head of him at her entrance and pushed back.

He was inside her.

He might have groaned again but she did not know because a sound erupted from her own mouth. It was strident and wild and came from deep in her gut.

*I'm squealing. Like a mare.*

She began moving forward and back, sawing him in and out of her. His hands found her waist and held it in a tight grip.

George was right, as he always was. It was a different pleasure. And not just because of the bestial position, the stimulation to her backside. His cock went deeper, rubbed some place far inside of her, some place that made her want to throw her head back and scream as he did. That made her want to run away. That made her want to pass out on this bed, delirious with her own ecstasy. All three things at once.

One hand off her waist, pushing her nightdress toward her head, his waistcoat scratching her back, his hand clutching her breast tight to her body. Both hands, the one on the breast and the one still on her waist, pulling her into him, as his tongue went over her back and she felt teeth sink into a shoulder blade.

A wash of insanity. A release was upon her from his deep, driving thrusts. His hand was on her mouth, muffling her cries, as her whole body shook and clenched and squeezed. Control and reason fled, chased by the purest pleasure.

*Huh, huh, huh. Unh.*

And then she was spent. Well and truly spent. His hand came off her mouth and she felt herself ready to fall but his hands were back on her waist, pulling her onto him as he plunged into her. The slapping together of their skins and the sounds of her wetness filled her ears even as his cock filled her and the rest of her body felt empty.

A gasp. He was out of her, one hand off her, and she was entirely empty.

“Don’t scream,” she said, suddenly terrified.

His strangled whisper. “Don’t move.”

Squelching sounds. Warm wetness on her backside. He let go of her completely.

With no one, nothing holding her up, she collapsed completely on the bed. Flat, unmoving.

Time passed and she could not think.

A rustle. A cloth on her bottom, wiping her cheeks.

“I’m sorry.” His low voice.

She used every ounce of strength she had to turn her neck and look behind and up at him. His trousers had been pulled up. His cravat was gone. His eyes were on her bottom and there was such tenderness in his face as the cloth—it must be his cravat, she realized—went over her skin. He wiped her bottom for far longer than was surely necessary. When he was finally done, his eyes met hers and there was a sheepishness there.

“Don’t be sorry,” she managed to say. “Thank you.” She turned her face back to the mattress and her hands found her nightdress hiked up to her armpits and she wiggled and brought it down over her bottom.

“Was that all right, Phee?”

She gurgled. She turned on her side. Then onto her back. He was buttoning his fall, not looking at her.

“All right is not the word I would use.”

He looked up. “All right is not a word—”

“—it’s two words,” she finished.

They both laughed. She sat up and pulled her nightdress down over her legs.

“George, if you were a stallion and I owned you, I could make such a lot of money studding you out.”

He sank to his knees in front of her, his arms on either side of her thighs, cradling her as she sat on the edge of the bed. His eyes were so dark as he looked up at her.

“You do own me, Phee.”

No. No. No. Too late.

“Silly,” she said and forced a giggle and stood, pushing him back and walking to the window. “Do you think you’ll



have much trouble getting down or will I have to sneak you downstairs and out the door?"

"Phee." His voice was anguished. She turned around and shook her head.

"Don't say anything. I think you had better not say anything. And I know that's difficult for you, but it really would be for the best, you know. And horses don't talk, do they? So we better not. Just know that . . . this mare was very satisfied with her stallion. Yes?"

He came toward her and there was a moment when she thought he might kiss her and she would be lost all over again. But he just walked past her and leaned out the windowsill and looked down.

"I'll climb down."

"Be careful."

"I'm always careful."

*Are you, George? Haven't we been doing something very dangerous? I know I started it, but still. You didn't need to give me any more lessons. You paid your forfeit last week.*

"Good night, George."

His leg was over the windowsill when he said, "I'll see you tomorrow."

Then the other leg was over and she couldn't see him. He must have slid part of the way down because his feet were safely on the ground when she looked out. He turned his face up and held up a hand. She held up her hand, too. And then he was gone into the night, his feet crunching on the gravel.

Tomorrow? She wasn't going to see him tomorrow. She went to her bed. A damp cravat lay there. She picked it up. Well, she'd rinse this out as best as she could in her basin and give it back to him tomorrow. Or it would join her handkerchief collection.

## SEVENTEEN

George sipped his tea and tried not to stare at the place where Phoebe's body met the chair. Although sheathed in a sprigged muslin that gave no information about its beautiful shape, her bottom now lingered in his imagination at all times.

Oh, no. He had conjured those gorgeously rounded velvet peach-halves and his cock was springing to attention.

*Think of something else, lecher.*

Thursday afternoon was the time he usually spent working on his etymological monographs, currently a quite detailed one tracing the origin of the word *clue*. But Thursday afternoon was also the time Alice had tea with Phoebe at the Abingdon town house. George had never joined Alice before, but she had seemed unsurprised when he had been waiting for her in the front hall of their own house, saying, "I'll think I'll come to tea with you today." Alice had merely raised her eyebrows and smiled.

"Do you think," he started.

Alice and Phoebe both swung their heads toward him.

He cleared his throat. "Do you think the duchy of Thornwick is up to standard?"

Alice snorted. "It's a duchy, George. How many are there in England?"

"Twenty-eight," Phoebe answered.

“Surely, with dukes and duchies being so scarce,” Alice said, grinning, “there can be no standard.”

“It’s just that . . .”

The two women waited expectantly.

“It’s just that I’ve heard rumors of some insolvency.”

“I’ve been over the books of the Thornwick estate with my father. There is nothing glaring. But it is so good of you, George, to worry over it.” Phoebe reached out and patted his knee.

She had touched him. His leg. His knee. He was lost in the sensation of that gentle touch. He almost whimpered when she took her hand away.

He rallied.

“But the mistresses must surely be a great expense.”

Alice sat back in her chair, her face unreadable. Phoebe flushed a beautiful red. Oh, how he wished he had caused that flush a different way. In his bed. In *their* bed.

“Mistresses, George?” Phoebe choked out.

“Well,” he said, now very uncomfortable indeed. Damn, his cravat was tight. He must speak to Morton about tying it more loosely in the future. He tried to work a finger between the cravat and his neck.

“Well?” said Alice.

“Thornwick has a stable,” he said.

Alice neighed. *Shut up, Alice.*

“Had,” Phoebe said firmly, despite her red face. “He had . . . companions, as you have had, George. I wouldn’t use the word stable. Women are not horses, after all.”

“Yes, yes, that’s true,” he said quickly. *But you were last night, weren’t you, Phoebe? My little mare in heat for her stallion.*

Phoebe nodded. “And Arthur gave up all his women months ago when he decided to seek a bride. I don’t claim to

understand why men need these flings before marriage when women do without them—”

“I don’t,” Alice volunteered.

He growled at his sister. “Shut up, Alice. This is between me and Phee.”

Alice leaned forward. “*What* is between you and Phee?”

“This discussion.”

Alice smirked. “I’m the one who was there when she met Thornwick. I’m her best friend. Unless Phoebe tells me to shut up, I will say what I like.”

George glowered. Alice’s next allowance for hats and gloves would be very meager, indeed. He was Phoebe’s best friend, wasn’t he?

“I assure you, George, I’m not worried about Arthur’s fidelity.” Phoebe’s normal color was returning but her voice was quavering and her eyes were glistening. “If anything . . .” She ducked her head.

Oh, no. Or . . . oh, yes? Phoebe was feeling guilt over what they had done together. Perhaps he should encourage this? Convince her she *should* feel guilt over coupling with him and she could assuage that guilt by marrying him instead.

But, no. He couldn’t have her feeling shame over what had been the most mind-rippingly ecstatic and intimate experiences of his life. That *would* be a sin.

“I am sure,” he said in his most authoritative voice, which he knew was very authoritative, “what someone does before a marriage is not a breaking of a commandment. Once the marriage vows are made in the church, which are the important and sanctified promises of the heart and soul, there would be no question of infidelity. In all cases.”

He studied Phoebe and her reaction to what he said. She did not lift her head immediately, but when she did, he was pleased to see there were no tears, her face was no longer red, and she was calm.

“Well,” Alice said, “now that’s settled, would you like a sandwich, brother?”

Alice stood up and brought the platter of savories over to George. As he selected a sandwich, Alice leaned over and hissed in his ear, “Be careful, George. Be very careful.”

What was Alice on about? He was always careful. There could be no man more careful than George Danforth. He wolfed the little sandwich in two bites.

Phoebe smiled. “Watercress, George? I thought you didn’t like the taste.”

“Oh. Well. Yes.” He had thought it was a cucumber sandwich. “I am trying to eat more leaves.”

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say. Both women stared at him.

“What do you think of the bloodline?” he blurted.

“The bloodline?” Phoebe looked confused.

“The bloodline of Arthur Montague, the Duke of Thornwick. I have heard rumors about some recent ancestors?”

Alice quirked an eyebrow. “Rumors of what?”

George leaned forward and whispered, “Madness.”

Phoebe giggled. Alice guffawed.

Phoebe spoke first. To Alice. “Have you seen the bonnet Lady Winter is wearing? I saw it yesterday on my drive in Hyde Park with Arthur. Those pink-dyed feathers? I think it’s outrageous.”

“Outrageous? Perhaps I should find out where she had it made. My milliner is so dull.” Alice sighed.

“When I see her next, I’ll try to remember to ask her.”

George coughed. “You have nothing to say about the madness in the Montague family?” he asked, exasperated.

Alice and Phoebe exchanged looks.

“Everyone knows his aunt is mad and yet no one speaks of it. I felt I should bring it up.”

“The only madness in the family is his father’s brother’s wife. No blood relation, George.”

“Are you sure about that, Phee?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

George was desperate now. Stymied on every front. Thornwick’s quite ordinary, almost pedestrian, sexual habits with whores. No current mistresses. No signs of banking oddities. No taint to the bloodline.

And Phoebe unmoved and unaffected by George, even after her lesson last night.

Her lesson. The lesson he hadn’t planned. Because he had only wanted to do what they had done before, touching her body and kissing her and her hands on his head and himself on top of her and inside of her. He hadn’t anticipated she would refuse him because she had already learned what she wanted to know, had already performed those acts with him. And he had had no idea she would push him into such a savage frenzy with her presentation of her bottom and her aroused quim.

Was he going to have to plumb decadence and his less-than-vast experience to be with her again? Come up with another variation, another position to satisfy her demand for novelty? Already, they had done things he would rather his sweet Phoebe didn’t know about. At least not until a year or so into their marriage.

She was far more daring than he. On the chessboard, in the bedchamber. Dazzling Phoebe.

He sighed.

He had made so many mistakes along the way. He should never have let her touch his cock on Monday. He should have restrained himself as he had planned. He should have let that be the carrot for future lessons.

A carrot. For his mare.

A wild panic rose up in him.

“There must be something wrong with him,” he announced loudly. “There must be something wrong with Thornwick.” He thought of Thornwick and Phoebe’s future wedding. “After all, he wants to marry *you*.”

There was a sound then.

A quick, painful inhale of breath.

As if a knife had just been sunk in someone’s chest.

The sound had come from Phoebe.

Only then he realized what he had said. What he had voiced. It wasn’t what he had meant. Of course, it wasn’t. Didn’t he want her for himself?

But from the look on Phoebe’s face he knew he had blundered. Badly.

“I mean to say—” he started. He looked to Alice, hoping stupidly for help. Alice’s face was a thundercloud.

“You’ve said quite enough, George,” Alice spat.

He looked again at Phoebe. Her eyes. Oh, my God, her eyes. Filled with what? Not tears but he could see those were coming. Her eyes were filled with the most incredible sadness. As if he had confirmed some long-held belief she had about herself.

But she met his gaze without blinking and managed to stand.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes. He wants to marry me.”

“Phee—”

“Alice,” Phoebe said and left the room.

Alice followed behind her but at the doorway, she turned. “You damned fool.” Then she disappeared, running after Phoebe.

He paced and waited for Alice to come back so she could bring him to Phoebe and he could apologize. *Yes, I am a damned fool. Why did I belittle my Phoebe?*

He had not quite anticipated how badly a damned fool he had been until Andrew came to the drawing room ten minutes later.

“I’m afraid you’re not welcome in this house, Lord Danforth.”

Andrew had bumped into several pieces of furniture just coming into the room which showed he was rather distraught and had forgotten what room he was in. Also, he seemed to have forgotten George’s first name. And that they were neighbors and friends. And that George was actually a good fellow. Sound and sensible.

“You have upset Phebes a great deal.”

“Andrew, it’s all a mistake—”

“Still, you’ll have to leave.”

“You have to go to Lady Phoebe and tell her—”

Andrew took a wide stance and faced George. “I don’t have to do anything but tell you that you have hurt the most precious person in the world to me and you have to leave.”

“I tell you it’s a damnable mistake—”

“I don’t want to have to get the footmen involved in ejecting you from this house, Lord Danforth. I will if I need to, but I’d rather spare my sister the scandal of the servants knowing more than they already do. And after I get Phoebe to speak clearly and tell me what you did, I will discover if this warrants a duel.”

George had to pause to marvel at Andrew’s courage. A duel—no matter the weapon—would mean almost certain death or injury to the nearly blind and painfully thin man. All the Finches had such a reckless disregard for consequences. Such pluck. Such valor.

“I’ll go.” It was the only thing he could do.

As George went out the door, Andrew spoke in a slightly less menacing voice. “Write her a letter, George. Explain yourself to her. She’ll read it when she’s calmer.”



## EIGHTEEN

George sat at his desk in his study, sharpened a quill, and wrote.

*Dearest Phee:*

*You must know I meant no insult to you. The two thoughts were not at all connected. I was just looking out for you*

No, it was a lie. He had been looking out for himself. He started again.

*Dearest Phoebe:*

*Please forgive me. The fact that Thornwick wants to marry you is, in fact, the only good thing about him*

No. He was damned if he was going to praise Thornwick. Even if it was faint praise.

A fresh piece of foolscap. A firm grip on his pen. For once in his life, let him not hide behind words.

*Dearest Bumblephee:*

*Don't marry Thornwick. Marry me.*

*Love, George.*

Within half an hour, his footman was back with the letter. Still sealed.

“It was taken up to her, my lord. But I was told the lady did not wish to receive any correspondence from you.”

He then went himself to the Abingdon town house. Chapman refused him entrance and just when George was about to try to force his way past the butler, Andrew appeared.

Andrew’s right hand grasped George’s forearm on the doorstep. Those fingers that held his violin bow so lightly, so delicately, were surprisingly strong. Andrew put his mouth to George’s ear. “You are causing the scene I had hoped to avoid, Lord Danforth. Now, in public view. On the street. Go. Away.”

“If Phee won’t read my letter, I want to see your father.”

“You can have no business with my father.”

“I do, you see, I want to—”

“I suspect I know what you want to talk to my father about. He’s always liked you, George, but you are not to bother him. Because it doesn’t matter what his answer is. I know what my sister’s answer is. And I would remind you she is promised to another man. You missed your chance.”

*I missed my chance.*

George wanted to howl. Instead, he walked away from the Abingdon house blindly, his head down, and after a time, he saw his shoes were moving over familiar pavement in Westminster.

Jack MacNaughton, the Duke of Dunmore, lived here, on this street, in the house he had built after he had retired from the navy.

George would go see Jack. That’s what he’d do. The man had suffered a broken engagement years ago when he was still Captain Jack Pike. True, he had never gotten the woman back since she had married his cousin within days of jilting Jack. But Jack had survived. He would at least be able to commiserate with George.

And he knew Jack would be at home. He couldn't be anywhere else.

Jack frowned when he saw George come in the bedchamber door. Papers and books were strewn around the bed and his wrapped ankle. Jack quickly gathered up the papers which looked like letters.

"I thought it was Phin when my butler told me a friend was here," Jack grumbled. "I need him."

George forced a smile. "Phineas is likely busy with his new mistress."

"Ah, yes." Jack examined him carefully. "You've heard. And you're . . . what? Here because you're angry?"

"I'm relieved. About that."

"Good. I'm glad there won't be any duels between my friends. Please. Sit." Jack tucked the letters under a pillow.

George shook his head as he drew up a chair to the bedside. "Phineas does not know the hole he has dug himself with Lady Starling."

"Ah. Well, he'll find out, won't he? I love the man, but it would serve him right. Some just desserts for the rogue."

"I don't know as many entertaining stories as the Earl of Burchester, but surely I can fill in for Phin in a pinch. Did you need me to procure you some whisky?"

Jack grimaced. "Believe it or not, George, my boy, I am off spirits while I'm off my leg. Doctor's orders."

Jack MacNaughton was acting very strangely. Doing what a doctor told him to do. Reading books. Not imbibing. No sign of a current mistress. Except those letters he just had hidden away like they were secret directives from the Crown. They must be from that woman he had met up in Scotland.

"What do you need Phin for?"

Jack rubbed his unshaven chin. "I need him to write a letter for me."

“Ah.” George didn’t understand. There was nothing wrong with Jack’s hands. Why couldn’t he write his own letter? But Jack seemed disinclined to explain.

“So if you see the rascal out in the world, tell him to come see me. Immediately.”

“Yes.”

“What’s wrong, George?”

“Wrong?”

“First, it’s Thursday evening. You visit me in my sickbed on Friday mornings. Always on Friday mornings. When I broke my ankle in April, I replaced your weekly visit to the British Museum in your calendar. Second, you’re not wearing your wig, thank God. And third, you look fucking miserable.”

“I’ve made a mess of things.”

Jack sighed. “You can’t have made a worse mess than I have. Tell me.”

“I want to marry Lady Phoebe Finch.”

“But that’s nothing new. Or is it?”

George groaned. Yet again, someone saying he and Phoebe must have had an understanding for ages. “It is new. Just a few days now.”

“And the problem is?”

“She’s engaged to the Duke of Thornwick.”

“An asshole.”

“Yes, I’m glad to hear you say that. Yes.” George had been right to come to Jack. This was the encouragement he needed.

Jack ran a hand through his too long blond-brown hair. “Have you ever noticed the man won’t acknowledge you or speak until you say something first? Makes dukes look bad. Such conceit. He’s insufferable.”

George nodded vigorously, unable to speak, choked with emotion. Jack understood. Thornwick was despicable, and he, George Danforth, was not.

Jack felt his whiskered chin. “So you’ll have to get her to break off the engagement.”

George cleared his throat. “I was trying to when I inadvertently insulted her.”

“What did you say?”

“I said something was wrong with Thornwick because he wanted to marry her.”

“Fuck, George.”

That wasn’t what George wanted to hear.

Jack stared into the middle distance. “You’re lucky Lady Phoebe doesn’t carry a dirk. You’d be dead.”

A dirk? His Phoebe? The Duke of Dunmore must be thinking of his own savage Highlander woman.

Jack was silent for a long time before he spoke again.

“I’m not sure I can help you. Because I’ve never done what you’re about to do.”

“What am I about to do?”

“Win a woman’s heart.”

What? But Jack MacNaughton had been London’s greatest lothario for the last five years. His conquests were unmatched, even by the notorious Earl Drake. Thomas Drake had always satisfied himself with whores, but Jack had only gone after married women and there was nary an unscrupulous, attractive matron of the *ton* whom he hadn’t bedded. George now remembered Jack had even bedded Horatia before her husband had died.

“Not a woman who mattered,” Jack amended.

“Yes,” George muttered. “She won’t see me or talk to me now. She won’t read my letter. She’s off to a house party in two days at his estate. They’re sure to set the wedding date soon.”

“Edmund is invited to that house party. I tried to warn him off since Thornwick is such a prick. But the poor man is

always at loose ends. You'll have to recruit him and go there together."

"I can't go."

"Were you invited?"

"I'm sure I've been disinvited by now."

"You have to go. House party. Perfect opportunity for Thornwick to get to know his future bride better. To compromise her."

George's fists tightened. Thornwick in Phoebe's bed. Or Phoebe in Thornwick's.

"Don't have an apoplectic fit, George. Take a deep breath. You'll go so you can prevent it. You and Edmund. Wait. Isn't your sister friends with Lady Phoebe? Is she going?"

"Yes."

"Talk to your sister. Get her on your side."

"I don't know if my sister will talk to me. She's very angry about what I said, too. And we do rather clash."

"I thought siblings were supposed to have each other's backs. I don't know myself, but surely that's the point of brothers and sisters. Blood being thicker, *et cetera*."

Blood might be thick, but he and Alice had never agreed on anything except their friendship with Phoebe. Would Alice help him now? She resented him, flouted his rules, laughed at his habits. Sometimes he felt the spats between them were as bitter as those that had governed his parents' marriage. And she seemed all in favor of Thornwick.

But Jack seemed certain he had landed on the right course. "Talk to Alice. There's your answer, George."

George went home and waited for Alice to return. And waited. At midnight, George succumbed to exhaustion, physical and emotional. He fell into his bed and embraced oblivion, not even checking the oil reservoir in the lamp that burned through the night.

The next morning Wynn came to George when he was in his study, wretchedly trying to compose another letter to Phoebe, one that he might persuade Alice to deliver for him.

“My lord, you asked me to notify you when Miss Danforth returned. She has just come in and gone to her bedchamber.”

George got up from his desk and strode to Alice’s room and entered without knocking.

His sister had been speaking to her lady’s maid but broke off when George burst in.

“What the devil, Alice?”

She put her hand up toward George and turned back to the maid. “Clark, you may go. Do have one of the footmen get one of the medium-sized trunks out of the attic for my packing.”

The lady’s maid curtsied and left the room. As soon as the door closed behind Clark, Alice turned to him in a fury.

“What the devil? You have the audacity to say that to me, George? Do you know what I have been doing for the last eighteen hours? I have been holding a poor girl who cried all night. At this point, I don’t know why she cares a fig for your opinion of her. But she does. But the worst of it, the worst of it all is—” Suddenly, she stopped and uncharacteristically clamped her mouth shut. Her face was so red, her freckles had disappeared.

“What’s the worst of it, Alice?” He was in a rage. At himself. At Alice. At Thornwick. At Andrew. At the whole world. Even at Phoebe. Because how could he repair this if he couldn’t get to her? “What could be worse than having Phee cry all night?”

Alice took a deep breath. “I had everything perfectly arranged, George. Everything was ticking along nicely. Finally, finally, you were waking up. Slowly, but surely. And Phoebe had unexpectedly taken certain matters into her own hands which I did not expect, but brava to her because it had a marvelous effect on you. And, I thought, on her. Finally, our little bird was turning into the kestrel I always knew she was. But you had to go about everything in entirely the wrong way.

And then to come out with some horrendous statement about how Thornwick must be lacking because he wants Phoebe. When the poor girl has only ever wanted one thing her whole life.”

“Yes, she wants to be a duchess!”

Alice’s stare burned holes into George’s skull. “No, you stupid idiot. She wants you.”

*Wait.*

*Wait.*

Phoebe wanted him?

“She-she’s told you that?”

Alice tossed her head. “You’d have to be blind as a bat—no, as blind as you, not to see it. We’ve all been on tenterhooks for years, waiting for you to do something about it. Meanwhile, with you looming over her at every ball, what other man would dare to approach her? And then I saw Phoebe give up. Give up on you. Fine. I could let that happen. But she also gave up on herself. And I couldn’t let her do that. And I knew there was no talking to you, you fixed, stubborn, contrary imbecile. Telling you to marry Phoebe would only make you run the other way.”

George tried to break in here. He was *not* contrary, he was just right.

But Alice ran roughshod over him, her heated words spilling out.

“There was only one thing for it. I was going to have to get someone else to come after her. Someone of high rank. So that damn George Danforth competitiveness would rise to the surface and overcome your stupidity and open your eyes and show you that Phoebe was everything and you would woo her yourself. And it just so happened a duke was available. Three dukes, if you count Middlewich, which I don’t because we all thought he was a drunk and he wasn’t going to any balls this Season since his father just died and now it turns out he was besotted with Lovelock’s widow anyway. And there was your friend Jack Pike, or rather, Dunmore. But first he went off to



Scotland and when he came back and met Phee at a few balls, he clearly thought she was your property. But Thornwick. Thornwick, whatever else you can say about him, Thornwick is no fool. He saw what you couldn't. And I was right. His interest woke you up, George."

George sat down on the edge of Alice's bed. Alice had done this. For him. For Phoebe. For a moment, he was grateful. His sister must love him to have made such an effort. And she must think he would make Phoebe happy. And *vice versa*.

But the moment passed, and he was angry again. How dare Alice? How dare she manipulate him this way? And she was the one who had gotten Phoebe engaged to Thornwick? All of George's pain was due to her. His fists closed in his lap. He opened his mouth but was cut off by his sister.

"Think first, George, before you shout and bluster at me uselessly about my hat and glove allowance. You have one ally right now. One ally who is close to Phoebe. Who has her ear."

"You call yourself my ally? Isn't this cataclysm all your fault?"

"If you had done what any right-thinking man who knew anything about Phoebe would have done, you would be fine. The engagement would be broken. You may not have had a promise from her, but you would be well on your way to it. Did you tell her your feelings?"

"M-my feelings?"

"That you love her, you numpty!"

"Phee knows I love her."

"Did you tell her that? Did you tell her how utterly marvelous she is? How caring and thoughtful and giving? How brilliant? How deserving of love?"

"I told her she was a lovely girl." He searched his mind. "I told her she was beautiful and magnificent last week."

“Were you in your bedchamber with her when you said these things? Was your cock hard at the time?”

He paused. Alice clearly knew what had happened between him and Phoebe. “Yes.”

Alice shook her head. “George, George, George.”

“I still meant those things I said. They were still true!”

“They would have meant a great deal more to her if you had said them years ago. Or when you were both fully dressed, when you were playing chess. Or better yet, during a waltz. Not when you were deigning to tutor her in physical pleasure. Phoebe is as blind as you are, George. Blind to how wonderful she is because she sees the world through your lens, the one you have forced on her all your life, the one where she is Bumblephee. Your pupil. Always just a bit behind you, never catching up, never drawing even. And in her own way, she’s as stubborn as you are. She had given up on you. She had tipped over her king and said ‘Enough, I’m done.’ If you wanted to get her back to the board, you should have known you would have to fight in order for her to give you another chance. Bedding her was never going to be enough.”

Filled with fury, George stood.

He would now tell Alice off in his most imperious manner. Thunder at her that she was a meddling, conniving bitch of a sister who knew nothing about Phoebe. About him. About what was between the two of them.

He was shocked when his knees buckled and took him to the floor and his words came out in a pitiful bleat.

“Tell me what to do, Alice. Tell me what to do. I love her. I love her. I love her.”

## NINETEEN

Despite very little sleep and not having packed yet for the house party, Phoebe had Dawson dress her for Lady Huxley's whist party.

She had been tasked to lose by her future husband. She could do that. It shouldn't be difficult, should it? A queen's sacrifice. For her king.

And it was George who had made her want to win. But now that she was shut of George Danforth forever, she could shed that teaching. Like a butterfly sheds its little shell and comes out, no longer a worm.

Because she didn't want to be a worm any longer.

*There must be something wrong with him. He wants to marry you.*

George's words had scalded her heart all night long. Those words were a hundred times worse than any reproach she had ever given herself. A thousand times more painful than any other criticism she had ever weathered. A million times more shaming than Thornwick's disapproval which now seemed nothing in comparison.

Alice had tried to soothe her, telling her George didn't mean what he had said, he was an idiot, he was never very good with words.

Never very good with words? George wrote monographs about the blasted things. He had given Phoebe half her vocabulary and all of her grammar. Who was Alice trying to fool?

Whom.

No, George had told the truth. About why he had never wanted her. She was deficient. No. He thought she was deficient. There was a world of difference between the two things. She didn't meet *his* standards.

But that was unimportant now. It should have become unimportant years ago. She had been a fool to continue to play chess with him, to delight in his praise when she won, to hang on his words and instruction, to let him share the strategies he learned at his chess club and from his reading of the masters' great games.

She should have abandoned chess and him years ago. But she hadn't been able to give up his deep voice. His hands moving the pieces. His glances at her, making sure she understood him. She had gone on wanting his attention long after she had come to understand he would never choose her as his wife.

And now she knew why he hadn't wanted her. She wasn't good enough for him. No, no, no. He thought she wasn't good enough for him. Even though she had worked so hard to be.

Well, no longer. Her job now was to meet Thornwick's standards. And she would do so. Today.

She was on time to Lady Huxley's whist party. As she came through the front door, Alice was at her side immediately.

"Did you sleep, Phee?"

"Yes, Alice. For a few hours after you left. Did you?" Phoebe gave her reticule to Lady Huxley's butler and came farther into the hall.

"Oh, you know me. I don't really need sleep." Alice tossed her head and laughed. "A cup of coffee and I'm fine." She lowered her voice. "I saw my brother and he is dreadfully up—"

Phoebe shook her head. "I don't want to speak of him. I am here to play whist. I must concentrate." Phoebe touched Alice's arm. "I love you, Alice. You need have no worries on

that front. You are a good and true friend. In fact, now you are my only—” Oh, no. She was going to cry. Thirty seconds into the whist party and she was going to cry. Surely, she had used all her tears.

But Alice rescued her.

“Of course, you love me.” She took Phoebe’s arm. “Everyone loves me, don’t they? I’m so amusing and unpredictable. And everyone loves you, too. Now, you are going to sit down to some whist and enjoy putting fear into the hearts of all these ladies with your brilliant play. Aren’t you?”

“Lady Phoebe.” Lady Huxley’s voice broke into her and Alice’s *tête-à-tête*. “Practically early. Your engagement has improved your tardiness, I see. We will begin. You will partner me, of course.”

Phoebe summoned a smile for Alice and broke away to go into the drawing room. The other partnerings were selected by draw and then the tables were decided. Phoebe breathed a sigh of relief. For the first game, Alice would be at a different table than her.

From her.

No. Than her. Who cared about some pedantic preposition?

*I don't. Not anymore.*

But she cared about putting some distance between herself and Alice. She did not want her friend to observe her play. If anyone here could spot what Phoebe was about to do, it was Alice.

Phoebe curtsied and greeted the other occupants at her and Lady Huxley’s table. Lady Fitzhugh was seated on Phoebe’s right again and the fourth player at the table was Lady Olivia Radcliffe, the daughter of the Earl of Titchfield and the greatest beauty of the *ton*. Golden curls never out of place, blue eyes, perfect creamy skin. And her figure? Flawless. Her dress, her posture, her manners—all perfect. It was astounding that she was nineteen, almost done with her first Season, and still not yet engaged.

Phoebe felt herself quite an aged frump next to Olivia. Surely, Thornwick should have chosen her for his bride instead of Phoebe.

But Thornwick *had* chosen Phoebe. And he was stuck with her now, wasn't he? She wasn't going to give him any excuses for wiggling out of the engagement. She was going to prove herself to him. And then she was going to be married and devoted to making her husband happy and it wouldn't matter what George Danforth thought or said about her ever again.

"I am unexpectedly to travel to the duchy of Thornwick tomorrow, Lady Phoebe," Olivia said. "My mother and I will be guests at His Grace's house party."

"What a delightful thing." Lady Fitzhugh laughed. "The oldest two Cavendish girls are going as well and have asked me to chaperone them. I've agreed, but I'm not sure what the world is coming to when they think it's fine to go to a house party when they are not even three months into mourning their father."

"Lady Anne and Lady Grace?" Lady Huxley quirked an eyebrow. "I forgot your late husband was a relation to the dowager Duchess. Did the new Duke of Middlewich, the Cavendish brother, invite you to his wedding?"

"I understand it was a small affair."

"Tell me is it true—" and then Lady Huxley put her mouth to Lady Fitzhugh's ear.

Phoebe knew Lady Huxley must be asking about the new Duchess of Middlewich's pregnancy at the age of forty-six, and the duke, only twenty-nine. And despite the duchess' former wealth, she was to bring no money to the marriage. It was well and truly a love match consummated long before the wedding. Not a fit piece of gossip to be discussed in front of two maidens. Not that she was a maiden herself anymore, but no one here knew that. Except Alice. Last night, Phoebe had not been as discreet as she should have been between her sobs.

Phoebe spoke a trifle louder to cover Lady Huxley's whispering. "I'm glad you will be a guest, Lady Olivia."

“Yes, my mother accepted the invitation.”

“I understand the gardens are lovely.”

“Oh. You have not been yourself?”

“No. I will see them for the first time tomorrow. Do you like gardens?”

Olivia laughed and her laugh was as beautiful as the rest of her. “May I be honest with you? I somehow feel like I can be. I don’t like gardens. Not at all. There always seems to be a bee hovering about somewhere.” She shuddered. “I live in fear of bumblebees.”

*Bumblephee.* The pet name came into her head. Phoebe pushed it away.

“What do you like?” Phoebe asked. She would never play chess again so she must search out new, feminine interests. And she must search out new friends. Perhaps she and Olivia could become close companions who talked over embroidery or collected butterflies together.

“Oh.” Olivia’s expression changed to one of rapture. “Music. If I could listen to music all day long, I would be the most blissful person in England. No, the world.”

Phoebe knew she couldn’t share this passion with Olivia, but maybe she could help her feed it and gain a friendship that way.

“You must pay a call on me before I’m married then, Lady Olivia. There seems to be nothing but music all day long at the Abingdon town house.”

Now the rapture changed to an excited curiosity. “Oh, why is that?”

“Let us play.” Lady Huxley had finished gossiping with Lady Fitzhugh about the Middlewich scandal and was impatient. “Shuffle the cards, Lady Phoebe, so Lady Fitzhugh can deal them out.”

It had begun. Phoebe must concentrate on losing.

It was harder than she had thought it would be. Lady Huxley was a very good player. And Phoebe did not want to fail so spectacularly that she drew attention to herself.

A very fine line to walk, indeed. And she was so wrung out.

She managed it. The perfect loss. Only by one point. Lady Huxley could not even summon a scowl. Her face was a cipher. Lady Fitzhugh and Olivia seemed surprised by their win but not particularly gratified.

Thornwick was right. Phoebe was strange. Inappropriate. Unfeminine and set apart from other women. If she had just beaten the best whist team in London, she would have been glowing, childishly unable to conceal her joy at her victory. But the gracious winners Olivia and Lady Fitzhugh did not even smile.

Alice was at her side with a consoling hand on Phoebe's shoulder. She must have heard of the loss.

"Perhaps I should have done what you did, Alice, and had a cup of coffee today. Can you believe it? I have lost my Midas touch. Lady Huxley is furious."

"It's too bad, Phoebe. I was hoping the whist would cheer you."

"Cheer me? I am full of cheer, Alice. I am engaged to a handsome duke, after all."

Alice frowned. Phoebe stood abruptly, wanting to get away from her, to move to the next table.

Phoebe and Lady Huxley lost the rest of their games. By greater margins, with more obvious mistakes in Phoebe's play. She was tired and felt the difficulty of playing to lose by just a little. And now she didn't care if Lady Huxley hated her. She was earning the right to be a duchess with her poor play, wasn't she? And as a duchess, she would be invited to whist parties whether she won or not. And she didn't care to partner Lady Huxley anymore. She would learn to chat and socialize with the other women. She would have more friends than just Alice.



As she retrieved her reticule from Lady Huxley's butler to go home and begin packing, she saw Olivia again, standing with her mother and a few other ladies, laughing.

Oh, to be nineteen again. To be nineteen and to be excited about something. To think that around every corner, there was a potential husband for her, just waiting to sweep her away. To make her into a butterfly.

TWENTY

1816 AND 1817. LONDON AND THE  
DUCHY OF ABINGDON AND THE  
DANFORTH BARONY.

At the first ball of her first Season, Phoebe accepted a glass of ratafia from George.

“I hope my sister behaves herself tonight. You’ll make sure of it, won’t you, Phee?”

Phoebe had turned nineteen on the second day of the year. She had pushed her debut off as long as possible. She had refused to come out until Alice could come out at the same time and be at her side. Otherwise, Phoebe was sure she would dissolve into a horrible puddle of blushes as soon as she entered a ballroom.

Her mother had used her iciest voice, her already-married older sisters had cajoled, but Phoebe had stood firm. She must have Alice. And George thought seventeen was finally old enough for Alice to come out, although Alice had argued with him about her debut last year and the year before. Unlike Phoebe, Alice was desperate to start her Seasons and go to balls and parties.

Phoebe laughed. “Don’t ask for the unattainable, George. Alice doesn’t listen to me. I listen to Alice, if anything.”

He scowled. “Well, she doesn’t listen to me either.”

“She’s so popular already. I don’t think she has missed one dance. She’ll be sure to make a match quickly.”

“One can only hope. Then, thank God, she’ll be another man’s responsibility.”

Phoebe sipped her sweet drink. George was impossibly handsome tonight, his dark eyes set off by his dark tailcoat and crisp, white cravat. He had become such a commanding and capable man. Tall and strong, with broad shoulders that were well able to carry the load of rehabilitating his father's estate and title. A man who could have any woman he wanted, and if Alice could be believed, a man who did.

When she had heard about George's mistresses, the first one from her cousins and the later ones from Alice, Phoebe had wept. How silly that had been. Of course, George wanted women and they wanted him. And she had no claim on him or he, on her. They were friends.

Yet, he was an undeniably attractive man despite his outmoded habit of wearing a wig. She wished he wouldn't wear it, but then, wasn't it a sign of intimacy that he didn't wear it when they were alone and playing chess?

Or a sign he had no care for her good opinion since he must think the wig improved his appearance.

"You look very handsome tonight, George."

"Thank you, Phee," he said absently, his eyes scanning the ballroom, likely looking for Alice. But his eyes came to rest on Phoebe for a moment.

He was looking at her. Not as a little girl, across a chessboard. But as a woman, in a ballroom. In her white silk gown with the neckline scooping lower than any other dress she had ever worn in his presence. The perfectly matched pearls her father had given her at age sixteen around her neck. Her hair up and staying up, for the moment. Her petticoats not dragging on the ground. Her white kid gloves covering the nails she could not keep herself from biting to the quick today.

"You look very nice as well." He must have realized his mistake almost immediately because he added quickly, "Pretty. I mean pretty."

A knife sliced her open from her throat to her loins. She looked at her feet and was surprised not to see her insides—

her heart, her lungs, her intestines, her blood—spilling out on the ballroom floor in front of her.

*That's what comes of thinking of George that way. You really must stop this. It's your own fault you're hurt.*

She answered, glad her voice did not waver. “That’s all right, George. I’m happy to be nice.” She raised her head. “We can’t all be Alice.” She nodded at her friend across the room who was laughing and throwing her head back, surrounded by four young lords.

“Thank God you’re not Alice.” His voice was a growl.

The musicians took their seats again. The Master of Ceremonies announced the next dance. Alice gave her glass to one of the lords and took the arm of another one and proudly went out into the middle of the floor for the dance.

George did not move. Neither did she. But George might move away at any moment and she would be alone, without him.

“Shall we play?” she asked.

“Play?”

“Chess. Without pieces. Blindfold chess with no blindfolds.”

An almost-smile came to his lips and he stepped a bit closer to her. “It’s your turn to be White, Phee.”

“Yes. I’ll take my King’s Pawn out two squares.”

“I’ll do the same.”

“King’s Knight to Bishop, third square out.”

“Queen’s Pawn one square.”

It was just like their usual Monday nights in town except they were in a ballroom instead of his study. And she was in silk instead of muslin. She had to remind him of the location of the pieces several times, but he won the game after forty-four moves.

“Congratulations, George.”

Another dance was announced.

“Where’s your partner for this dance, Phee? Who is he?”

“He’s Sir Figment.” George looked at her blankly. She went on with a giggle, “Of my imagination.”

“Well, I can’t have that. You must dance. Here.” He took her glass of ratafia and turned away from her, putting it down somewhere. He offered his arm. “It would be my honor.”

She nodded and took his arm and let him lead her to the center of the ballroom.

It was a waltz. She had danced with him before, of course. Just this last Christmas, for example, when the Danforths had come for Christmas dinner at the Abingdon estate. It had just been the two families, so she and Alice had been allowed to dance, despite not yet being out.

But she had never been in his arms.

But, see here. She had waltzed with her younger brother Daniel dozens of times. This was no different. George’s hand on her waist was just like Daniel’s. Perhaps a trifle warmer, a trifle tighter of a grip. But really no different.

She smiled up at George. She laughed when they nearly collided with another couple. She thanked him with her whole heart at the end of the dance.

And he was very good about playing blindfold chess with her when she had no partners the rest of the Season. And very conscientious about dancing one dance with her at every ball. Of course, he asked her to dance. He knew her. He was her neighbor. Her oldest friend. Her friend’s brother. Of course, he danced with her. He complimented her gowns, her waltzing. Normally so serious, he teased her when her locks tumbled down during a reel. He even bought her a little tin of hairpins as a joke, for her to carry in her reticule. “Against future hair catastrophes,” he said. The original pins long since lost on the floors of ballrooms across London, she still kept the empty tin on her dressing table where she could see it every day. As evidence George had a sense of humor.

And then her first Season was over with no offers of marriage made to her, and both families went back to the country. The low-cut silk ball gowns were packed away. The high-necked woolen dresses came out. The chess games in the study of his town house on Monday nights moved to his study in the Danforth country house on Tuesday and Friday afternoons. Naturally, he offered to come to her father's manor instead.

"Nonsense, you're so much busier than I am, George. You shouldn't waste your time in riding over. And I like the walk."

"You could ride, Phee."

"I suppose I'll take the carriage when the weather is foul, but I don't really ride anymore. I can't seem to manage sidesaddle."

She had reminded him she was not a little girl anymore and could not wear an old pair of his breeches and ride astride. But she did not like to remind him of his promise to her. It was too much like asking him herself. She knew he didn't want that.

"Yes," he said. "Thank you for being so considerate of my time. I hope you'll keep that in mind and not be late for chess."

The day after New Year's Day was her birthday. She was twenty. He did not come. Alice showed up with a birthday gift, a book of poetry. Alice said it was from her and George. But when Phoebe opened the cover, the inscription under the frontispiece was in Alice's hand only and wished her many happy returns.

She was a silly child to think he might remember the promise he had made to her long ago. She was a fool to think he might consider that promise binding. She was an idiot to think he was romantic enough to propose in a book of poetry, to think he would propose to her at all. When had he ever offered her anything beyond tutelage and friendship?

Never.

She must stop thinking like a little girl.

She smiled at Alice and thanked her. "I so look forward to reading it," she said. "Tonight, in bed."

She did not read the book of verse that night. It was a night full of pain. And part of the pain was that she had done this to herself. How many times was she going to tell herself to stop thinking of him?

She did not rise the next day. Or the next. "I don't feel well," she told her mother when she came to her bedchamber.

But the next day was her chess game with George. "I feel much better today," she said at breakfast.

"You don't look better," her mother said.

"What is wrong, dearest girl?" her father asked.

"Nothing, Papa. I was tired, and now I just have been lying abed too long. You know I can't bear that."

Despite her best intentions, despite walking as quickly as she could, she was late, as always, upon arrival at the Danforth estate.

George had his nose deep in a book when she came into his study. He did not look at her or greet her but held a finger up.

"You made me wait for you, so now you can wait for me."

She did not speak until he had closed the book and put it away and started setting up the chess pieces.

"I apologize for my lateness, George."

"Apologies are all very well and good, Phee. But they don't mean anything unless you resolve to change your behavior."

"I do try." She put a finger in her mouth and bit down on a nail.

"Try harder."

She moved her finger out of her mouth and took a deep breath. "Thank you for my birthday gift."

He looked up, startled.



“The book of poetry?” she said. “Alice said it was from both of you.”

He ran his hand over his almost bare skull. “I’m sorry, Phee, I quite forgot. Happy birthday. Was it a happy one?”

“I missed you.”

“I’ve been inundated, trying to get the estate’s accounts reconciled.”

“Perhaps I could help you? My mother has been teaching me how to read our household books.”

“It’s so dull. I wouldn’t want to drag you into it. Better that you help me by showing up on time.”

“But I could do more than that, George. I could . . . I could be a helpmeet.” How brave she was being. Because George knew the word helpmeet could mean a spouse. She fiddled at one of her cuticles.

“Help me by being on time. And by playing chess with me. As I’ve told you before, it distracts me, eases my mind. Let’s see. It’s my turn to be White.” He rotated the chessboard. “Remind me which birthday this was for you?”

“My twentieth.”

“Of course, I’m twenty-four, Alice is just eighteen. Of course, it’s your twentieth.”

“A significant age.”

“No, surely that must be twenty-one. When you are in your majority.”

“Some people have said twenty is quite an old age for a woman.”

“Nonsense, you are as young and sprightly as ever. And unlike me, you still have all your hair. Didn’t you walk the whole way over here?”

“Yes.”

“And it made your cheeks so pink from the cold. Be sure to get near the fire and get warmed up.”

“Some people think a woman should be married by twenty.”

“I don’t know who these *some people* are that you keep quoting, but they’re wrong. You’ve only had one Season, Phee. You must look around a bit, take your time to find the right chap, all that.”

“Maybe I’ve already found him.”

His eyes narrowed. She had a moment when she thought her timid bravery might be rewarded.

“Do I know him? Has he asked for you?”

“Not in so many words.”

“Well, I hope he’s good enough for my Bumblephee. You must let me meet him.”

She sat down abruptly, her legs suddenly too weak to hold her up. “Yes.”

She forced herself to stay and to play a game. George said it helped him and she had just promised to help him, hadn’t she? But she felt so heavy. So very heavy.

He won. He did not comment on her poor play, perhaps feeling he had chastised her enough for one day.

“Congratulations, George. It’s a little wet out. May I use your carriage to go home?”

“You won’t stay and have tea with me and Alice?”

“No, not today.”

She rode home alone in his carriage and did very well at dinner that night with her parents and Andrew and Daniel home from his regiment for Christmastide.

Before she went to bed, she sat at her dressing table, shivering, and looked at herself in the mirror.

She did not think of herself as stubborn. She thought of herself as pliable. Too easily influenced by others. Too wanting to please. Not at all like George and Alice, those

Danforths who knew what they wanted and took it. Alice, with her confident wildness. George, with his rigid certainty.

But her mother had said Phoebe was stubborn. In the worst kind of way, she had said. It had come up when Phoebe had refused to debut when she was seventeen. Then her mother had asked her, “What is your perpetual lateness, your nail-biting, your chess-playing, if not stubbornness?”

So Phoebe would now think of herself as stubborn. No, not stubborn. Resolute. Disciplined, like George. No, not like George. Like her brother Andrew, who would not give up his violin despite being heir to the duchy.

But unlike Andrew, she would use her resolve in order to give up. She would give up George.

She wanted to be important in someone’s life. A wife, a mother. George would never give her that.

And she could do this. She knew she could.

She toyed with the idea of giving up chess with him as well. But, no. She still must selfishly see him. And chess was the only thing he wanted from her. It was the only thing she could give him. And she still wanted to give him something.

She was still going to love him. Yes, like a brother. She just wasn’t going to *love* him. And if that proved impossible, at the very least, she wasn’t going to wait for him to love her back. Not anymore.

She tried to ignore the gentle but stern whisper in her head that sounded so much like George’s low voice.

*You’ve said that before, Bumblephee, and look where it’s gotten you.*

## TWENTY-ONE

Phoebe was beyond relieved that her mother was coming to the house party. There had been talk that Andrew might come instead of the Duchess of Abingdon, but Alice also needed a chaperone and Andrew couldn't be that for a young lady who was not his sister. So the duchess, Alice, and Phoebe had climbed into one carriage this morning with their three lady's maids following behind in a second one.

Phoebe hoped her mother might be able to do what she herself had failed to do so far—secure a wedding date. And maybe Mother might be able to help Phoebe envision herself as a future duchess.

But as she gazed out a window while the carriage jolted down a country road, Phoebe felt the burden of some guilt along with her relief. The duchess had taken charge of the duke's dyspepsia, and Phoebe knew her mother was worried her father would stray from his new regimen while his wife was away. No coffee or tea, no sweets, no pungent spices, no spirits.

"I'll be good, Esther," her father had promised last night at dinner.

"I suppose Andrew can keep a tight rein on you for a few days." Her mother had turned to Phoebe. "I want to meet your future mother-in-law. And I must make sure we get the wedding plans underway."

The wedding date was clearly her mother's primary concern. But Phoebe had her own object in mind. She had to

get Thornwick—Arthur—to show he felt something for her.

She had done as her betrothed had asked. She had lost at whist. Now, he should make her feel adorable and enchanting and . . . *wanted*. More than anything, she longed for that.

But he had been so hard to know. So aloof. So cold.

Maybe he thought she would not permit intimacies before marriage? That would be preferable to the horrible notion that he was repulsed by her. She must find a way to make him understand she would welcome his touch without breaking George's dictum against giving.

Wait. Why should she obey that dictum? Because what did George know about husbands and wives and betrothals? Nothing. He knew nothing. He knew less than she did. She was the one who was engaged, after all.

She had been an idiot to go to him for help. But with the suddenness of her betrothal, she had been frightened about so many things. And until two days ago, George had always been her rock. He had always been the one to make her feel secure and safe. Praiseworthy. Competent. Even her father or mother or Alice couldn't do that for her when she had worked herself up into an extreme state of anxiousness.

Oh.

All this time, she had told herself she had pushed off her debut until age nineteen so Alice could be with her. She had said she needed Alice. But that wasn't true, at all, was it? It hadn't been Alice she had needed. It had been George. As Alice's chaperone, he would be with Alice at her balls. And since Alice would be with Phoebe, George would also be with Phoebe. Stalwart, shoring Phoebe up, giving her confidence.

Although that dribble of confidence had not resulted in any proposals, had it? Just scores of chess games as she stood by the wall with George and watched other young ladies dance with eligible gentlemen. But at least she had been able to stand and not crumple. She had been able to go to ball after ball, knowing he would be there, knowing she would see him even if no one saw her.

She squeezed her hands into fists in her lap. Thank goodness she was shut of George. She had relied on him for far too long. And when she had most needed him, he had failed her. Insulted her and injured her. And worst of all, it had been after he had bedded her.

That was real reason why coitus should be only for married couples. It didn't have to do with sin or babies. It was because it was too terrible to be that way with someone, be that close to them, have that pleasure with them, and then have them hurt you.

As the carriage approached the Thornwick manor house, Phoebe gulped at the sight of the exquisitely manicured lawns and flowering gardens. Everything appeared to be blooming and at peak lushness.

*This will someday be my home.* She felt no excitement, only a brush of fear. *Stop being such a ninny. Grow up. You're the betrothed of a duke.*

The ladies were met by Thornwick in the very grand front hall and ushered into the very grand drawing room of the very grand house to meet Thornwick's mother. The interesting duchess. Would she match the house and daunt Phoebe as much as her son did?

"Your Grace, may I introduce you to the Duchess of Abingdon, Lady Phoebe Finch, and Miss Danforth," Thornwick said.

Their hostess was a tiny woman, shorter than Phoebe and looking far older than a mother of Thornwick should look. Looking ages older than Phoebe's own mother. Decades older than Lady Fitzhugh who had claimed her as a friend when they were younger. A wizened and haggard face, slumping shoulders, a shuffling gait.

And she was quite nervous for a duchess. Her eyes darted about the room, landing on her son, and then looking away.

"You are most welcome," the duchess whispered.

"Thank you, Your Grace."

Phoebe expected they would be invited to sit, to take some tea as refreshment after their journey. But no.

The duchess edged toward the door. "I'm delighted to make all of your acquaintances." Her face belied her words. "I must..." The sentence was unfinished as she scurried out of the room.

Thornwick's brows came together for a moment and then his face relaxed. "Let me show you the gardens."

"Oh, yes," said Phoebe and stepped closer to him and took his arm. "I am ever so excited."

He looked down at her arm linked with his. Oh. Oh, no. He had not offered her his arm. She had taken it. She tried to pull away but his hand came down and covered hers.

"As ever, Lady Phoebe, your enthusiasm is contagious."

She had done as he had asked. He must have heard of her whist loss. And now, he would accept her affection. She smiled up at Thornwick, and he smiled back.

They strolled out to the back gardens, Thornwick leading the way, her arm in his, her mother and Alice flanking them. As Thornwick discussed the history of the gardens, pointing out this or that shrub or plant, she realized Thornwick could teach her things, too. She would learn all about weeds instead of words. Soil instead of chess. Pruning instead of grammar. Flowers were so much prettier and lady-like than those other things. Her future husband's voice suddenly made her feel cozy and comfortable, and she hugged his arm more closely, letting her breast almost graze his elbow.

After the tour of the gardens, Lady Anne and Lady Grace Cavendish arrived with Lady Fitzhugh in tow.

"Lady Fitzhugh, my mother is indisposed," Thornwick said after the new visitors were greeted in the front hall. "But Lady Phoebe told me of your friendship in the past. You'll meet her again at dinner. She should be feeling better by then. Shall we go and see the gardens?"

Phoebe found herself at the tail end of the group and next to Lady Anne on this second tour of the gardens. Thornwick

was again pointing out the plantings, saying the same things he had said to her and her mother and Alice just an hour ago. Surely, he should vary it since he knew three of them were hearing it for the second time?

Anne slowed her walk and spoke to Phoebe in an undertone as the rest of the party disappeared behind a privet hedge.

“I know it must seem peculiar we are here since my father’s death was only three months ago. But we went to my brother Jamie’s wedding two weeks ago. And I thought . . .” Anne chewed her lip. “Well, I am done with Seasons. I’m far too old for balls and should have given up years ago. But I must . . . after I heard of your engagement, I hoped to speak to you. On a delicate matter. And Catherine—I mean, Her Grace—is much more liberal than my mother and convinced Jamie we might come with a suitable chaperone. And Lady Fitzhugh was good enough to say yes.”

“I’m glad you accepted the invitation, Lady Anne.”

And Phoebe was. True, she had always been intimidated by the caustic Anne, the oldest of the seven still unmarried Cavendish daughters, but she also held a secret fondness for Anne and all her sisters. Although she would be loath to admit to this pettiness, it had reassured Phoebe that there were other daughters of dukes who couldn’t find husbands. And now she felt a twinge in her chest to hear Anne considered herself too old for balls. Anne must know all her best chances for marriage had passed her by.

*That would be me if it weren’t for Thornwick.*

Phoebe must help Anne in any way she could. She took her arm and gave her an encouraging smile. “What is the delicate matter?”

Anne spoke even more quietly than before. “I wondered how much you know of your betrothed’s past.”

Phoebe stiffened. This again. The mistresses. Exactly what George had brought up.



She tried to speak carelessly but could hear the brittleness in her own words. “I know His Grace is not a youth. He’s a man, isn’t he? I would be silly to think a lord of his age had not dallied.”

“But I wondered if you knew about the—”

“Here you are!” Thornwick rounded the privet hedge. “You’re missing the best bit about the roses, Lady Phoebe. You must keep up.” Thornwick took her hand and tugged her toward him.

Phoebe was torn. On the one hand, she did not want to leave Anne rudely, even though she wished to hear no more about mistresses. On the other hand, Thornwick had sought her out, was wanting her attention, was touching her. It was exactly what she had been longing for.

Torn? Why should she be torn? She belonged at Thornwick’s side. She gave Anne an apologetic look, dropped Anne’s arm, and tipped her face up and smiled at her handsome soon-to-be husband.

“I hope you won’t mind saying the best bit again, Arthur.”

He began moving her forward. “I think we’ll have to get you in the habit of walking a little faster, Lady Phoebe.”

“Yes. Just remember my legs are shorter than yours.”

He leaned down, his lips above her ear. “And I suspect they are shapely legs. I can’t wait to see them on our wedding night, sweet Phoebe.”

They joined the rest of the group, Anne following at a distance. Thornwick continued to hold Phoebe’s arm tightly to his side as he began his lecture on the roses all over again.

*Shapely. Sweet.* The compliments had not thrilled her or given her a warm tingle.

Her legs were not shapely. They were soft and round and plump, like her bottom. Thornwick would be disappointed. She shuddered.

And as for being sweet? She wasn’t. She was sour and resentful. Envious of Anne’s narrow hips, Grace’s perfectly

coiffed hair, her own mother's regal posture. Jealous of how Alice could tease Thornwick about repeating himself, getting him to laugh. Phoebe had never made him laugh at anything, let alone himself.

And the beautiful Lady Olivia Radcliffe was not even here yet to make Phoebe feel even worse about herself by comparison.

At tea, Thornwick asked Phoebe's mother to pour since his own mother was not present. Phoebe made sure to sit between her mother and Alice, far away from Anne. She dreaded Anne cornering her and telling her something she didn't want to hear about Thornwick. Phoebe would have to avoid Anne for the rest of the house party.

Lady Olivia Radcliffe and her mother, the Countess of Titchfield, arrived after tea. Alice poked at Thornwick and laughed. "Are we to be all hens at this party and you the only rooster, Your Grace?"

Thornwick bridled. "No, there are gentlemen coming. Three to be precise."

Dinner was awkward. Lady Fitzhugh tried to engage the Duchess of Thornwick in conversation, to remind her of mutual acquaintances, of long-ago balls and parties and picnics. The duchess gave monosyllabic responses, always looking at her son when she answered rather than at Lady Fitzhugh.

Phoebe felt herself dull and cloddish. Even Alice, normally so lively and well able to brighten any dinner table, was subdued.

Just after the table had finished eating their strawberry tarts and had gotten up and were moving out of the dining room into the grand front hall, two more carriages came up the lane. The first one stopped at the front door, and three gentlemen got out and entered the house.

Edmund Haskett, the extremely large and tall and surly Lord Longridge, heir to the Marquess of Sudbury.

William Dagenham, the Viscount Dagenham, usually so dashing, but looking a little tired and worse for wear.

And George. Wigless, with his gleaming scalp and perfectly formed skull on display. Pressed and starched with an impeccably tied cravat, his jaw set, and his dark eyes unreadable.

Phoebe's vision blurred. The gall of him to come when he knew she didn't want to see him and didn't want to talk to him.

Of course, she had said nothing to Thornwick to make him rescind the invitation to George. What could she have said? She couldn't reveal how badly George had hurt her. But she never imagined George would come to the house party after what he had said on Thursday.

Another person, besides Anne, to avoid. A person who had once made her feel brave but now cowed her since she knew the real truth of the matter. He despised her.

Wasn't she nervous enough? How was she going to survive this treacherous gauntlet of a house party?

She must. That was all there was to it. She must don her armor, put her visor down, and get on with it.

She raised her thumb to her mouth, found her last remaining fingernail and bit down.

## TWENTY-TWO

George retired early. He was hamstrung. There was nothing he could do or say, no move he could make right now that would have any effect or do any good.

Phoebe would not look at him. It was not pointed, would not have been remarked upon by anyone. When he had spoken in the company, her face had swung toward him, but her eyes had been pointed over his shoulder, unseeing.

On the other hand, Phoebe's mother had watched George constantly throughout the evening. The Duchess of Abingdon had always treated George with barely veiled suspicion. Well, now the suspicion was flagrant. And, he admitted, totally warranted. After all, George was here to end her daughter's engagement.

*Because I want your daughter, Esther Mary Bevington Finch. I want her by my side, across my chessboard, in my bed. I want her to have our babies. I want her all the ways a man can want his woman. And I'm going to make sure she knows it. And you can't stop me.*

But Phoebe could stop him. This evening, she had been careful never to let George get close to her, never to be alone where he might grasp her elbow and turn her to face him. Force her to look at him. To listen to him.

He had attempted to provoke her. He had used the word *nauseated* incorrectly, commenting that the carriage ride from London had made him *nauseated*. Not that the carriage ride was nauseating or that he was nauseous. He himself was

*nauseated*. The misuse of this word was one of his bugbears, and he had thought it was one of hers.

She had heard him. He knew she had heard him. He waited for her to contradict him, to correct him. She didn't. She kept her face neutral, pleasant even, as if what he had said was commonplace for him. When she *knew* it wasn't. And, of course, no one else remarked on what he had said.

He went to his bedchamber, the one that had originally been Alice's and that adjoined Phoebe's. The one Alice had insisted he take upon his arrival at Thornwick's house because it faced east and she could not have a room that faced east as the bright morning sunlight would wake her far too early, never mind the heavy drapes. Alice would take her brother's much smaller room in the other wing, thank you very much.

The housekeeper and the chambermaids and the footmen who had carried the trunks from one room to the other knew, of course, the switch had been made. As well as his own valet Morton and Alice's lady's maid Clark. But had Thornwick or his mother been made aware? Did Phoebe know? Did *her* mother?

He stood in front of the door that connected the two rooms. Very quietly, very slowly, he unlocked his side of the door. He put his hand against the carved and painted wood. He knew Phoebe was still downstairs, laughing with Alice, smiling at Thornwick. But still, he felt this was the closest he had been to her in days.

George stood there a long time. Finally, he broke away and went and opened the drapes and pushed open a window. A breeze filled the room, cooling him slightly and tickling his head. The moon was full. He could smell the rose garden beneath the window. He thought of Phoebe's lips, so like a rose.

It was a night for romance. For lovers. But not for him. Not for George Danforth.

He deliberated putting a nightshirt on. If he were naked in the bed, it would keep him from getting up in the middle of the night and going to her. He didn't want to do that, didn't want

to scare her before he could make his apology. But, if by some miracle, she came to him, his unclothed state might make her flee, make her think the only thing they now shared were their bodies. That coitus was all he wanted from her.

Why hadn't he made her listen to him on Wednesday night? Why hadn't he taken her in his arms again in her bedchamber and made sure she knew she had his heart and his devotion, not just his cock and his chess game? Then he never would have wounded her feelings so grievously and crushed his own chances so thoroughly.

She wouldn't come to him tonight. That was the wish of an arrogant man. And anyway, it was too hot for a nightshirt.

He took off his clothes and got into the bed, pulling a sheet over him. He did not blow out the candle by his bedside. He couldn't bear to be in the dark. He lay on his back and stared at the flickering light on the underside of the bed canopy.

Edmund's bedchamber was next to Thornwick's, and he had promised to keep awake and vigilant, to go into the hall if he heard Thornwick leave his own room or if he heard someone in the hall coming toward Thornwick's door.

Phoebe would not be compromised by Thornwick tonight. Edmund was watching out.

George woke to the opening of a door. His bedchamber was now lit only by the moon shining through the open window, the candle having long since guttered out. He saw a white form.

A whisper. "Alice? Are you awake?"

He willed himself to say something, to tell Phoebe it was him. He cleared his throat. She spoke before he did.

"I'm scared, Alice."

She came closer to the bed.

"I am. It isn't . . . it isn't what I expected at all. Being engaged. And now with George here . . ."

His heart lurched in hope. He meant something to her.

“All I can think of is what he said.” Hope crumbled into despair. “I don’t measure up. I don’t think I can be a duchess.”

She was right next to the bed. He had to make her aware.

“It’s me, Phee.”

She jerked. A squeak. His hand reached out to hold her, to keep her in place. He caught the sleeve of her nightdress.

“Please—” They both said the word at the same time.

He sat up, using his other arm to make sure the bed sheet covered his lower half. Her face was clearly visible to him in the moonlight now.

“Don’t go,” he begged her. “Let me tell you how sorry I am.”

Her fearful expression did not change. “I can’t be here.”

“No one will know.” She was safe with him, didn’t she know that?

She bit her lip. No one will know. Never a wife. Just a secret. That’s what he wanted from her. To keep her hidden away, even more hidden than his mistresses. At least Thornwick had acknowledged her and had made it clear to the world what he wanted from her. Even though it wasn’t quite how she wanted to be wanted.

But it was silly and girlish of her to think she could have any say in how she was desired. She had no control over that.

It was what her whole life had been, hadn’t it? Having no control. Finding her fingers in her mouth, with her nails bitten down. Her plate too full at breakfast. Her hair a disordered mess. Always late, scattered, worried.

And yes, weak and bending both to George and to Alice. Those powerful Danforth personalities that had ruled her life far more absolutely than her mother and father ever had. Going along with George’s unconditional certainty and Alice’s harebrained schemes.

Because this must be Alice's doing. George here, in Alice's bed, capturing her. She should have known. She had smelled him as soon as she had come into the room. He carried the scent of everything that was home to her. And now everything that was arousing to her.

"I hate you," she whispered.

"I know. But I don't hate you, Phee. In fact—"

"Why would you hate me? Haven't I done everything you've ever asked of me?"

He was silent.

"Haven't I stayed a little girl for you? A pupil for you? Haven't I cried out of your sight so you wouldn't be upset? Haven't I learned to beat you at chess in a high-necked dress so I could keep your interest? If only for an hour or two over the chessboard. Because I could never keep your interest any other way. Tell me what you want from me now, George. Tell me what you want so I can give it to you and you'll leave me alone." She heard the plea in her voice and hated herself.

"You keep my interest," he mumbled.

"Only now. When it's too late."

"You've always kept my interest. And it's not too late. You're not married yet."

She could feel the tears coming. "What do you want, George?"

"I want to hear what you want, Phee."

The words tumbled out of her. "Shall we couple again? In the house of my husband-to-be? So you can laugh at him behind his back? So you can satisfy that perverse part of you that wants to win? That sick part of you that never wanted me until I was somebody else's property."

"You're nobody's property."

She used her free arm to pull her nightdress up, high over her right breast. "What is the meaning of the mark you gave me with your mouth? Don't people put marks on their



property? Did you think I wouldn't see it? That I don't look in a mirror at my own breasts? That my lady's maid wouldn't see it and look at me like I had been a whore with my betrothed? The only saving grace was she would never guess it had been you instead of him."

He let go of her then.

But she couldn't leave his room. She couldn't leave him.

*Why? Why can't I leave? I hate him. I just told him so.*

Because she wanted him. She had wanted him as soon as she knew what wanting was. She still wanted him.

Standing next to his bed, smelling him, seeing his naked chest and knowing the rest of him was bare under the sheet, Phoebe was finally ready to acknowledge the terrible truth. Of course, she hadn't asked for a bedding lesson *only* because she was so worried about failing at one of the most important duties of a wife. It hadn't *solely* been so she could know what to do or how to act with Thornwick in a bedchamber.

*It was because I wanted to couple with George.* She had wanted him for so long and it was never going to happen unless she took matters into her own hands. And with her engagement, her looming marriage, her opportunity was slipping away.

Her worry she wouldn't please her husband? It had been real. She hadn't lied to George. That worry was still real.

But it had been an excuse, hadn't it? An excuse to know George's body, to be in his arms, to have his kiss, to thrill to his touch. To have her nose next to his skin and inhale, great huge lungfuls of the most wonderful aroma in the world. To catch hold of a little piece of her girlhood fantasy before it was lost to her forever.

She thought she didn't know her future husband? Ha! She scarcely knew herself.

She used her now-free hand to hold the other side of nightdress up, to show her left breast.

Had it only been eight days ago she had first shown her body to George? So scared of his disapproval. So nervous that her breasts, her hips wouldn't please him enough to get her lesson, her chance to be with him. And how she had trembled with fear.

As she was trembling now. She tried to force her body to be still.

"That was very wrong of me." His words were quiet but clear. "All of it. Very wrong."

*No!* She screamed inside. *Touch me, take me, make me yours.*

But he made no move toward her. He kept speaking in a low, calm voice. "The fault is mine. Entirely. About everything. I should never have taken your wager. I should never have bedded you."

He regretted bedding her. Of course, he did. He was the man most aware of all her faults, and he had never minded pointing them out to her. And he had made it clear what he thought of her two days ago. Here she was, hoping his coming to the house party, his baiting her with using *nauseated* incorrectly, his being in the bedchamber next to hers meant something. Meant at least he wanted something womanly from her still.

He only wanted the least womanly thing about her. But she would never let him have *that* again. She pulled her nightdress down.

"We are speaking truthfully now, are we? Well, let me tell you something, George Danforth. I never liked chess." She leaned forward and hissed, "In point of fact, I hate it. I loathe it. I despise it. It's childish. The little pieces. The pedantry of it. The slowness of it. The pretense that it is some great intellectual battle when it is really a game. And I hate that I've wasted so much of my life playing it with you."

He recoiled.

She left his room and locked her side of the door behind her.

She had done it. She had hurt him as he had hurt her.  
And she had finally learned how to lie.

## TWENTY-THREE

Phoebe was surprised to see George at the breakfast table the next morning. She thought he would have already retreated back to London to hide in his study and lick his wounds.

*I think too much of myself. I can't hurt him that way. I'm inconsequential.*

The party went to church, and she fidgeted when the banns were read for a local man and woman who would marry in a fortnight. Thornwick—Arthur—turned his head ever so slightly toward her and smiled as the banns were announced. He still had not said anything about setting a date for their wedding. But soon, she was sure, they would sit down with their mothers and plan the whole thing.

After luncheon, her betrothed had a surprise for her.

“I remember you like to do your archery on Sunday afternoons,” Thornwick said in an offhand manner.

Had she told him that? How extraordinary that he had remembered.

“I’ve had some targets set up on the south lawn. And found some bows of differing sizes.”

“And arrows?”

“Yes, and arrows.” He looked at her. With a degree of tenderness, she thought.

“I must change my dress. I’ll do so right away.” She was about to rush upstairs, but she stopped herself and touched his

arm. "Thank you, Arthur."

"You're welcome, Phoebe."

It was the first time in public he had called her Phoebe without the *Lady*.

She went up to her bedchamber, her heart a trifle lighter.

"Dawson, quickly, I need something suitable to wear for archery. Let's look at my day dresses. And we need to fix my hair again. And I need a bonnet or a hat with a small brim."

A knock on the door. Dawson went to answer it, but there was no one in the hallway.

Oh. The knock had come from the door that led to George's room. Phoebe held up her hand to stay Dawson and went to answer the knock herself.

George could not meet her eyes. He had something brown in his hand. He thrust it at her.

"I had this made for you this week. Best not tell anyone it's from me, I think."

She took it and looked at it. It was made of leather. Stiff, hard leather. Molded like half a sphere. No, more like a third of a sphere. A slightly larger-than-a-croquet ball sphere. With two looped straps and buckles.

"It's for archery," he mumbled. "For your . . . side. Over your dress. There's been no saddle oil put on it so it shouldn't stain anything. I'm sure your lady's maid can figure out the straps, but if not—"

"Yes, I'm sure she'll be able to, Lord Danforth."

"I look forward to seeing your skills. I know you enjoy archery."

"Yes, it's quite challenging. And useful, too. After all, you can kill your enemy with an arrow."

"Yes." He bowed and stepped away.

She closed the door. It was a cunning thing George had had made. She should have thought of such a thing herself

years ago when her breasts started to grow. She held the sphere to the side of her left breast and the leather cupped it perfectly.

*Of course, it does. George knows my breasts.* Her vision blurred. *Blast.*

“Miss Alice Danforth must have told her brother of my difficulty with my bowstring,” she said loudly to Dawson. “Very wrong of her. But we all know how improper Miss Danforth can be at times, don’t we?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Now, shall I wear the green dress to match the grass of the lawn or the blue dress to match the sky? What do you think, Dawson?”

“Oh, I think for archery, green is best. Didn’t you tell me Robin Hood wore green, my lady?”

“Yes, well, that was Lincoln green, and my dress is more of a leaf-green, but I think you’re right. Let’s put on the green. And then we’ll figure out this contraption.”

“Yes, my lady.”

George had planned to leave at first light but decided against it. He did not deserve an escape. He did not deserve to spare himself pain. He would flagellate himself for Phoebe.

Only after he had heard the banns read in church and seen Phoebe and Thornwick looking at each other in the pew in front of him, did he realize, once again, how inconsiderate he had been. He should not have been thinking of what he deserved. He should have been thinking of *her*. Of Phoebe. She didn’t deserve to have him here, ruining her happiness. Although he still thought Thornwick wouldn’t make her happy.

*Shut it. She thinks it. That’s what’s important.*

He was about to make his excuses, to have Morton pack him and ready his carriage, when he heard Thornwick tell Phoebe about the targets, the bows, the arrows.

He saw Phoebe's delight and the smile she gave Thornwick. It was the first genuine smile George had seen from her since his arrival. He had taken that smile for granted his whole life, hadn't he? And now that it was gone, or not directed at himself, he realized how much of a gift her smile had always been.

And he remembered *his* gift for her, the one he had hounded his saddle maker to finish before Thursday when he had meant to present it to her at tea. That loathsome, dreadful tea. Of course, the thing had not been ready by then. Damned saddler. Although the man had warned him it might take some time as it was a very strange thing George wanted him to make. The little leather shield had been delivered on Saturday morning and he had taken it with him when he had left London with Edmund and William for Thornwick's estate.

He had hoped it would be part of his and Phoebe's reconciliation. A reconciliation, despite Alice's schemes, that would never happen now.

George climbed the stairs to his bedchamber.

He would let himself have one little crumb more of selfishness where Phoebe was concerned. He would allow himself the pleasure of giving her the gift and the pleasure of watching *her* pleasure as she shot some arrows. He had never taken an interest in her archery, and now he realized he had never seen Phoebe use her bow when she had watched so many of his fencing lessons in the gardens of the Danforth estate, read his monographs before they went to the printers, heard him practice his speeches before he gave them in the House of Lords.

What attention she had paid him. And he had paid her practically none, except over the damned chessboard. And then twice in his own bed and once in hers.

And now he longed to pay her attention. He craved it. He wanted to dedicate every single waking second of the rest of his life to paying her attention. And she didn't want it.

He got upstairs quickly and gave her the shield through their connecting doors and was glad she didn't refuse it. He

hoped he hadn't embarrassed her in front of her lady's maid.

He strolled out to the lawn. The whole party eventually collected there, save Thornwick's mother who had been absent the whole day. And Phoebe.

"Thornwick, your butler told me there is talk of a wild boar in the area," William Dagenham said, grinning. "We must keep an eye out and protect the ladies."

"Surely not." This was Lady Anne Cavendish. "The wild boar was hunted to extinction in England by the seventeenth century."

"The sixteenth," growled Edmund.

"You are mistaken, my lord." Lady Anne's *my lord* dripped with disdain.

"I am not, my lady." Edmund made *my lady* sound like *idiot*.

Thornwick interrupted, waving his hand dismissively. "Just some pig that escaped from its sty and has gone feral. Pigs are quite smart, you know. Smarter than dogs." He frowned, looked at his watch and then back at the house.

George could do something for Phoebe, perform a small service. He could distract Thornwick from her tardiness.

"Lovely cool breeze you have here at your estate."

"Don't give the man credit for the breeze, George." William laughed. "Although, knowing Thornwick, he likely thinks he magicked it up himself for our benefit."

"It's always cooler here than in town," Thornwick said, his face and voice bland.

"You have very lovely gardens, Your Grace," George commented, knowing from yesterday evening that this was a point of pride for the man, one he would be willing to talk about for hours. And last night, he had.

"Yes." Thornwick looked at his watch again.

"Uh, that's a handsome watch." Blast. Why had George drawn attention to the watch, to the time, to the fact that it was



taking Phoebe so long to dress? “Is it reliable?”

“Yes. In fact, I intend to have one made to match it, a small one, and give it to my wife on our wedding night to put a stop to occasions such as this one.”

George’s jaw dropped. His hatred of the man came flooding back to him. And yes, he hated that Thornwick would have a wedding night with Phoebe. But it was more than that.

What a shit Thornwick was. An unmitigated shit.

George could imagine Phoebe’s reaction. Her, perhaps naked in the bed—no, he couldn’t think of that. Her in a nightdress, in the bed, thinking her husband was about to give her a romantic gift, a symbol of their union. Her face when she saw her punitive present. A gift intended to correct her. Fix her.

Surely, Phoebe’s expression would match the one she had had when George had told her there must be something wrong with Thornwick because he wanted to marry her.

Which reminded him that he was a shit, too. Because in addition to that insult, hadn’t George bemoaned Phoebe’s lateness a million times himself?

*That’s different. I wouldn’t give her a watch for a wedding present. I’d give her . . . what would I give her? I’d get Alice to tell me what to give her. In fact, I’d get Alice to buy it. How is that for romantic? Maybe I’m an even bigger shit than Thornwick.*

George almost turned and left the lawn then. But here Phoebe finally came, tripping over the grass in a green dress that did not look much different to George’s eyes than the dress she had worn to church.

*Don’t hurry, Phoebe. Don’t give the shit the satisfaction.*

And Phoebe didn’t hurry. She walked as she always did, straight ahead, bouncing a bit on her toes. A short stride to match her height, her arms swinging easily at her sides. George had always liked her walk. None of Alice’s boyish swagger. None of Lady Starling’s swaying. A sensible, sweet walk.

She was wearing the leather shield. He was glad of that and her smile when she joined the group. He had been right to stay.

Phoebe chirruped, “My apologies for keeping everyone waiting.”

Thornwick smiled back, his irritation seemingly erased. “It’s all for you, Lady Phoebe. Let’s have you select a bow.”

“What is that odd thing you’re wearing, dear?” The Duchess of Abingdon stepped closer to Phoebe and fingered one of the straps.

“Oh, it’s just something—” She drew her mother aside and whispered in her ear. The other women came closer, and Thornwick engaged William and Edmund in some chat about a horse race he had seen two weeks ago.

Lady Grace Cavendish said, “May I?” and reached out. When Phoebe nodded, Grace touched the shield. “This is very clever. I should have one made myself.”

George would have to tell Alice where it had been made so she could tell Phoebe.

Lady Anne said, “If I had known such a thing existed, I might have taken up archery myself. But I had always thought it impossible.” Lady Anne was narrow everywhere except her breasts, which George could admit were things of surpassing beauty. But not surpassing the beauty of Phoebe’s breasts. Because, of course, Phoebe’s breasts were attached to Phoebe now, in a way they hadn’t been when he was seventeen and had dreamed about them.

Phoebe went and selected a bow.

And then George felt if he had not already been in love with Phoebe Finch, he would have fallen in love with her on the south lawn of the Thornwick estate.

She was . . . he didn’t know what she was. The words he had used before—beautiful and magnificent—could not come close to describing Phoebe with a bow and arrow. She was not of this earth.

Her head tilt. Ah, that was where that head tilt had come from. The curve of her back when she took her stance. The very slight poking out of her pink tongue. The last second when she closed her eyes. To feel the breeze, he supposed, to sense the influence of the wind. And then the sure and sudden *twang* of the bowstring. The arrow itself, a glorious missile through the air. The *thud* of it hitting the target.

Even when a sudden gust blew her arrow off course, causing her to miss the target, one could see the path of the arrow had been perfect until the very last moment. And her laugh at the wind had more than compensated for the lack of a thud.

William Dagenham and Lady Grace had also chosen bows and were shooting arrows at the other two targets. But George only had eyes for Phoebe.

“Let’s lay a wager,” William called out. “To make it interesting.”

George snorted. Clearly, William had not been paying attention to Phoebe’s skill. But the Viscount Dagenham was an inveterate gambler. Everyone knew that.

“I thought you were here to get away from your losses, Dagenham,” Thornwick said loudly.

William was not in the least abashed. He shouted back, “Not money. Some other kind of wager.”

Thornwick walked over to him, and the two men put their heads together. Thornwick said something. William laughed. Thornwick laughed. The two women—Lady Grace and Phoebe—came over and joined them.

George could tell from Phoebe’s reddening face and her gaze directed at the ground that she didn’t like the stakes at play here. He almost walked over himself, but he suddenly felt the Duchess of Abingdon’s hand on his forearm, restraining him.

“I’m surprised to find you here, Lord Danforth. At a house party. From what I understand from my daughter, you lead a very regimented life. You do certain things on certain days.

Surely, you are missing duties and appointments by being here?"

He turned and looked at her. "I rearranged some things."

Her gaze was steely, not unlike her daughter's when Phoebe was losing. But George had almost forgotten that look, Phoebe had won so many games in the last year.

"It's such a pity your routine has been disrupted. Surely, you will very soon be needed back in London. After all, there's nothing here for you. Now."

"The wager has been agreed upon," Thornwick called out. "It's between Lady Phoebe and Lord Dagenham only." Lady Grace was shaking her head as she walked away, handing her bow to a footman.

"Each archer is to have three arrows," Thornwick continued. "Whoever has the fewest arrows in the center of the target at the end is to sing for the company this evening after dinner. A draw will be decided by an additional two arrows each."

The company, barring George and Alice, clapped their hands. Even Phoebe's mother released George's arm so she could clap.

Phoebe had no musical talent. She never sang in public. She had confessed many times of being petrified of ever being called upon to do so. What had induced Phoebe to accept this wager?

Thornwick, of course. And also the knowledge she would almost certainly win. But it was not like Phoebe to take a chance like that. Only on the chessboard—and in the bedchamber, George reminded himself—was Lady Phoebe Finch daring.

George exchanged looks with a furious Alice.

"And I will pay Lady Phoebe's forfeit if she should lose!" Alice shouted out.

A good woman, his sister. Alice knew several comical songs and enough of the pianoforte to accompany herself with

a few chords. And no one would ever accuse Alice of being shy.

“No, Miss Danforth! No, you will not,” Thornwick shouted back. “You must have very little confidence in your friend’s skill to say that.”

Alice had moved toward George. “But I have every confidence that man is an arsehole,” she said under her breath.

George shot a glance at the Duchess of Abingdon. She had apparently not heard what Alice had said because she continued to gaze at Thornwick, her smile fixed in place.

William and Phoebe flipped a coin. William would go first with one arrow, then Phoebe would use two of her arrows, William would use two, and if there was any remaining question as to the winner of the match, Phoebe would use her last arrow. If it ended in a draw, the extra arrows would come into play.

William took his stance. Now, George paid attention to him. His form was not on a par with Phoebe’s, but George suddenly remembered William Dagenham had been in the army before his older brother had died and left him the title. But surely, in this day and age, the army still didn’t train soldiers in archery? Weren’t they all about cannons and rifles now?

William hit the edge of the target with his first arrow. No point for him. A sympathetic groan from the group.

Phoebe’s first arrow hit the center dead on. A cheer rose up, George trying to cheer the loudest of all. But he was drowned out by Alice’s roar of approval.

A wind came up. Phoebe had already brought her second arrow to her bow and notched it, but now she lowered the bow and arrow together. She said something to William.

“Lady Phoebe thinks the group as a whole, including the footmen, should move away for safety’s sake. The breeze!”

“Wait for the wind to die down, Phee!” George shouted as he and the whole group stepped back. Both Thornwick and the Duchess of Abingdon glared at him.

In fairness, Phoebe waited quite a while. The spectators grew restless, and George knew she sensed it.

“Come on, Lady Phoebe. It’s not life or death. Just shoot the arrow,” Thornwick called out.

Phoebe nodded and raised her bow. She closed her eyes. She frowned.

*Wait. A frown has no place in her preparation.*

George wanted to shout and stop her. But he didn’t. She let the arrow fly. The wind took it, and it missed the target entirely.

A collective groan.

And then, mysteriously, as quickly as it had come up, the wind died down. Disappeared.

“Aeolus is on my side today, eh, Lady Phoebe?” Lord Dagenham said loudly and grinned and notched his arrow.

George had always thought William Dagenham a rather amusing fellow but right now he hated him and his grin.

William hit the center of the target twice in a row.

Now it was down to Phoebe. If she made this shot, the match would have extra arrows. If she didn’t, the match would be over. William would have won, and Phoebe would have to sing for the party tonight.

George noticed Phoebe was looking at Thornwick. George whipped his head around in time to see the duke frown and shake his head.

George looked back at Phoebe. “You can do it, Phee!” he shouted.

She kept her eyes closed for a long time before letting this arrow fly.

George prayed.

It was straight and true. *Thwap*. Right in the center.

William had two points. Phoebe had two. A draw. To break it, they would now shoot two arrows each, starting with

William.

Thornwick held up his hand. “A moment!” he called out. “I must give my betrothed encouragement!” He lowered his voice. “A husband’s privilege, wouldn’t you say, George?”

Thornwick walked to Phoebe. He held her elbow as he spoke to her. He seemed very intent. And Phoebe. What was Phoebe doing? She was looking up at Thornwick, listening to him, as she had once listened to George. And was that a little nod from her? George could not read her face.

Thornwick walked back to the group of spectators, and George had no difficulty reading *his* face. The blond duke looked smug. But he always looked smug, didn’t he?

William hit the center of the target with his first arrow and missed it with his second.

“I wish you good luck, my lady,” he said in a voice loud enough to be heard by the watchers, “and I look forward to torturing these good people tonight with my drinking songs.”

There was a chorus of boos from the crowd.

Phoebe notched her arrow. George was ready this time and watched Thornwick, not Phoebe. Again, Thornwick shook his head and frowned.

George glanced at Phoebe. She was looking at Thornwick. Her face was red. He thought he could see the crease between her eyebrows. Then she closed her eyes for the longest period of time yet. She adjusted her aim. A second or two. Then she adjusted again.

*Twang! Thwap!* An arrow vibrated in the center of the target. George could tell it was a winner but he held back his cheer.

The footman whose job it was to remove arrows from the targets came at a run.

“Your Graces, lords and ladies, the arrowhead has gone clear through the target to the other side. And it is in the center.” The footman began the process of shifting the target

Lady Grace had been using earlier and moving the damaged one away as the group huzzahed and clapped.

“Hold!” Thornwick stalked toward Phoebe very quickly. He seized her elbow with one hand and began pulling her toward the forest that edged the lawn, not thirty yards away. Phoebe was stumbling, unable to keep up with his long legs and rapid pace. She had the bow and her next arrow in her hand.

George had visions of her falling, the arrow going into her face, her eye. He started after them.

Again, the Duchess of Abingdon’s strong grip on his forearm.

“Don’t, Lord Danforth,” she hissed. “You’ve interfered in Phoebe’s life long enough.”

Alice took his other hand and whispered in his ear. “Maybe she’ll wake up to what an asshole he is.”

“The match is on hold, I suppose. Let’s have our lemonade,” William said, grinning as he walked back to the others. But the grin looked false. Surely, he knew Thornwick wanted Phoebe to lose intentionally.

The party, except for George and the Duchess of Abingdon, retreated to the shade of a tree where the cold lemonade waited in glasses on trays held by footmen.

Once Thornwick and Phoebe disappeared into the forest, Lady Abingdon released George’s arm.

“Stay. Good boy.”

Was she aware she had just addressed him as if he were one of her husband’s hunting dogs?

He bowed. “Your Grace.” He had other names for her on the tip of his tongue, but he was working very hard not to give voice to those. After all, this was Phoebe’s mother.

*No, damn it.*

He took off running, knowing the duchess would not make a scene by shouting after him. And the lady’s grip might be



strong, but she would never be able to keep up with George's legs.

## TWENTY-FOUR

Thornwick dragged Phoebe deep into the forest. He did not speak but took long strides, pulling her by her elbow until they reached a large clearing.

She knew he was in a rage. She had deliberately disobeyed him twice and had been fully prepared to disobey him a third time. But she could not and would not face the crowd of people after dinner tonight and attempt to sing. She would be mortified, humiliated, and certain to cast up her accounts in front of everyone.

And . . . and it would mean performing badly in front of George. Twice. With first her archery and then her singing.

She had only accepted the wager because she had been confident that she would win. But Thornwick had ordered her to lose and not embarrass Lord Dagenham. But surely Lord Dagenham wouldn't be embarrassed to lose to her just because she was a woman? The men in her life had always liked her to win. Her father, her brothers, and, of course, George.

But perhaps the Finches and George were anomalies. Perhaps other men really were that fragile. Perhaps that was why other young women had an easier time finding suitors and husbands—they understood and accommodated this mystifyingly delicate male pride.

But now Phoebe needed to find a way to appease her future husband.

“Please, Arthur, let go of me. I won't run away.”

“I am holding your arm, Lady Phoebe, so I don’t do something else with my hand. Like smack you.”

She had never been struck by anyone. Not even spanked as a child. She blanched and pulled away, but he held her fast. She whimpered. Like a child. And tried to think.

She should push him away or pry his hand off of her. But she had no free hand herself. She still clung to her bow and arrow as if somehow she still needed them.

*I do need them. So I can stab Thornwick with the arrow if it comes to that.*

The notion strangely calmed her and her whimper petered out.

Thornwick’s face was red, his nostrils flared. He had creases around his downturned mouth. His normal placidity was gone. His whole expression . . . it wasn’t just anger. It was some kind of hate. She had never seen its like.

“You agreed, Lady Phoebe.” He shook her arm and the violence of it made her whole body flail. “You agreed to miss the target.”

“But I lost at whist, just as you asked, Arthur.”

“Your Grace!” he screamed. “I am Your Grace.” Flecks of saliva collected in the corners of his mouth. He shook her again. “You thought you could trick me into marrying you by making a gesture? You didn’t think you needed to continue to obey me? You’re like all the rest!”

“All-all the rest?” she squeaked out.

“All sweetness and softness until you’re asked to do something you don’t want to do. Lying, deceiving bitches. All of you.”

A deep rumble, verging into a roar. “Let go of Lady Phoebe.”

George. She looked over her shoulder. He was standing at the edge of the clearing, all shoulders and chest and dark eyes and smoldering rage.

She hung her head, unable to keep her eyes on him. How shameful for him to see her like this, being treated like a child by Thornwick. Being cursed at and yanked.

“The law in England is that I can do what I like with my wife.” Thornwick’s voice was suddenly controlled and calm.

“Lady Phoebe is not your wife,” George answered.

“She will be.”

“Will she?”

“If she wants to be a duchess, she will. And she will learn to do as she’s told.”

“Your Grace.” She looked up at Thornwick and spoke quietly so George would not hear. “If you let go of me, I will convince Lord Danforth to go.”

Thornwick did not release her but the tightness of his grip on her elbow lessened somewhat. His eyes narrowed.

“I’m not afraid of him if that’s what you’re implying.”

“No, of course you aren’t. I just want him to leave so you and I can continue to discuss this matter.” Whatever happened in this clearing, Phoebe didn’t want George to witness it.

Thornwick was looking at her and suddenly he wasn’t. He looked past her, over her shoulder, and his face changed. He let go of her and he was gone. Running and disappearing into the trees. What had George done to scare him so? But Thornwick hadn’t been looking at George, had he? He had been looking slightly off to the side.

Strong hands on her waist. The smell of cedar. A harsh whisper in her ear as she was pushed toward the edge of the clearing.

“Make no sound. There is a wild pig rooting in the forest. Twenty yards away. We are going to go to a tree and get you up it before it decides to charge.”

And then George was pushing her up a tree. She managed to grab a bough and get on top of it, lying over it, her arms and legs dangling on either side. She was safe, hung over the limb,

eight or ten feet off the ground. A wild pig couldn't climb a tree, could it?

As George reached for a different limb, there was movement on the other side of the clearing and she saw the pig coming at a run.

Her bow. The arrow. She still had not dropped them. How she had gotten up the tree still holding them she didn't know. It must have been George's mighty shove.

She notched her only arrow.

*Concentrate, Phee, concentrate.*

The *zwing* of the bowstring and the *plumph* of the arrow into the pig's flank were very close together since the distance was so short. The pig continued its headlong gallop, and George had not yet gotten a good grasp on a bough.

She despaired. She had not killed the pig.

A yard away from George, the pig stopped moving and fell over.

"George, it's all ri—"

A horrendous *crack*, she slid, George moved like lightning, the limb under her broke away from the tree completely and she fell. But only a few feet since George caught her, bow and all. She was safe in his arms, and the limb fell to the ground at his feet.

"I must—" She was very out of breath. "Stop eating biscuits."

George kissed her. A brief, tender kiss that was more perilous than Thornwick's rage or a feral pig. A kiss that made her feel how much she loved him, how much she had always loved him and wanted him and yearned for him.

But he hadn't wanted her.

"Put me down, George."

"I'll put you down if you promise me two things."

"George!"

“Two things.”

“What are they?”

“You’ll never stop eating biscuits.”

“Fine, yes. Put me down.”

“And you won’t marry Thornwick.”

She could feel the thump of George’s heart in his chest.

“I promised to marry him.”

“He was cruel and vicious to you. I saw it. I heard it. And he’s a coward. He left you, Phee. He ran away.”

She was silent. It was true. Thornwick was a coward. And a bully.

George went on. “He doesn’t care for you like—”

“Shut up. Put me down.”

“No, I won’t shut up. Ever. And I won’t put you down. And I won’t stop kissing you. Ever.”

And he kissed her again. And again. And she dropped her bow and kissed him back. She couldn’t help kissing him back, grabbing at anything he was willing to give her just as she always had.

Someone coughed, and George stopped kissing her.

She looked around, and Lord Dagenham and Lord Longridge were standing ten feet away, both out of breath, both looking chagrined.

“His Grace came running out of the forest,” Lord Dagenham said and looked down at the dead pig. “He shouted about a boar and that he was going to get some guns. Edmund and I concluded something might be amiss and someone might need some help, so we came into the forest.” He looked up from the pig. “And we found Lord Danforth still standing. The wild pig dead by arrow. And Lady Phoebe?”

“Unharméd,” she answered. “Put me down, George.”

Very slowly, George put Phoebe down. She dusted herself off and straightened her skirts. She looked at George whose

eyes were on the enormous pig lying on the ground. Its proximity. Its tusks. Its side punctured by an arrow with the blood coming out.

His face went white.

George didn't like blood. He had had to sit down quickly once after she pricked her finger on his letter opener. It had been just a few drops of blood, but he hadn't liked it.

"Lord Dagenham, Lord Longridge." Her voice rang out. "Get Lord Danforth—" But both men were already at George's side, catching him as he collapsed, his head lolling.

"Do you think you can carry him back to the house?"

Lord Longridge took George's shoulders and Lord Dagenham took his feet.

"You mustn't think he isn't brave because he fainted. He rescued me from the pig."

Lord Longridge nodded toward the pig. "It looks like you did some rescuing, too, Lady Phoebe."

Phoebe walked alongside the two men carrying George as they wove their way through the trees.

"Lord Dagenham, Lord Longridge—"

"William."

"And Edmund."

"William, Edmund, I know His Grace is your friend, but you must realize Lord Danforth and I, we had just escaped—"

"Save your breath, Lady Phoebe," Edmund said. "We're George's friends, not Thornwick's. I understand you're engaged to him, but I don't have much use for a poltroon who doesn't stay behind to protect a woman."

"Or one who tries to rig a contest. Even if it's in my favor and even if I owe him more than a few pounds. We will say exactly what I told you." William grinned. "And certainly, if you prefer, we will not mention any kissing."

"I prefer you do not."

George must have come out of his swoon because he opened his eyes and raised his head at that point. “And I prefer you do. Lots of kissing. Tell that pusillanimous arsehole there was lots of kissing. Between me and Phee.”

Edmund growled. “If the lady does not want her reputation compromised, George, we’ll all keep our mouths shut.”

“It’s none of your business, Edmund.”

William grinned again. His face was sweating and he was panting even as the enormous Edmund showed no sign of strain from carrying the heavier half of George. “It’s a good sign he’s talking, Lady Phoebe.”

“Yes, but all the same, I wish he would shut up.”

George did shut up then. But he stayed conscious, his eyes open and every time she turned her head to look at him, he was looking back at her.

Near the edge of the forest, the gamekeeper and a group of other men approached, all carrying muskets or pistols. George insisted he be put down. He was quite all right, just had been shaken, he was a grown man, for God’s sake.

She put her hand on George’s arm, keeping him back from the group as they headed toward the house.

“May I speak to you?”

“Yes, yes.” He got in front of her and stopped walking, blocking her. “That’s all I want. To talk to you. Please. Please let me tell you how sorry I am about what I said at tea. About Thornwick marrying you. It isn’t what I meant. It isn’t what I think. At all. Quite the opposite, in fact.” He gulped. “I want to marry you, you see? And I was quite desperate. And desperate men are foolish men. And foolish men say hurtful, untrue things when something important is slipping through their fingers.”

She shook her head, unable to speak. Why would he say he wanted to marry her when he never had before? She wasn’t good enough for him. He had said that, in essence, during tea. And it didn’t matter that he wanted to take it back now. Because she had felt the truth of it, for years.



George was a man made up of rules, wasn't he? And he had broken a rule by fornicating with her at her insistence. He was feeling guilty, and this was his way of making it right.

“Are you saying no, Phee?”

“I'm saying . . .” She looked up at the sky, blinking back her tears. “Why now?”

“Because I'm stupid.”

She brought her gaze back down to his fiercely intelligent dark eyes. “We both know you're not stupid, George.”

“Yes. I am. I wasn't paying attention. I was stuck in a past where you were still fourteen and needed an older brother. You didn't need a lover or a husband. ”

He thought she needed him. He didn't need her. That was true, too. And it was hateful. Because what kind of marriage would that be? He would condescend to marry her, and she would spend the rest of her life with a clutching need to please him.

Because she still wanted to please him. More than she wanted to please Thornwick. What had those unfailingly accurate arrows been, except for a desire to do well in front of him even if it meant enraging her betrothed?

George had all the power. He always had done. She must claw something back for herself.

She took a deep breath. “I won't marry you. And I want you to leave.”

His face fell.

She hardened her heart and went on. “Leave right away. Leave me alone. Let me sort this out. By myself. Not under your influence.”

“But Phee—”

“If I am ever to be any kind of real person, anything more than a girl, I must know my own mind.”

“You don't know it now?”

“I know I’ve made a promise. I know you hurt me. But mostly, I feel like I know everyone else’s mind better than my own.”

“Do you know I love you?”

“Yes. You’ve loved me my whole life.”

“And maybe you feel something for me?”

She took a deep breath. “I feel a lot of things. A jumble of things.”

“Do you promise not to get married without letting me talk to you again?”

“So you can make me do what you want, just as you always have?”

“I—”

“You’ll leave. You won’t speak to me or Thornwick. I’ll come and speak to you before I marry. Is that our bargain?”

He nodded slowly. He didn’t like it, she could tell. He couldn’t like it. She had stripped him of his authority over her.

She stepped around him and walked back to the house.

The duke was not in the great hall or the drawing room with the other guests. After reassuring her mother that she was fine and letting her fuss over her for a bit, Phoebe went to Thornwick’s study and heard raised voices through the door. The voices fell silent at her knock.

“Enter,” Thornwick’s voice said at last.

She opened the door and was surprised to see Lady Anne Cavendish and Thornwick standing on opposite sides of the room, both tense with something. Anne’s face was red.

“I’m sorry to interrupt.” Phoebe turned to go.

“No, Lady Phoebe. His Grace and I were just discussing a charity, but we do not agree on its necessity. And our discussion is done. I’m glad to see you well and unharmed. I will bid you adieu. Unfortunately, my sister and Lady Fitzhugh

and I must leave. Unexpectedly.” Lady Anne swept from the room.

Her betrothed had been closeted in his study with another woman, discussing a charity, without knowing whether she was safe from a wild animal.

Phoebe closed the study door and curtsied. “Your Grace.”

“Please call me Arthur, Phoebe.”

“Yes, Arthur.”

“There are many things to be said. I lost my temper, and I’m sorry.”

“I accept your apology, Your Grace.”

He seemed surprised. “You do?”

“I angered you. That was not my intention, but still . . . I angered you by not doing what you asked of me. I should not have agreed and then done something else. I apologize to you, Your Grace.”

“Arthur,” he corrected her.

“Arthur.”

“Oh, Phoebe.” He crossed to her and took her in his arms and kissed the top of her head. “You are too good. Thank you.”

He was embracing her. It was what she had wanted from him for so long. But she felt nothing. Vacant.

Only when she got back to her bedchamber did she realize he hadn’t apologized for running away from the wild pig without taking her with him.

There was a sealed letter on her bed addressed to her in a feminine hand.

*I must speak to you privately before your wedding. Please, upon your return to London, send word to the Middlewich house in Grosvenor Square. I will come to you immediately. It is of the utmost importance.*

*A. Cavendish.*

She retired early. Her mother came and sat on the edge of her bed and dismissed Dawson from the room.

“I don’t want to talk, Mother. I’m exhausted.”

“That’s fine, Phoebe. You don’t have to say anything. I’ll talk. You can listen.”

Phoebe took a deep breath, preparing herself for a reprimand.

Her mother traced a pattern in the counterpane with a perfect oval fingernail at the end of an elegant, long finger. “I loved your father from the first moment I met him.”

Phoebe’s mouth dropped open. This was contrary to every bit of mythology about her parents’ courtship she had ever heard. Papa was the one who was taken with Mother and had to persuade her to marry him.

“And I met him three years before he started courting me. He was a duke already and a well-known rake—yes, we used the same word back then—and he had no interest in me. I was just a tall, skinny sixteen-year-old girl who secretly mooned over him like every other girl around. But I knew I wanted him. Wanted him the way a woman wants a man, but also as a husband and a father for my children. He and I discuss everything, you know, and he told me of your conversation this week. I was reminded he didn’t love me when we married.”

Phoebe blinked.

The duchess went on. “But he came around after a year or so. I knew I loved him, you see, and I thought he could love me in the future. And he did.”

Her mother’s lips curved upward slightly. “I want your happiness, Phoebe. I suppose I thought your happiness should take the same form mine did. Marry a duke, become a duchess, get your husband to fall in love with you, and have

children. But it's possible that isn't your path to happiness. After all, we're different, aren't we, despite my thinking we should be the same. This is a long way of saying you don't have to marry Thornwick or anyone you don't want to. Are you still engaged?"

"Yes."

"I want you to make up your own mind about things, but I have been reflecting this evening. About the Duchess of Thornwick. There is something not right there. I don't like to see a woman frightened in her own home. I wouldn't want that to be you in thirty or forty years."

"I'll never be like that."

"Good. I know I've called you stubborn in the past, and I regret I framed it as a criticism. Stubbornness is a kind of strength, you know, and I want you to be strong."

"Do you and Papa ever disagree?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"Different things. For example, we disagree about you. Specifically, about you and George Danforth. You know I think you should have given up playing chess with him a long time ago. But your father likes George and likes that you play chess. He is very proud of your wins. He thinks you're clever, and he's right about that. He thinks you take after him, but he's wrong there." Her mother raised her eyebrows. "Thirty-three years of marriage, and he still doesn't know I'm the clever one."

"Why do you dislike George so much?"

"He's had too much influence on you, Phoebe. All your life. I suppose in some way, I was jealous. I wanted you to be pleasing me instead of him. And I worried you didn't like yourself and I thought it was his doing. You aren't engaged to him, are you?"

"No. Still Thornwick."

"As I said, you must make your own decision."

Phoebe didn't know. She didn't know. George was gone, and she still didn't know. She was still a child.

"I would like to hear your advice, Mother."

"Don't marry. Not yet. I know you're impatient, but give yourself a bit more time. And I know I urged a short engagement, but I've changed my mind."

"Why?"

Her mother shuddered. "Besides my feeling that something is not right in this house and not right with the Duchess of Thornwick, I overheard Lord Longridge and Lord Dagenham talking. Something about His Grace leaving you alone with a wild pig. Abingdon would have never. Even before he was in love with me. A man's natural impulse should be to protect his woman, not run away."

Phoebe lay on her back, staring into the darkness, unable to sleep. She heard her door creak open and was immediately frightened. Back in London, she had wished Thornwick would come to her during the house party, but now she didn't want him in her bedchamber. She sat up.

"Who is it?" she got out.

"Phee?"

Alice crossed the room quickly and sat on Phoebe's bed, in the exact same place her mother had sat just a few hours earlier.

"I'm sorry to wake you up."

"I wasn't asleep."

"Phee, I need to talk to you about something important."

Phoebe held still and waited.

"I know I'm usually shallow and glib, but I'm serious right now."

"All right."

“I’m to blame for all this. I wanted George to marry you. He loves you, Phee. He’s just...he’s George. So I got Thornwick to come after you. To make George jealous. I thought my brother would see Thornwick paying attention to you and it would spur him into action. But then he was away and didn’t see Thornwick courting you and it all moved so much faster than I thought it would.”

“I see.”

“But I picked badly.”

“You picked. For me.”

“You love George, you know you do.”

“No. I don’t know that.”

“Well, I do know.”

Phoebe took a deep breath. “You seem to think you know an awful lot, Alice Danforth.”

“Phee—”

“You put George in the room you were meant to be in last night.”

“Yes. I wanted you two to talk.”

“I see.”

“Phee, please break it off with Thornwick and give George a chance.”

Phoebe was silent.

“Say something.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. I’m not going to say something. I don’t have anything to say to you.” She didn’t recognize her own voice. It was full of venom, like Thornwick’s had been when he had upbraided her in the clearing.

“Don’t be angry—”

“Here I thought I had friends. But I don’t. I have puppeteers instead of friends. And you’re even worse than George.”

“I did it because I love you both—”

“Go away, Alice. I’m going to tell you what I told your brother. Leave me alone.”



TWENTY-FIVE

SPRING, 1819. LONDON.

Phoebe was two and twenty and older than most unwed maidens of the *ton*. She had no intention of having a fourth Season, of exposing herself to rejection yet again, but Alice persuaded her, saying she would be quite bereft if Phoebe were not by her side.

“Who will distract the other gentlemen while I slip off to the terrace for some fondling with one gentleman in particular?”

Phoebe frowned. “I distract no one.”

Alice eyed her. “Your breasts distract them.”

It was true. Phoebe had breasts. Alice had almost none. But Alice said men loved her small breasts. They longed to see them, she whispered to Phoebe, and would become quite desperate when she hinted she might unbutton enough for them to catch a glimpse of her bosom.

“That’s how I got Hadrian.” Hadrian was her gelding, the very horse she had ridden in such a scandalous manner with the Earl of Temblebury. “I made a wager with Lord Dagenham. If I won, I got Hadrian. If the viscount won, I had to show him my breasts. I won, obviously. But then the poor man looked so sad, I showed him my breasts anyway.”

But this Season was just like every other Season. Very few dances for Phoebe, no suitors or callers, lots of chess games with George while the music played and seventeen-year-old girls who weren’t any prettier than Phoebe laughed and twirled and flirted. Why had she thought things would be any

different? She should never have gone along with Alice. But that was what she always did, wasn't it?

Then in May, with only a dozen or so balls left in the Season, George away in the country so she didn't even have the comfort of blindfold chess with her best friend, Phoebe felt an elbow in her ribs from Alice as they fanned themselves between Alice's dances at the Ashmore ball.

"Oh, His Grace, Thornwick," Alice growled to Phoebe. "Do you see him looking at me?"

Phoebe had not noticed Thornwick looking at Alice. In fact, she thought Thornwick might actually be looking at *her*, Phoebe.

"He's marvelous, Phee," Alice said. "Those golden locks, those blue eyes. That nose. That smile."

Yes, that smile. And it was a smile, not a grin. The smile of a man who enjoyed life, had no worries, no anxieties. How wonderful it must be to be like that.

He came toward her. Phoebe couldn't help looking over her shoulder to see if Lady Olivia Radcliffe or Lady Ellen Stafford was standing behind her. No. No one. And Alice was taking Phoebe's fan out of her hand and backing away herself.

"My lady? Lady Phoebe, is it?"

"Yes, Your Grace." She curtsied.

The Duke of Thornwick bowed.

"Small stature, pearls, an inch of petticoat showing." Phoebe clutched at her skirts but the duke smiled. "Charming. I thought I was right, but this is not the occasion to be wrong. And I want to do this correctly so I am going to go find our hostess to obtain a proper introduction, but I wanted to make sure it was you and that you didn't give away any of your remaining dances while I did that."

"No, Your Grace." Phoebe blushed.

"Do you have any waltzes left?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

“Consider the next one reserved for me. Yes?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

The introduction was made and she found herself in Thornwick’s arms for a waltz.

“You’re a lovely dancer, Lady Phoebe.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. You’re a wonderful waltzer yourself.”

“I’m glad to get a chance to meet you without your guard dog nipping at my heels.”

What was he talking about?

“I’ve admired you from afar this last month and have thought you quite lovely. Most suitable.”

Phoebe had no idea what to say to that.

“Are you shy, Lady Phoebe?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Perfect. I love shyness.”

Phoebe couldn’t help herself. She giggled.

“What is that little laugh for?”

“I’ve never heard of anyone thinking shyness was an attractive quality.”

“Well, for me, it indicates a certain temperament. A domestic temperament. A pleasant, sweet woman.”

His use of the word *domestic*. Was it possible he was telling her he was considering wooing her for his wife? She felt her face get warmer, and she knew she was redder than ever.

“And your blush is charming.”

“It’s so hot in the ballroom, isn’t it?”

“Shall we take a turn on the terrace to cool down after our dance, Lady Phoebe?”

Phoebe gulped. “Oh. Oh, no. I’m sorry. I don’t do that.”

“I meant with your mother accompanying us.”

“Oh, yes.” She smiled in relief. “That would be lovely.”

His grip on both her waist and her hand tightened slightly. He looked down at her with his sleepy blue eyes.

“I’m glad you don’t do that, Lady Phoebe. Very proper, very obedient. You are very promising, indeed. A dear girl. The dearest.”

*Dearest girl.* Her father’s name for her. Had she met her husband at last?

She tried to keep her smile from turning into the grin of a hoyden as she looked up at the tall, blond, handsome duke who whirled her around the ballroom.

*Please let him like me.*

## TWENTY-SIX

It rained the next day. The house party had been reduced to Alice, Edmund, William, Olivia and Olivia's mother, Phoebe and her mother. And Thornwick, of course.

And his mother.

It was often hard to recall his mother was there, too.

Phoebe had greeted Alice politely at breakfast. They weren't friends anymore. But Alice would make a scene if Phoebe told her the friendship was over, and Phoebe was not going to have a scene at a house party. She would suffer through this until tomorrow when they would return to London and then she would shed Alice Danforth and her machinations just as she had shed Alice's brother.

After breakfast, Alice proposed they pass the morning playing hide-and-seek. "But when each person is found, they join the seeker and help find the next person."

Thornwick scoffed. "A child's game."

But William laughed and said it was a good idea. That seemed to bring Thornwick around.

Phoebe volunteered to be the first seeker. Then there could be no question in Thornwick's mind she was attempting to be the best hider, the last one found. She could not win.

She closed her eyes. She counted to one hundred. When she opened her eyes, only Thornwick's mother and her own mother were sitting in the drawing room.

Her mother looked up from her book and nodded. “We’re not playing, dear. Good luck.”

Phoebe found Edmund immediately, an enormous lump behind the drapery in the drawing room. It came as no surprise she found him first. He was so large that coming up with a good hiding place would be difficult. But she did wonder why he hadn’t made a bit more effort.

*He’s George’s friend. George probably told him to stay close to me.*

And she did feel some comfort roaming the enormous house with the taciturn giant at her side. Soon Lady Titchfield, Olivia, and William were found. Everyone but Alice and Thornwick.

Suddenly, Phoebe got a very bad feeling in her stomach. The upstairs hallway seemed to lurch and she stumbled.

*I’ve driven Alice to this. I should have told her what she wanted to hear last night.*

“Let’s give up,” Phoebe said. “Let’s let them stay hidden and go have luncheon.”

No, no, no. Lady Titchfield, Olivia, and William protested. Edmund stayed silent.

“I’m going back to the drawing room. This is a silly game. And I’m tired,” Phoebe said when she could not dissuade the others. She didn’t know how to stop this. She didn’t want to witness this. This was her fault.

She walked back downstairs and Edmund followed her.

She sat in the window seat of the drawing room, looking out at the rain on the rose bushes, waiting for the next move. Ten minutes later, Lady Titchfield appeared at the door, supported by her daughter. She looked first at Phoebe, then away. Her face was white.

Phoebe’s mother rose to her feet. “What’s wrong?”

“I think she needs to sit.” Olivia helped her mother to a sofa. Then William appeared in the doorway and jerked his head at Edmund who went out into the hall to talk to William.

Phoebe's mother went to sit next to Lady Titchfield. Phoebe could hear murmurs and her own mother gasping.

One or two minutes passed and Edmund came back in and sat in the window seat next to Phoebe.

"Did they find them?" Phoebe asked quietly.

"Yes," Edmund grunted.

"Were they in bed together?"

"No. Found in one of the attics with some disarranged clothing. Lady Titchfield swooned."

"I see."

"Just so you know, William won't say anything. He hates gossip. If you can get the women to keep quiet—"

"No. I'm not going to keep anyone from doing anything. But would you help me, my lord?"

"Yes."

"Go upstairs and tell His Grace I want to talk to him in his study. And tell Miss Danforth I don't want to see her and she is not welcome in the Abingdon carriage back to London."

"Yes, my lady." Edmund stood and loomed over her. "You're very strong for such a little person." He left the room, treading heavily on the carpet.

Phoebe's mother rose from the sofa and came over to where Phoebe still sat. Phoebe turned her gaze from the rain-streaked window to look up at her.

"Mother, we're going to leave in the next hour. Will you ask Dawson to pack my things and get your maid to pack your things? Alice will not be coming with us."

Her mother's eyes narrowed for a moment, but she did not speak. She touched Phoebe's cheek lightly and nodded and left the room.

Phoebe stood and had a moment of dizziness. She walked over to Thornwick's mother and curtsied. "Your Grace, thank



you for having us in your home. My apologies that we must depart so abruptly.”

“Oh, my dear,” the duchess whispered, shaking. “Has something not been to your liking?”

“Your house is lovely. Thank you.”

She avoided meeting Olivia and Lady Titchfield’s eyes as she curtsied and took her leave from them. She did not want to see their pity or their disgust.

She went to Thornwick’s study. She was waiting just inside the door when he entered.

“Phoebe.” He closed the door.

“There’s no need for you to say anything, Your Grace. Our engagement is over. I will not be marrying you.”

The corners of Thornwick’s mouth turned down. “It’s a mistake, I tell you, the woman is the devil—”

“No, she’s not. I won’t let you say that. Alice is misguided, but she’s not evil. She’s trying to protect me.”

“Protect you? She seduced me in order to break our engagement and you—”

“Goodbye.” She opened the door and walked out of the room.

She had not been allowed to know her own mind. Maybe there was no mind of her own to know. She had been forced to this. Manipulated to the end. Still just a pawn.

*I should have broken it off when he said he wanted to hit me. But I didn't. Because I thought I deserved that. I think poorly of myself and he knows it and he would have used it against me for the rest of my life. I would have been worn away to a whisper, like his mother.*

*His poor mother.*

It took an hour and a half, rather than an hour for them to get away. Phoebe was glad to have been spared seeing either Alice or Thornwick during that time. Edmund and William helped the footmen with the trunks in the rain.

She and her mother shared an umbrella to get into the carriage. They settled into their seats and the carriage started rolling a few minutes later. Dawson and her mother's lady's maid were in the second carriage behind them.

"It's too bad about the rain, Mother. I'm sorry the coachmen and the footmen will get wet."

"At least it's summer, and they won't suffer from cold as well as rain. And I'm sorry, Phoebe, about your engagement. I'm happy you won't be marrying that man, but I'm sorry if you've been hurt. And I'm sorry about your friends. But you have your family."

"Yes." Phoebe rubbed at the fogged window.

The carriage was just at the end of the lane when a horseman thundered by, going the opposite direction. She recognized the horse. It was one of theirs, one of the Abingdon riding mounts. Phoebe rapped on the ceiling of the carriage, but it was already slowing. She opened the door while the carriage was still moving.

"Phoebe!" her mother called.

She fell into a puddle and got up and started running back down the lane, past the second carriage which was coming to a halt, too. The rider had slowed the horse and was bringing it back around. It was Samuel, the head footman from their house in London.

Phoebe squinted up at him in the rain. "What is it, Samuel?"

"It's your father, my lady." He got off the horse.

"Did he send a message? What is it?"

Samuel bowed. His face was grim, and Phoebe knew what he was about to say.

She wanted to scream out and stop him from saying it as if that could make it not true. Instead, she bit her tongue as hard as she could and tasted blood in her mouth.

"He has died, my lady. In his sleep. Found this morning by his valet. Your brother is the new Duke of Abingdon."

## TWENTY-SEVEN

George was present for the funeral and interment of the late duke in the duchy of Abingdon. He kept to the back of the group of mourners, wanting to honor the man who had cared for him like a second father but not wanting to draw attention to himself. He saw Phoebe's brothers Andrew and Daniel and bowed to them and they nodded back.

He waited an hour or so in the country churchyard after everyone had left and then rode over to the house of the Abingdon estate. As was customary, none of the women of the family had been present for the funeral or the burial. But he needed to see Phoebe. He knew it was foolish to hope she might need to see him, too, but if there was a sliver of a chance she did, he would seize that.

A groom helped George stable his horse. He went into the house through the servants' entrance. He was seen by several staff members who bowed and said "my lord," but no one stopped him or questioned him. And why would they? Hadn't he and Alice treated this home like their own since they were children?

George had insisted Alice stay in London, convincing her that he should be the one to bring about a reconciliation. His tailcoat pocket contained a twenty-page letter from Alice to Phoebe. If an opportunity presented itself, he would give it to Phoebe. But not if he thought he might upset her. He would do nothing to jeopardize any chance he might have with her.

Hang Alice and her intrigue.

He skirted the large drawing room where he was sure the family was gathered. He went upstairs.

He found Phoebe in the first place he looked—the priest’s hole. He couldn’t see her in the shaft of light from the hallway, but he knew she was in there because he could hear her ragged breathing. She must be around the side, in the farthest corner away from the opening.

“It’s me,” he said.

She didn’t answer. He got down on his hands and knees and crawled into the darkness. The panel that hid the opening in the upstairs hallway slid closed behind him. It was a well-made priest’s hole. Not even a chink of light found its way in.

He hadn’t brought a candle with him. He hadn’t even thought of it. He had only thought of her. Of finding her.

One of his crawling hands bumped into something. Her ankle. He sat back on his heels, knees to the floor. She continued to breathe loudly. Every third or fourth breath had a stuttering inhale, and he knew she was crying.

After a time, he could feel his knees start to protest the weight of his body pressing them into the floor, so he got off his haunches and sat cross-legged.

A reaching hand touched his thigh, putting weight on him. She crawled into his lap.

*Oh, thank God.*

She was sideways to him, her bottom in the hole created by his crossed legs. He wrapped his arms around her and now he could not only hear but also feel the quiver in her breath. Her hair brushed his face.

“Phoebe—”

“Shhhh.”

He bit his lip.

“Don’t say anything, George.” Her voice was thick with tears. “Nothing.”

Time passed. He had no sense of how long, but he was happy to be here and holding her. Even in the darkness he abhorred, even if she required him to be mute when all he wanted to do was give her words of comfort. He was where he belonged.

He felt her turn slightly toward him, a hand on his cheek. Her fingers ran over his lips, followed by her mouth.

It was a hungry kiss, a needing kiss, a kiss born of desperation. And he kissed her back without reserve, tasting the tears on her lips, feeling the tremble of her chin. She opened her mouth and the kiss became deeper and her hands were on his head, pulling him into her as if she wanted to consume him whole.

And then her lips were on his chin, his cheeks, his jaw. Owing him. Devouring him. Her wet face rubbed against his.

“Phee—”

“Shut up.”

She moved so she was facing him, straddling him, her breasts pushed into his chest, her hands on his head, and she was still kissing him with ferocity. Her pelvis pushed into him, rubbing him, rocking against him.

George’s hands, at first on her waist, moved down to her bottom and he held her against him. Her own hands moved down to his torso and the waistband of his black trousers. She leaned away from him and he could feel her unbutton his fall.

He was hard. Of course, he was.

“Lie back.”

It was not a request. It was a command. A queen’s fiat.

He lay back and straightened his legs. She put her knees on either side of him. He felt her hands between their two bodies. She must have moved her skirts and petticoats away because the next thing he felt was her cleft, her wetness against his cock, and then her hand grasping him and putting him inside her.

She sat down on him, encasing his member completely.

There was a moment of stillness. A groan from her.

He suppressed his own groan. Even as every bit of his being was aching to tell her he loved her, he stayed silent. She had told him to shut up. He would do as she said. She was his queen. If this was what she needed, something wordless and primitive here in the dark, she could have it.

She leaned down over him, he felt her breath on his lips, and then she began rising up and sitting back down, sliding him in and out of her. She was kissing him, her breasts grazing his chest as she took him.

He helped her rise and fall with his hands at the tops of her thighs, just under the cheeks of her bottom. But he was careful to let her control how deeply she took him, how quickly she moved up and down. He was only there to assist. To serve.

She was slow at first, shuddering as she kissed him. But in that close, hot darkness, over time, she began to move at a relentless pace.

She grunted.

He wished he could see her. Her hair must be falling down by now. Yes, strands of it tickled his face as she moved. She was likely flushed and sweating. After all, he was sweating and all he was doing was holding her and lifting her slightly.

Her kissing became disordered. Her body trembled.

“Unhh,” she said.

He clutched her bottom more tightly.

“Unhh.”

Her body came away from his and they were only joined at the groin. His cock could feel her tightness clenching over and over again as his hands felt the muscles of her buttocks squeezing.

And then he joined her in her climax. He had not known he was ready. He had been thinking only of her, of staying hard for her so she could have what she wanted. There had been no build for him. No sense of an inevitable pinnacle. No idea this was coming for him. Only for her.

She swept him up with her release, and for the first time in his life, he spent himself inside a woman. How right it should be inside her, the woman to whom he wanted to give everything.

He pulsed and pulsed and pulsed, his head off the floor, his abdominal muscles contracting. There was no need to bite back his scream. There was no scream in him, only the words *I love you, I love you, I love you*. But he stayed silent as she had commanded.

It was over. He kept his head up. She stayed sitting on him. He heard her panting. Her thighs quivered against him. He relaxed his grip on her bottom.

He willed her to lie down atop him. To collapse onto his chest so he could put his arms around her and hold her tightly. So he could feel her heart beating. So she could feel his. For them to lie there, together, with him still inside her and for her to give him permission to speak.

*Come to me, Phoebe.*

But she didn't. She sat for a long time, her weight pressing down on him, his seed leaking out of her and onto him. His member softened and when she shifted slightly, it slid out of her. He allowed himself to keep his hands on her bottom, just barely cupping her cheeks, maintaining his contact with her. The sounds of her breath slowed and became quieter and quieter.

She got off of him.

*Lie down next to me, Phoebe.*

She didn't. She must have stood, bending at the waist to keep her head from hitting the low ceiling of the priest's hole.

"May I speak?" It was the creaky voice of a querulous, old man.

"No." A rustle. "No. Never—"

"Phee—"

"AGAIN." The last word was a shriek accompanied by steps, a shaft of light, the sound of the panel closing.

For a long time, he could not bring himself to move, despite the darkness. This hot, black hole suited the hell in which George Danforth found himself.



## TWENTY-EIGHT

George had put Alice on a ship at the end of July, ostensibly to tour the Continent for a year with their Aunt Dorothea, but really because Alice could not sit still. She had stayed awake for days after George had returned to London from the duke's funeral. She had spent those nights writing even more voluminous letters to Phoebe, staggeringly long and rambling letters, explaining herself, justifying what she had done, begging for forgiveness or a letter back or a meeting.

"Something! Anything!" Alice had raved to George.

She had become more and more agitated as days went by with no response from Phoebe. Finally, fearing she might do herself an injury and remembering what his father had often had to do for his mother when she wouldn't sleep, George had forced two glasses of wine into Alice, put her to bed and sat with her until she had stopped talking and her eyes had closed.

When she had risen the next day, she came to him in his study.

"I have to leave. I have to go. I can't bear this. I can't bear myself."

George did not think Aunt Dorothea would be able to control Alice. Hell, he couldn't control Alice. But he wanted Alice away from him.

Partly for her sake. His despair only reinforced her despair. The center of both their lives had fallen away. The person who had rooted the Danforths in some semblance of normalcy and

kindness with her smiles and her small worries and her enthusiasm was gone.

Their light.

But George also selfishly wanted Alice gone for his own sake. Yes, he knew Phoebe didn't want him around her. But at least she had allowed him to apologize and declare his intentions to her after the wild pig attack. And she had needed him in the darkness of the priest hole that day of her father's funeral.

He would have no chance with Phoebe if Alice hung around like a stray dog, whining and demanding her apologies be accepted.

Damn Alice. What had possessed her to think having a tryst with Thornwick was a good idea? No, he shouldn't curse his sister. Her plot had worked and the engagement had been broken off. He supposed he owed Alice thanks for that, even if what she had done had been bordering on madness.

George's last three letters to Phoebe had not yet been returned. He took that as a hopeful sign. He had written to her about the Audley Street Chess Club tournament at the end of August and about meeting the great French chess player Valois. How small the man was, probably the same height as Phoebe. How swiftly he had defeated George. How elegant the man's play was. How George thought Phoebe would have certainly put up a much better fight than he had.

Tonight, he would write to her about his trip to Sudbury. It had been a short hunting trip out to the estate of the marquess, Edmund Haskett's father. Edmund, Phineas Edge, William Dagenham, and Sir Matthew Elliot had all been there. George had hoped to find relief from his heartache in a change of scene, just as Alice was seeking to do, but he had only felt worse being far from London, unable to check the post to see if a letter had come from Phoebe.

Of course, no letters had arrived in his absence when he got back to the town house last night. But the trip had given him something to write to Phoebe about, something besides how much he loved her and wanted to see her.

He might travel to the barony soon. He was usually there this time of year and being out in Sudbury had made him long to be in the country for the autumn.

But he knew being so physically close to Phoebe would drive him mad. With the duchy of Abingdon just a few miles away, he might see her at any time, around any corner. And he had no good reason to think she would do anything besides cut him dead.

He shook his head as if the physical movement might clear away some of his melancholy. It was a Thursday afternoon in London. It was time for George to work on his monograph on the origin of the word *clue*, the same monograph he had been working on since June when his whole life had been turned upside down and inside out by an engagement and a chess game and a wager. And by a woman he had both loved and ignored for years.

He must get back to his routine.

He reread what he had written last week. Ah, yes. He must get this bit down about Theseus and the labyrinth. The ball of string or *clew* he uses to get out the labyrinth after slaying the minotaur. The *clew* given to him by Ariadne who he later abandoned.

Not who, whom. Whom he later abandoned.

George threw his quill down. Even simple grammar eluded him these days.

And why must he get back to his routine? What had his routine ever done for him? Maybe it had damaged him. Maybe it had been the reason he hadn't seen, right in front of him, the woman he now desperately wanted. Because she had slotted into his routine and his calendar as *chess* and *pupil* and *childhood best friend* and not as *lover* or *wife* or *the person I want to see every day* or *the person who makes life worth living*.

The person for whom he would abandon all routines and calendars, forever. The person who had given him so much joy and so much relief from his tiresome self.

Because the terrors which used to come to him at night now came to him in the daytime, too, and he found himself continually tormented by the questions that had haunted him since his father died.

What was George Danforth's place in God's grand scheme? What was his use? What was he doing in the world and what good was he?

He was no good. He was doing nothing. He had no use. He had no place.

His life was not just hopelessly banal, but fruitless. His speeches, his monographs, the things he did every day—all of them were just time-fillers, temporary patches on a leaky boat called *Life* that would not hold water for long.

And chess—the activity he had long called his greatest comfort—suddenly seemed flat and empty, too, without Phoebe. He saw now it was she who had given him comfort, not chess. He had delighted in winning a game at the chess club so he could boast about it to her, recall the moves and show her how he had won. He had read Philidor a hundred times so he could teach Phoebe the master's secrets. And he had reveled in her daring and her cleverness, the way she saw things he couldn't, four or six or eight moves ahead.

He heard a noise. It was the door opening at the base of the stairs of the special entrance, the one that hadn't been used since Lady Starling had gone out of this room for the last time in June.

It was Horatia, coming back to him. Phineas had told George in the carriage on the way back from Sudbury that he intended to break it off with Lady Starling. She was likely on the hunt for a fuck to soothe her wounded vanity. That was what George had been for her seven or eight months ago when Thornwick had left her. The viscountess was seeking that type of consolation from George again.

He put his head in his hands. Not now. Please, not now. He didn't have the patience or strength for an encounter with Horatia. He would likely rip her simpering head off with his

own raw feelings, his savage temper fueled by his dire outlook.

He took his head out of his hands and pushed his chair back from the desk but stayed seated, waiting for her and her languid *hello, lover*.

But it was the opposite of what had happened in June when he had expected Phoebe and Horatia had come instead.

A knock and Phoebe, dressed in black, a veil covering her face, came through the door.

He sprang to his feet. "Phee."

She closed the door behind her. "Lord Danforth." She curtsied.

He bowed. He tried to read her expression behind her veil, but he couldn't.

She said, "I tried to see you yesterday morning. But you weren't here when I came up."

"I-I just got back last evening from a trip." That sounded horrible. As if he had been out carousing, not pining for her as he had been, as he had confessed in his letters to her.

"I knew you would work on your monograph today. May I sit?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Please. Yes. I'm so glad you're here. I wasn't even aware you were in London. I would have called at your house immediately."

She made her way to the chairs by the empty hearth and hesitated for a moment. She turned and sat in the chair he had always sat in when they played chess.

"Can I get you anything, Phee?"

"You should sit as well, Lord Danforth. I have to tell you something." She lifted her veil. Her face was pale. Her eyes were red. She looked so sad. Of course, she must miss her father terribly.

He sat in the chair that had been hers for so many years.

“Yes, Phee. I want to talk. I have so much I want to tell you, to explain to you—”

“Stop.”

He stopped. There was a silence and he spent it drinking in her face. There was a change there, a hardness he had seen on his own mother’s face once upon a time.

Her light had gone out.

“I need you to marry me, Lord Danforth.”

His chest was full. Was it possible? What had brought about this change of heart? Had it been his last letter when he had vowed he would do anything to marry her? But hadn’t he put that in every other letter preceding that one? But maybe she had opened this one. What did it matter? She wanted to marry him. And he *would* do anything.

“Yes. Yes. That’s all I want, Phee.”

But her face was not the face of a woman who wanted to get married. Not the face, he thought, of a woman in love. It was the face of a prisoner, facing execution. Unsmiling. Stony. Without hope, without life, without the spark that was his Phoebe.

He got up from his chair and came and knelt in front of her. He took one of her gloved hands. “Will you marry me, Lady Phoebe Finch?” Her hand was limp in his.

“Yes.” She took her hand away. She was not looking at him but at the empty hearth.

He sat back on his haunches.

“You deserve to know why you have to marry me,” she said. “I have missed my monthly courses. Twice. I am almost certainly with child.”

“With child?”

“Yes.”

The day of the funeral when he had spent inside her. She had gone to the priest’s hole for comfort and he had come to

give that to her. And now, because of his own lack of control, his abandoning himself to the moment, she was with child.

She cleared her throat. "It's good of you not to say it's my fault. Because, of course, it is. I know it is. I took you, rather than the other way around. And it's good of you not to say you think it must be some other man's child. I have only ever lain with you, so it must be yours."

"I know you haven't been with another—"

"And I'm not wily enough to trick another man and get him to marry me while carrying your child. But I must marry. I can't hurt my mother or shame my family further. So I must marry you, George Danforth."

"You-you don't want to marry me, do you?" He could barely get the words out.

"What I want has been neither here nor there for a long time." She stood. He stayed kneeling, looking up at her. "Tomorrow, come to the town house in the afternoon and ask to see my brother. Unless you change your mind."

"I won't change my mind," he said quickly.

"I'll tell him why you're coming so you won't have to do that. I want you to get a special license so we can get married right away, outside of a church, away from public view. I am sure everyone will guess why we are marrying since I am still in mourning, but I'd rather not have the wedding be a spectacle. Certainly, everyone will know once the baby is born in seven months or so."

"You know I want to marry you, don't you, Phoebe?"

She nodded and went to the door and opened it before he could get to his feet. She put her veil down. She took a step out the door and spoke.

"I don't know why since no one else wants me."

"Phoebe." She must have run down the steps because the stairwell was empty when he finally stood at the top of it, calling out her name.

“I’m not happy, George.”

At least, Andrew was calling him George.

“I’m sure you’re not.”

“How would you feel if it were Alice, eh? If Alice came to you and told you she had to get married because she was with child?”

Honestly, George would feel relieved. Given her love for transgression, Alice might not get married if she found out she was carrying a baby. But he understood what Andrew meant.

“It’s not an ideal situation, I know.”

“You were part of our family. A man we trusted and liked.”

“Your mother didn’t like me.”

“No, she never did, did she? She must have always known something the rest of us didn’t. Tell me, did you do this on purpose?”

“No. Of course not.”

“I know you were very eager to form an attachment to Phoebe earlier this summer when she was still engaged to Thornwick.”

“Yes. I was. I still am. I love your sister, Andrew.”

Andrew looked toward him for the first time since George had come into his study, formerly his father’s study.

“The problem, George, is—”

“I know. She doesn’t love me.”

“I guess that’s a moot point given the circumstances.”

“No, it’s not. Not for me. Don’t misunderstand me, I intend to marry your sister no matter what. But it matters to me a great deal that—”

George was glad Andrew couldn’t see his tears. Blast, if only he could control his voice.



“I’ll take good care of Phoebe, Andrew. You can be assured of that.”

“I know.”

Those two words gave George the first solace he had had in the last day. And gave him the strength to make his request.

“May I see Phoebe?”

“Yes. She’s waiting for you in the drawing room.”

George bowed and left the study and went and knocked on the drawing room door. He heard a muffled “Come in.”

Phoebe was standing and curtsied to him. He bowed.

“I’ve seen your brother.”

“Close the door, George.”

“Yes.” He closed the door and came closer to her. He thought she might be a little less pale than she had been yesterday. But the Phoebe he had known for twenty-two years was still absent. “Are you well?”

“Not really. Are you?”

“No. I mean, yes.” He took both her hands. “You’ve changed.”

“I had to. I couldn’t be a little girl, anymore, could I? Not with Papa gone and Mother needing me. And now, this.”

*But I loved that other Phoebe.*

She went on. “You know, I had always wanted to be needed. To feel myself important to someone. And I’ve had that with Mother these last two months. And it’s helped me.”

“I need you, Phoebe.”

“I think you’ve done very well without me.”

“That’s not true. I’ve been a ruin.”

She blinked.

“I want to be a good husband to you.”

She said nothing but she looked up at him, met his eyes.

“I know this isn’t how you wanted to be married, Phee.”

“No.”

He looked down at her hands in his hands. Nails bitten to the quick, cuticles ravaged and bleeding. Phoebe must have been in so much pain to do that to herself. It made him hurt to see it. She took her hands away.

“I’m sorry you have to marry me,” she said. “I will work very hard not to try your patience.”

“Phee—”

“Shall we discuss the wedding?”

“Yes, yes. I have an appointment with the archbishop tomorrow morning for the special license, just as you asked.”

“I’m sorry for the extra trouble.”

“No, Phee—”

“Shall we say two days from now then? At eleven o’clock?”

“Where?”

Phoebe looked around. “Here. In the drawing room. Andrew can be one witness. We’ll need another one.”

“Your mother?”

“My mother is in Abingdon and knows nothing about this. The day after we are married, I will go out to the country and tell her.”

“No.” George took a deep breath. “I will tell her. Or we’ll tell her together.”

A small smile on her lips. A hint of his Phoebe.

“You’re brave. Saint George will face the dragon?”

“I wish there were dragons, Phoebe. I’d slay one for you.”

The smile faded from her face. “No need.”

George was at a loss. How could he make her smile again?  
“Who shall we have as our other witness?”

*Whom. Whom. Correct me. Care enough to correct me, Phoebe. Correct me and smile at my error.*

Phoebe shrugged and walked to the window and looked out. A finger in her mouth. What did she have left to chew on?

George began. "Alice is in France—"

"Good," she said around her finger.

"Do you want to ask another friend of yours?"

"No. I—" She took the finger from her mouth and balled her hands into fists at her sides.

"Should I ask Phineas?"

Phoebe shrugged again.

"I'll ask Phin." Phineas owed him, after all. And the earl could be appropriate if pressed. His affable presence might lighten what seemed likely to be a very funereal wedding.

"Fine."

"And the wedding breakfast? Shall we have it at my house or here?"

"No wedding breakfast."

"And . . ." George was scared to ask the next question. Slay dragons, yes. Ask this of Phoebe? He felt himself tremble. "And after the wedding, will you come live with me?"

Phoebe turned and faced him. "Since this is a marriage for the sake of appearances, I have every intention of making it appear as normal as possible. Yes, I will live in your house after the wedding. A wife lives with her husband."

"I hope it won't just be for appearances, Phoebe."

"It will be for the child."

"Yes." *Will it be for us, Phoebe?*

"I hope I give you an heir, George. It's the least I can do."

"You don't owe me anything, Phoebe. You know I want to marry you. And yes, have children with you."

“Well, a child, at least.”

A stab at his heart. “And I’ll be a good father.”

“Yes. You’ll like teaching him.”

“Or her.”

“You will not. If it’s a girl—” Phoebe bit her lip and squared her shoulders. “No chess. No hoydenish things. She’ll be a proper lady.”

“You’re a proper lady, Phoebe.”

“I’m not. I never have been. But if we have a daughter, she will be.”

He went to her at the window and embraced her. She didn’t move.

“You’ll be a wonderful mother, Phoebe.”

He felt her relax just a bit. Her bowed head leaned into his chest. A stuttering inhale. Then a sob. He tightened his arms around her. Her body shook under his grip.

“There, there.”

A growl from her. She lifted her head off his chest, her eyes angry, and reached up and pulled his head down and kissed him. A wild kiss with a forceful tongue, her teeth knocking against his. And through it all, she continued to cry, her chest heaved, her nose ran. She cried into his mouth, almost shrieking.

He tried to soften the kiss, but she was having none of it. Her hands were tight and heavy on the back of his neck and his skull. Her lips and her tongue were demanding and ravening. He gave into it. He let his hands slip from her back to her bottom and he squeezed.

*Thank God. Thank God, she at least wants me as a wife should want a husband.*

Suddenly, she pushed him away and walked to the door. She put her hand on the knob and paused, her head down, not looking at him.

“Thank you for agreeing to marry me. I’ll see you in two days. I’ll be on time.”

And then, just like the day before, she was out the door and gone.

## TWENTY-NINE

On the morning of her wedding, Phoebe woke at five and had vomited three times before six. She lay in her bed, clutching the dirty chamber pot, waiting for the next episode. A trunk had been packed by Dawson yesterday, and it sat now at the foot of her bed. All her black dresses, her undergarments, some nightdresses. Not much. The rest would come at some later time.

By half past eleven today, she would be Lady Danforth. Her fourteen-year-old self would have been giddy with joy. However, her twenty-two-year-old self was wracked with nausea. And not all of it was from her pregnancy.

She had been thinking about her wedding for as long as she could remember. And about her marriage—about having a life with a man who loved her and cherished her—for almost as long. And now to be married in this shameful way, in mourning for her father, the smallest number of witnesses required by law.

And to be marrying a man who hadn't wanted her until he couldn't have her. Who had spent her whole life correcting her.

She had always thought her husband would think she was perfect. The prettiest girl. The cleverest. He would indulge her. He would tell her he was the luckiest man in the world. He would make her feel like a queen.

In short, she thought her husband would be like her father.

But there were no men like her father. Not George, not Thornwick, not anyone. All those gentlemen at balls who had

never danced with her. They all thought there was something wrong with her.

Even Andrew was disappointed in her now, knowing she was wanton. Pregnant and not yet married. No better than a whore.

*Thank God Papa is dead. Thank God. So he never knew how bad I am.*

She sat up and hung her head over the chamber pot, heaving. She was empty but her stomach still rebelled.

At eight o'clock, when Dawson came in, Phoebe was standing at the window, looking at the garden. It was the same window George had climbed through back in June when it was so hot. The summer flowers were gone now.

“Will you have a bath, my lady?”

“Yes.”

She bathed. Dawson helped her into a black dress. Bride or not, Phoebe was still in mourning.

She arranged her own hair with Dawson holding the pins and handing them to her. Her arms ached when she was done.

She sipped some tea. It didn't come back up. Dawson brought her some dry toast and she nibbled on a corner. That stayed down, too.

It was four minutes to eleven. She stood and went downstairs to the drawing room. Mr. Davies, the vicar from St. George's Church just around the corner, was there. He was kind enough to smile at Phoebe. The Earl of Burchester was also smiling, but Andrew looked angry and George looked worried.

The man who would be her husband searched her face as soon as she came in the room. She wished she could give him a smile that would reassure him. But she could muster nothing for him.

The ceremony only took a few minutes.

She was married. To George.

Her brother grabbed her and embraced her before she left the house on George's arm.

"Thank you, Andrew," she said. "We are going out to the country tomorrow so we'll tell Mother. You don't have to do that."

He released her. "I don't mind, Phebes."

"I mind."

He hugged her again, bending over and whispering in her ear, "He's a good man. Give him a chance. You could be happy."

Happy. The feeling seemed distant and foreign, as if she had never been happy. She squeezed her younger brother's slender frame once more and then let him go.

George sat across from her in the carriage.

"Thank you for marrying me so quickly," she said.

"I don't want you to thank me anymore for doing something I wanted to do. For something that's selfish."

"All right."

The streets of Mayfair were cleaner than most streets in London, but the carriage passed something foul-smelling and Phoebe lurched forward and had to press her gloved hand to her mouth quickly.

"George—"

A handkerchief was put in her other hand. She raised it to her lips, ready to catch the effluvium she was sure was coming. She closed her eyes.

"Shall I close the window, Phee?"

She shook her head. The moment passed. But the handkerchief. It smelled of him. That George smell. She opened her eyes.

"I suppose you'll save a great deal in handkerchiefs, George. Since I never return them. Morton will know where to find them now."



His expression was one of concern. Then he smiled a little. It looked like it pained him.

“Yes. But I never minded the loss of handkerchief or two.”

She sat back. She played with the handkerchief in her lap.

“Are you ill?” he asked.

“It’s my condition. That’s all.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want you to say you’re sorry anymore for something that’s my fault.”

“It’s not your fault.” A silence of a few seconds. “I’ve had Mrs. Bowles put you in the blue bedchamber, Phoebe. I think you know my mother’s old room is my room now and my father’s room is my study, but there wasn’t time to rearrange things, but, of course, you can have any room you like, including Alice’s—”

“It’s fine. And we’re leaving tomorrow, aren’t we?”

“If that’s what you still want. If you’re well enough.”

“I’m well enough. And I want to be away from London.”

“Yes.”

“I want to see my mother.” She came very close to sobbing out the last word.

It wasn’t far to the Danforth town house. The footman helped her down. George hurried out of the carriage to give her his arm.

Wynn was waiting, smiling. “Many happy returns, Lady Phoe—Danforth.”

“Thank you, Wynn.” She turned to George. “I’ll go to my room now.”

“You don’t want to eat anything?”

“When Dawson gets here, I’ll have her talk to Mrs. Hay about what I can eat. You don’t have to worry.”

She went to the blue bedchamber. She sat at the dressing table until Dawson came. The trunk was brought in.

“Don’t unpack it, Dawson. We’re leaving tomorrow.”

A tray was brought with some tea and toast and broth. She ate a little bit.

“I’ll go to bed now.”

She saw her maid’s eyes dart to the mantel clock. It was only a quarter past two.

“I just need to lie down and read and rest a bit. You’ll make sure Lord Danforth knows I won’t be coming down for dinner?”

“Yes, my lady.”

A tap at her door woke her at six o’clock. “Phoebe?” It was George.

“I’m well, George. You don’t need to worry,” she called out.

A pause. “Can I come in and see you?”

“Yes.”

He opened the door a little bit and slid in. Almost as if he had to be furtive. Almost as if they weren’t married. He closed the door quietly and came toward her bed.

“Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?” She shook her head. “And you’re sure you’re well enough to travel tomorrow?”

“Yes, I just—I didn’t sleep much in the last week.”

“Yes.”

“So there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

He still stood there. She rolled over so she was facing away from him. She closed her eyes.

His low voice. “Maybe I want to worry.”

She started to cry. The mattress moved under her and she knew he had sat down on the bed. She felt a hand on her back,

stroking her.

She cried and waited for the hand to go to her bottom or her hair or to creep around to her front, but it didn't. It stayed on her back, petting her. She cried and his hand rubbed her back tenderly until she fell asleep again.

When Dawson came into the bedchamber in the morning, Phoebe rolled over and opened her eyes. George wasn't there.

# THIRTY

They set off an hour later than George had planned to leave. He had paced the hall for ten minutes and then forced himself to go and sit in his study until Wynn came and told him Lady Danforth was waiting for him.

He put a smile on his face as he came down the stairs.

“Shall we go?”

Phoebe gave him a quizzical look from under her black bonnet and then frowned. “Are you sure you’re George Danforth? Where’s my scolding?”

He felt a twinge in his gut. “There’s no hurry.”

She blinked and swept out the door.

George looked at his wife as she gazed out the window of the carriage at the London streets.

His wife.

A woman he had known all her life and he suddenly didn’t know at all.

“Do you feel any better?” he ventured.

“Yes.”

“I’m glad.”

As the carriage got away from London, she vomited once, opening the carriage door and leaning out just as he rapped on the ceiling to tell the coachman to stop the carriage. He clutched at her skirts, sure she would tumble out as she heaved

and gagged. Finally, the carriage slowed and she sat back and took his proffered handkerchief and wiped her mouth.

“You didn’t have to stop the carriage, George. We can keep going. We are behind time as it is.”

“If the carriage won’t stop quickly enough, I would rather you get sick in the carriage than open the door.”

“All right, I will. But I’m done for now. We can go.”

He knocked on the carriage ceiling with his knuckle and it started moving again.

Long minutes ticked by. She looked anywhere but at him.

“Shall we talk?” he asked at last.

“If you like.”

“I’d like to know what you’re thinking.”

She shook her head and compressed her lips into a thin line. “This isn’t chess. There’s no advantage in going first. You tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking of how to make this right. For you.”

She was silent.

He went on. “I’m thinking of what I said to you, at that tea. When I was trying to keep you from marrying Thornwick. It was terrible and I have felt—”

“Yes. It was terrible.”

“What I said, it wasn’t what I meant—”

“It doesn’t matter what you meant, George. What matters —” She took a deep breath. “What matters to me is that I believed it. I believed my oldest and best friend despised me.”

“I don’t despise you—”

“Didn’t I just say your real feelings don’t matter to me?”

George felt a sharp pain in his chest. But he also felt he deserved the cruelty of her words. He tried to push his own hurt away and concentrate on what she was saying.

Phoebe frowned. “What does it mean about me that I believed it?”

“It means you hadn’t been shown enough care and attention so you would know—”

“That’s rot, George. Utter rot.” Her whole demeanor was suddenly one of a fierce certainty. She must have looked this way in the black priest’s hole when she had sat astride him and taken him. “My whole family has shown me care and attention. There could have been no more caring father in the world than mine. My mother, despite her manner, always found a way to make me feel loved. I know Andrew would do anything for me. And I know you love me. And yes, I know Alice loves me. I even know what she did with Thornwick was some deranged act of love on her part. No, I have received plenty of care and attention.”

She looked away, her fierceness gone, replaced by a defeated sadness. He longed to move across the carriage and take her in his arms, but he sensed he should wait.

Her voice trembled. “And it still wasn’t enough. I don’t remember a time when I wasn’t trying to make other people happy with me. When I wasn’t starved for praise. Mostly from you, of course. But also from Alice. But it was never enough. Because . . . because, I don’t know why. I don’t know why I needed so much.”

He didn’t know either. Because he had no sense of what she was talking about. She had never seemed a praise-seeker to him. Never a toady. She had never wanted to display herself, to show herself off.

But she had always done whatever he had demanded of her, hadn’t she? He had thought it was because they were in total agreement and because what he wanted had to be right, but what if that weren’t true?

What if she had just gone along with him because she had wanted him to *like* her?

He cleared his throat. “Is it true you hate chess?”

“I don’t know.”

“All those hours, Phee. All those hours you spent playing with me. Surely, you must know.”

She shook her head. “All I remember is that I wanted—no, I needed you to tell me I was good or I was clever. And you would, and I would gobble it up. But a few hours later, I was hungry again. You liked to argue and debate, so I learned to do that, too. You liked words, so I liked words. I don’t know who I am. I don’t know what I like. I’m nothing.”

“That’s not true, Phee. There is some essential you.”

“I don’t think so. I’m a person made up to please you and Alice. But mostly you. Over the last two months, what with Mother needing me and my being so much on my own, I had started to feel that I was maybe becoming someone new. But now . . .”

*But now you’re tied to me for the rest of your life.*

“You never were a nothing, only wanting to please me,” he protested. “Look at your lateness. Has anyone ever told you how wonderful it is that you’re late to everything? No. I certainly didn’t. And yet you are. I’m probably going to regret this for the rest of my life—” He took a deep breath. “But you should always be late, Phee. Because it’s you.”

She let out a bitter laugh. “My essential self is late. Wonderful.”

“Being late isn’t so bad. Who does it hurt?”

“Whom. Mother says it’s a lack of respect for other people’s time. You’ve said that too, George. My essential self is disrespectful.”

“Good. Yes. Be disrespectful. You should be. I only care that you respect yourself right now. And if you need an extra ten minutes in the bath or arranging your hair or looking out the window, you should respect that. I’m going to try to.”

“You do know that adds up to my being a half an hour late? Not ten minutes.” She held up her hand and ticked off on her fingers. “Ten minutes in the bath. Ten minutes with my hair. Ten minutes at the window. Thirty minutes. Thirty minutes late, I would be.”

Right now, he didn't care about her being half an hour late. She could be an hour late, as she was this morning. She could be two hours late. She was looking at him. She was talking to him. She was *here* with him.

A mischievous smile played over her lips and now she resembled the Phoebe he knew.

"But you owe me gobs of time, Lord Danforth, having been two years, eight months, and nine days late yourself."

His mind's eye flashed on a calendar, and he counted backward. Two years, eight months, nine days. The beginning of January. Her twentieth birthday. He shook his head. He still didn't understand.

Her smile disappeared. "The day you showed me chess for the first time? You promised to ask me to marry you when I was twenty."

He had no memory of that promise. "I remember it being dark, and I remember a kiss. And that you asked to take the white queen back to the nursery with you. That's what I remember."

"A faulty memory is no excuse for being late." One of his own reprimands being tossed back at him.

He held up his hands, as if in surrender. "Like I said, I'll be happy for you to be late."

She sighed. "You can't praise me for being late. That would defeat the purpose."

"I'll try not to. But—" He reached out and touched her knee. "I hope you are going to let me show you how much I love you some other way, aren't you?"

She looked at his hand on her skirts. "Yes, we'll always have the bedchamber, George. I know my duty as a wife."

He snatched his hand back. "No, no. You misunderstand me."

She started crying then.

Blast.



He thought of all the times he had dreamed about comforting her over the end of her engagement and then over her father's death. Holding her and then kissing her.

But how does a husband comfort a wife who is crying because she's married to him?

He got out a second handkerchief.

## THIRTY-ONE

A future of sharing a bed with George had been her consolation ever since she realized she was with child and she would have to marry him. She looked forward to coupling with him, and it wasn't just because of her own desire and the pleasure she knew he would give her.

It was because of *his* desire. She would have that. She would have his attention. She would be important, in that way.

At least, she had thought she would have that. But they had had no wedding night. Just her crying and his rubbing her back, like a brother would. And just now he had taken his hand off her leg as quickly as he could.

She must make herself not care. She must not show him she did care. She must stop crying right now.

She took a deep breath and willed the tears to go away. She took the clean second handkerchief he handed her and wiped her eyes.

For too long, she had wanted his good opinion, and it had done nothing for her. It had kept her a silly child, concerned only with herself and trivial matters, when she should have become a woman years ago.

Well, she must make herself into a woman now. She had broken off an engagement to a man who would have destroyed her. She had lost her father. She was going to be a mother. Life was serious. It wasn't a game. At least, she hoped it wasn't. She had already made so many wrong moves, lost so many pieces, she would never have a chance of winning.

Her throat was dry and burning. “I need something to drink.”

He had a basket next to him and he opened it and found a corked bottle with barley water in it. He worked the cork out carefully.

She drank all the barley water and handed the bottle back to him. “Thank you. Thank you for being prepared.”

He tucked the bottle back in the basket. “I’m not. Mrs. Hay is. If I had been really prepared, I would have thought to have brought a chamber pot with us instead of letting my wife jettison herself halfway out the carriage when she was queasy.”

“But I didn’t fall out.”

“No, you didn’t.”

He had rescued her, held her back, kept her from pitching out onto the road. Saved her. Like with the wild pig. Like with her pregnancy.

“I want to go see Mother first before we go to your house.”

It was just dusk when she got out of the carriage in front of what she now needed to think of as her childhood home. George got out after her. She turned to him.

“You don’t have to come in. You can stay in the carriage and wait for me.”

“I’ll certainly give you some time alone with your mother if you want it, but I need to be with you at the beginning. When we tell her.”

She looked up at him. His dark eyes. A muscle flexed in his jaw as he gritted his teeth. She put a hand up. She had intended to touch his face or his head but instead she brushed a nonexistent piece of detritus from his cravat.

“Let’s go in, Saint George.”

Her mother was alone, seated in the drawing room. Phoebe had asked the butler not to announce them.

“Mother,” she said and went to her and hugged her as she was rising.

“Phoebe. I had no word you were coming. I thought you would be in London another few weeks. You were so insistent —” Her mother’s eyes went to George. “Lord Danforth.”

“Your Grace.” George bowed.

Her mother turned back to her. “Are you married?”

Of course, her mother had come to the correct conclusion with just a glance at the both of them, seeing they were here together. And she also must have guessed the reason for the quick, clandestine marriage.

Phoebe spoke in a rush. “Yes, we are, and you need to know it is entirely my fault we had to get married and I am to blame and you mustn’t be angry with George about it. I’m the stupid one. We were married yesterday by special license.”

“I see.” Her mother sat again.

George took a step forward. “Your daughter claims too much responsibility. Of course, I’m to blame.”

“Yes.” Her mother’s eyes narrowed.

Phoebe knelt at her mother’s feet. “But please, it’s done now and we have to live with our mistakes. So you will give us your blessing, won’t you?”

“Phoebe, you’ll always have my blessing.” Her mother touched her cheek. “And your father would have been very happy. Perhaps not over the exigent nature of this wedding, but he would have been happy to see you married.” She raised her head to look at George. “The late duke always liked you.”

It was done. She had told her mother, and her mother had not flown into a temper. Had not raged at George or cut him dead. Had said her father liked George. Phoebe got to her feet.

“Thank you, Mother.”

The duchess reached out for the little bell on the table next to her then withdrew her hand. “I almost rang to have your

bedchamber prepared, Phoebe. But, of course, you won't be staying here tonight, will you?"

"No, I'm Lady Danforth now. I will live in the barony. But shall I come visit you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? No, I'm leaving tomorrow to go see Deborah and the earl for a week. In Hartmouth. If I had known—"

"No, Mother. You go visit Deborah. I'll be here when you get back."

It was dark in the carriage on the way to the barony. Phoebe couldn't see George's face or even his body where he sat across from her. But she could smell him.

"I want you to know." His voice was low and hoarse.

She waited. "Yes?"

"I don't consider anything about our marriage a mistake. Not the baby. Nothing. None of it. Only that it didn't happen years ago."

She said nothing.

"I understand you do. I understand that. But I don't."

She still said nothing. What was there to say? There was nothing to be gained from arguing with him.

And maybe she didn't like arguing anymore, either.

*Like Thornwick. Am I a bully now, too, with my silence and my tears?*

Dawson had completed the unpacking of Phoebe's clothes by the time they arrived at the Danforth country house. Phoebe was to have George's mother's room here, adjoining George's father's room. Now George's.

Phoebe turned to close the door she had just come through, but George appeared in the hallway.

"Will you come down and have a late supper with me?"

"I won't eat anything."

"You haven't eaten all day. We can have Mrs. Gregory prepare you whatever Mrs. Hay made for you in London.

Whatever you can tolerate.”

“May I have a tray here in my room instead?” She looked into his eyes.

His gaze was unflinching. “You may have whatever you want.”

“I want a tray.”

“I’ll go arrange it.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded and disappeared.

She had Dawson undress her and put her in a nightdress and dressing gown. The tray came up with beef tea and dry toast. She felt her appetite return as she sat and ate. She consumed everything. Dawson took the tray away and left her for the night.

She got into bed and waited. She waited for the door between her and George’s bedchambers to open and for him to come to her.

But the door didn’t open. He didn’t come. She got out of bed and crept to the door. There was light coming through a crack at the bottom. She put her ear to the door and heard nothing.

She went back to her bed, suddenly afraid of being caught out of it, like she was a child with a bedtime instead of a grown woman in what was now her own house.

She had made it clear to him today she was willing, hadn’t she?

And she needed him to show he needed her. He had said he needed her the day he came to speak to her brother about their marriage. But maybe he hadn’t meant this way.

Or he was punishing her. For crying again in the carriage. For telling her mother the marriage was a mistake. For not eating supper with him.

He was teaching her a lesson.

After her long sleep yesterday and the day of idleness in the carriage, she couldn't find slumber. She still had not closed her eyes when she started vomiting at four in the morning.

A tap came on the door between their two rooms, but she couldn't answer as she heaved.

The door opened, and George entered holding a lamp, wearing a shirt and trousers. He didn't say anything but came and sat on the bed and held her hair back as she spat into the chamber pot.

When she finished and lay back on the pillows, he said, "I'll have the doctor come see you today."

"No," she rasped, suddenly exhausted. "No. This is normal."

"Is it?"

"My sisters all had this with their first pregnancies. And Judith all four times. It gets better. At least, I hope it gets better."

"Can I get you anything?"

"No. Thank you."

"Let me get you a fresh chamber pot." He took the one she had vomited into and went to his room and came back with another. He hovered. "Shall I go?"

"I don't want to cause you any bother."

He sat down heavily on the bed. "I never imagined I would have such a polite marriage. My mother screamed a lot. At my father."

"Would you rather I screamed at you?"

"No." He turned to her, his face grave in the lamplight. "But do you want to? You can."

"No, I don't want to."

"Well, let me tell you what I want. I want you to bother me. Because otherwise, I feel like I'm pushing at you. And you've made me realize I've pushed you enough the last

twenty-two years. But I'm wild to do things for you. Please bother me."

"Is that why you didn't come see me after your supper? You didn't want to push?"

"You wanted to eat alone. I thought you must want to be alone."

He hadn't been punishing her. Why had she jumped to that conclusion? He had been trying to give her what he thought she wanted.

She yawned. And now, strangely, she wanted what he had given her before.

"Will you—will you rub my back like you did last night? Until I fall asleep. But I promise not to cry this time."

"I would love to rub your back. And you can cry."

"I don't want to."

She turned over onto her stomach and felt his strong, warm hand begin to stroke her back in circles. It would be arousing if she weren't so sleepy now.

"You know, Phee. I've been thinking. And I think I know what our problem is. Not your problem. Our problem."

"Mmmpf?"

"You're too generous, and I'm too selfish. Let's switch places for a while."

He probably said something more after that, but she fell asleep.



## THIRTY-TWO

Long after her eyes had closed and she had burrowed her face into the pillow and her deep breathing had told him she was asleep, George continued to rub Phoebe's back. It was his chance to touch her, and he was going to take it. With his hand, he memorized her spine, her shoulder blades, the softness of her lower back just before it curved into her bottom. He arranged her long hair carefully to one side so her neck was exposed and every four strokes of her back, he allowed one of his fingers to brush the skin of her nape and the very soft and fine hairs that gathered there in swirls.

Just before he got off the bed to go back to his own bedchamber and get ready for the day, he leaned over and deeply inhaled the warm scent of her neck.

He was married to her, but he didn't have her. Maybe he never would. And maybe the idea of having another person wasn't right even though that was what he had always thought marriage was. What he had seen with his own mother and father, but with his mother being the owning and demanding one, the one who had ruled and ruined the household with her extravagance and her volatile moods that he sometimes saw reflected in Alice's behavior.

He shuddered.

Phoebe wanted to have herself. Wasn't that what she had been telling him? He must make sure she got that chance.

He got off the bed carefully, and she didn't stir.

He caught Dawson before she went into Phoebe's bedchamber. "Let her sleep."

"Yes, my lord."

In the days that followed, he would come into her bedchamber in the wee hours when he could hear her vomiting. He would hold her hair, and he would rub her back until she went back to sleep. He would visit her in the evening, and at her invitation, he would sit and she would ask him about his day. He would also ask her about what she had been doing, what she had been thinking.

She would shrug.

It was almost as if she had been doing nothing, thinking nothing.

At times, he saw a glimmer of the Phoebe he knew. A smile, a joke. But it would fade quickly and he would find himself sitting in his mother's bedchamber, talking to a guarded stranger.

The sixth day after their wedding, he came out of the dining room after luncheon and was surprised to find her waiting for him.

"You could have joined me, Phoebe."

"I-I thought the smells might be too much. The fish."

*Tell Mrs. Gregory no more fish.* "Did you eat anything today?"

"Oh, yes."

"What?"

"Toast. Broth. But I'm feeling much better, and I have had far too much sleep."

"What do you say to some biscuits and tea later?"

She nodded.

"Or how about now?"

She smiled. "Yes, please."

Oh, her smile.

“Where do you want to have your tea, Lady Danforth?” He was sure she was going to say she wanted in her bedchamber, on a tray.

“Where are you going now, George?”

“To my study.”

“Can I have it in your study?”

Hallelujah.

“Yes, but—” He held up a forefinger. “Only if you promise to scatter crumbs everywhere.”

She giggled. “I promise.”

A giggle. A giggle to go with her smile. And she wanted to be where he was. Suddenly, she seemed herself. His Phoebe.

She had tea and three biscuits in front of the fire and he joined her to eat one. She leaned back in her chair.

“Let’s play.”

“You don’t have to do this for me—”

“I know. I’ve thought about it. I’ve had a lot of time to do a lot of thinking. I do like chess.”

“Good.”

“George,” she said warningly.

“I mean I’m just happy there’s something you like. That’s all.”

He set up the pieces.

“There’s something else I like besides chess.”

He continued to set up the chess pieces, but suddenly a peculiar ache blossomed in his throat. *Please say me.*

He coughed. “What’s that?”

“Why haven’t you come to me?”

He looked at her. She was looking down at the carpet. He wasn’t expecting this. He thought he knew what she meant,

but it seemed very dangerous at this moment to make assumptions.

“Come to you?”

“In my bed, at night. Not in the morning, when I’m vomiting.”

“You haven’t felt well.”

“Yes. But—” She raised her head and stuck out her chin. “I think it would make me feel better.”

“I’ll come to you if you would like it.”

She stiffened. “I don’t want it as a kindness from you to me.”

“Phee. You know I’m not kind. I’m a selfish arse, you know that. I want you.” He took a deep breath. “I want you right now.”

She turned pink. “Shall we go upstairs?”

“I say yes.”

“What will the servants think?”

“The male servants will think I’m the luckiest man in England, and the female servants will think I’m a horrible lecher for forcing you to perform your marital duty while ill.”

“Are you choosing bedding me over playing chess with me?”

“Yes. I’ve played Valois now, you know. The greatest chess player of this generation, they say. But I’ve never bedded my wife.”

She gazed up at him. “Let’s change that.” She held out her hands and he took them and helped her to her feet.

It was the walk up the stairs with his arm around her soft waist that George had pictured when he had first thought of marrying her.

After locking the hall door and the door to his own bedchamber, George turned to her. She was standing in the middle of her room, clasping her hands in front of her.

Suddenly, he was nervous.

“Traditionally,” she said, swaying back and forth a little, “I think one starts with kissing.”

He strode to her, three large steps, and took her in his arms. God, she felt good against him, her beautiful breasts, her warm belly, her luscious legs. All of her. Her arms reached up and her hands went to his head. She had no nails to scratch him but her fingertips and her palms felt as wonderful as ever.

“Good,” he said. “I’d like to try that first.”

He kissed his wife. Her lips were everything he remembered. Warm and meltingly soft. Her own sweetness tinged with the sweetness of the biscuits she had just eaten.

He had intended to kiss her as he first had back in June, softly and lightly, to continue the game of acting out that first time they had coupled. But he lost himself in being close to her and he found himself devouring her, his tongue invading her mouth and playing over her tongue, lapping at the insides of her cheeks, trying to capture every bit of her.

*Oh, Phoebe.*

It was what she had been craving. The obliteration which came with being pressed against him, his hard body holding her and his scent surrounding her, wiping doubts and fears from her mind.

She was as weak as ever. But she didn’t care. In this moment, she only cared about what he did to her, how he thrilled her, how every little bit of her felt alive and ached to be closer to him.

He swept her up into his arms and took her to the bed, keeping his mouth on hers, not breaking his intoxicating kisses. She took one hand from his head and brushed his groin as he laid her down. He was so swollen already. He groaned into her mouth and she was reminded he was vulnerable, too. And in this moment, she had the proof that he wanted her. This was her power.

Despite the maddening pulsing ache between her legs and his hardness, the undressing took a long time, as if they couldn't bear to break away long enough to do the job properly. A button here, a shrug there, lips locked together, hands everywhere.

Finally, every scrap of clothing was removed and only their bodies were tumbled together on the bed. His cock brushed her maidenhair, was against her cleft. She pulled at his neck, his shoulders, clutched at him.

And then he was inside her, stroking in and out of her with big powerful thrusts.

She was no longer solid but another substance entirely, some ether. Her pleasure rose inside her quickly, frighteningly quickly, like a blaze set to a flammable vapor. His lips on hers, his hands on her body, his cock in her deepest place. She contracted and wailed into his mouth as she surrendered and floated and flew and was nothing. An arrow directed toward the sky, soaring, soaring, soaring until it was lost to sight.

Then the tears came. The despicable tears, dragging her back down to earth. Back into herself. He halted his thrusts. He took his mouth from hers.

“Phee?”

“No!” she sobbed. “No. Finish, George. Finish!” She grabbed his buttocks, she pushed her hips up into him, she tried to take his mouth with hers.

At first, he responded to her kiss and her movement. But he quickly stopped again as her body was wracked by waves of an entirely different kind than had been there seconds before. Deep, rolling grief that consumed her as thoroughly as her pleasure had.

He pulled out of her and hesitated, hovering over her. She didn't have the strength to drag him down, to force him to do what she wanted.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

“No! No, no, no, I'm sorry,” she got out. “I ruined it. I ruined it.”

He got on his side next to her, careful not to be too close. He moved a piece of hair off her cheek.

“You didn’t ruin anything.”

“Yes, I did.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“You stopped.”

“I can’t make love to you when you’re crying, Phee.”

He didn’t want her. She was wrong. She had no power. She couldn’t even be a good wife this way, a way she had felt sure of with him. She was nothing but self-pity and tears and sadness.

She rolled away from him. “Go away.”

“Phee.” His strong, warm hand on her waist.

She squeezed her eyes shut. That hand couldn’t fix her. Nothing could fix her.

“Go away.”

The hand disappeared. A sigh. The mattress shifted. He went away.

And suddenly that wasn’t what she wanted at all.

## THIRTY-THREE

The next day she had Dawson dress her when the luncheon gong sounded, and she went and waited for him in his study.

“I won’t do that again,” she said as he came through the door.

He had been reading a letter and he looked up, startled.

“I won’t send you away,” she clarified.

He came over and sat across from her, folding the letter and putting it away in his tailcoat pocket.

“Are you sure you want to make that promise, Phee? I want to send myself away most of the time.”

“Yes.”

He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. “I’ll try not to take advantage.”

“Is that innuendo, George?”

Worry creased his forehead, and he moved his hands away from his face. “Did you want it to be innuendo? I’m not very good at hinting at things.”

“I want a rematch, George.” He looked at her, not understanding. She stood. “I want to do yesterday afternoon over. Will you come upstairs with me again?”

He rose to his feet slowly. She took his hand. “But let’s go to your bedchamber this time.”



She undressed him, touching his skin, the hair on his chest, the top of his head, his shoulders, his back, his legs. She made him sit down on the edge of the bed and she sat in his lap and nestled her face into the side of his neck and inhaled deeply as she rubbed his head.

“Phee? Can I undress you now?”

“Yes, please.”

He replicated her slowness in taking her clothes off and when they were lying in the bed together naked, he kissed and caressed her body even more slowly, paying attention to her, inch by inch.

“Please,” she said.

He paused.

“Please make love to me, George.”

“I am making love to you, Phee.”

She grasped his cock. “You know what I mean. Please tup me.”

A chuckle escaped from him. “I guess you’re not very good at innuendo either.”

She ran her hand up and down his length, stroking him. “I would rather have this in me than innuendo.”

She giggled at her own joke and he laughed, too, and it all seemed so natural again to be with him, to have him on top of her, both of them trying to please the other one.

And then she discovered the delight of lying on his chest afterwards, his arms around her, knowing they didn’t have to move, neither one had to leave.

*He’s my husband now. I belong here.*

“Phee?” he said and kissed the top of her head.

“Mmph?”

“You know how you said you wouldn’t send me away again?”

“Yes?”

“If you ever have to, it’s fine. Just as long . . .”

She raised her head off his chest. His eyes were closed.

“Just as long as what?”

“As long as you don’t run away. My mother, she left five or six times, I think. They were terrible weeks for my father, for me. I don’t think Alice really understood what was going on, she was too young. And, of course, we made sure no one outside the household knew.”

“I’m so sorry, George.”

“So if I’m suffocating you, if you can’t bear me and need me to leave you alone, I’ll go to another part of the house. I’ll sleep in the stables. As long as you don’t run away, as long as I know where you are and you let me see you.”

Her husband had wounds she knew nothing about. She brought her hand up and stroked his head. “I won’t run away.”

He opened his eyes. “Good.”

George made sure there was no fish on the dinner menu and felt an enormous satisfaction in having Phoebe eat with him that night for the first time as his wife. She nibbled at her roast chicken. She laughed when one of her potatoes, slippery with butter, got away from her fork and slid off the plate. She teased him about the book that rested, unopened, next to his own place-setting.

“It’s how I occupied myself when I was eating alone.”

“But now I’m keeping you from your reading?”

“I’m glad to have you keep me from it.”

They went to his study afterwards rather than the drawing room. She sat in her chair.

“Let’s play,” she said.

He felt her looking at him as he got out the table and the chessboard and began setting up the pieces.

“You don’t wear a wig anymore.”

“No.”

“Why is that?”

“You know why.”

She smiled. “So I will touch your head?”

“Yes, and because you said I was handsome without the wig.”

“You’re handsome with or without. But I prefer without.”

He set the board up with her as White and she made her first move.

“You know, when you touched my head for the first time, I was well and truly lost.” He moved a black pawn.

“Not when you first kissed me?”

He looked at her, suddenly afraid of upsetting her. “What’s the right answer?”

“The truth.”

“I loved kissing you. But when you rubbed my head, I wanted to worship you,” he admitted.

Phoebe giggled. Then grew serious. “You weren’t attracted to me before that? You didn’t see me that way?”

“I *did* see you that way before. But you were far too young. And my appetite for you felt very shameful. And your father constantly reminded me of my duty to protect you, including from myself.”

“But I grew up.”

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t see me as a woman?”

“I can’t explain it. But I think I must have.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Have you ever wondered why you were twenty-two and still unmarried?”

She bit her lip and looked away and trembled.

“No, Phee. I didn’t mean—I mean to say it’s my fault.”

“How could that be? I had almost four Seasons with no suitors. My only dances were with you or your friends or my relatives.”

“But that’s my doing. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I’ve been told by lots of people that I kept other men away from you.”

“What?”

“I’ve been told I was very threatening.”

“You were?”

“And everyone thought you were mine so they stayed away. That’s why you didn’t get a suitor until I missed so many balls last May when I was back here. Because of the floods.”

“Oh.”

“So I was saving you for myself all those years. I didn’t know it, really, but I was. See, I told you I was a selfish arse.”

“I don’t feel well.” She stood and he did too, but before he could get around to her side of the table, she had fled the room.

He waited several minutes, not sure what to do. Follow her? Wait here? She had promised not to run away, but he didn’t want her to feel alone. But would she want to see him when she was so upset with him?

Why did he continue to be so stupid with her? Why had he chosen to tell her just now about his keeping suitors away from her? Things had been going so well. They had been in bed together and she had been so responsive to him, so wanting him, and she hadn’t cried. They had eaten a meal together for the first time as man and wife. She had asked to play chess with him.

He went upstairs and knocked on her door and entered after she said “Come in.”

She was sitting on her bed. He could see she had been crying.

She smiled weakly. "I suppose I should feel better that it wasn't my fault no one wanted me, but I don't."

"I'm so sorry."

She shrugged and started to say something but it was interrupted by a sob bursting out of her.

## THIRTY-FOUR

She woke up surrounded by George. Phoebe was on the very edge of the bed, facing out, and one of his arms was under her, the forearm coming up between her breasts so his hand cupped her topmost shoulder. The other arm banded around her waist. His leg was thrown over hers. He was solid, heavy, warm.

He had taken out her hairpins and removed her clothes and put her in her nightdress last night as she had sobbed. What a baby she had been. Crying like that.

Then the reason for her tears came back to her and sadness clutched at her chest even more tightly than George's arm.

*I felt so badly about myself for three years and it was his fault.*

But she couldn't let herself think about that. She couldn't let herself fall down that well of despair again. She felt George's hardness behind her, pushing at her, provoking a wildness in her she couldn't name.

It wasn't desire. What was it? It wasn't rage, although it felt akin to that. It was hunger, it was wanting, it was violence . . . it was *desire* for desire.

He was holding her too tightly for her to be able to move much, but she pushed back against him with her bottom. She took George's hand off her collarbone and molded it around her breast. Now, finally, he was beginning to stir a little.

"Phee," his voice croaked from behind her and his leg came off of her.

“Shift over. I’m on the edge.” She had always slept in the middle of the bed, having a fear of falling out as she had when she was five. She had no idea how she had wound up so far over.

His warm body came away from hers, his hand released her breast, his arm came off her waist and she was able to turn over and face him.

George had a look of alarm on his face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize—you kept getting away from me, and I promised you I would hold you all night.”

“Did you?” He was in his shirt and trousers. She pulled his shirt out of his waistband and got her palm against the heated skin of his hard stomach.

“Which?”

“Did you hold me all night?” She moved her hand higher and brushed the trail of hair from his navel to his chest with her fingertips.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Good.” Her hand went down to the fall of his trousers and she stroked over his hardness.

“Phee.” His voice was edging into a groan. “We need to talk about what I did. How I hurt your chances with other men. How sad you’ve been.”

“I don’t want to.”

“What then . . . what do you want?”

She looked up at his troubled face. “You know what I want.”

“Phoebe—”

“It’s the only thing I want from you.”

“The only thing?”

“Yes.”

It was true. It was all she wanted in this moment. To lose herself in her own body and his, in their mouths and loins, in

their releases. She wanted to erase herself and her feelings in a tumult of physical sensation.

She got hold of her nightdress and wiggled and pulled and got it up over her head.

“Bed me, George.”

She wedged herself up against him as tightly as she could and grasped his cock through his fall and began kissing his neck.

For several long seconds, he was motionless even as he grew under her hand.

“George. Give me what I want.”

“I want a normal life,” he got out.

She stiffened in his arms. Her mouth came away from his neck but she couldn't look at him.

“Are you saying I'm not normal?”

“No, of course not.”

She was about to cry and she was tired of crying. “You don't want me?”

“Yes, Phee.” He put a hand on her cheek and moved his head back and away so he could look at her face. “I do, sweetheart.”

“Then show me you do.”

“Can't I show you some other way right now?”

She shook her head. “I want you to take me.” She fumbled at his fall, trying to undo his buttons.

A growl and his hands were pushing her hands away. She had a moment when she feared he was going to get out of the bed and leave her. But no, he was undoing his fall and dragging her by her hips into the center of the bed and kneeling between her legs.

He did not take off his shirt or his trousers. He did not kiss her or fondle her breasts. He did not rub his member over her cleft and her own little nub, teasing her.



He took his cock in hand and put it at her entrance and plunged into her with one unsparing thrust. He gave her what she wanted, what she had asked for.

She watched his dark eyes as he pounded away at her. He was lost in lust, forcing her body into its own desperate and savage place.

This was what she wanted.

His name came to her lips time and again. *George*, she wanted to call out. But she didn't speak. There was no place for names here, and this was no time to make him into her husband or her lover or even her friend. This was cock and quim and nothing else.

His pace was frenzied. His thrusts were deep. She felt her own release building, irrevocable, inevitable, inexorable. But still even when the moment came, she did not grab at him or say his name. She stayed apart, her breath in short bursts as her lower body gripped him over and over again.

His release came soon after, a few more thrusts, his head back and his eyes closed for the first time since he had entered her, and she could feel him pulsing inside her as he stilled.

He did not scream. And he did not linger inside her. He withdrew, still hard, and buttoned his fall before he got off the bed. He went to her bowl and pitcher. She could not read his face as he came back to the bed with a cloth in his hand.

She thought he would hand the cloth to her and she reached for it. But instead, he sat on the edge of the bed and took the cold, wet cloth to where her legs were still spread, where his own warm seed and her fluids were coming out of her. He cleaned her tenderly, a gentle swipe of the cloth on the lips of her cleft, a light press against her entrance. Such a contrast to the brutal coupling they had shared just minutes ago.

He met her eyes. "Breakfast is in an hour," he said and got up and left the room.

She pulled up the covers. After a time, Dawson came in and opened the drapes.

“Will you wear the dress we selected yesterday, my lady? Breakfast is in half an hour, I heard.”

“No, Dawson. Close the drapes. I’m staying in bed.”

She turned on her side and the maid left the room.

*Maybe he’ll come to me when I miss breakfast.*

But he didn’t come.

He didn’t come the whole morning she lay in her bed, naked, waiting for him.

*I didn’t mean to, but I sent him away. After I promised not to.*

*He must hate me right now.*

She needed to escape and he wasn’t going to come and help her do that with his cock. She needed to feel her blood coursing, air moving in and out of her lungs, her skin prickling. She needed proof she was alive and not just a floppy rag-doll made up of tears and regret.

She dressed, laced her boots, found a woolen shawl. She left her room, went down the stairs and out of the house, slipping through the front door without a word to anyone.

She walked miles and miles through the fields and forests of her childhood. She knew where she could walk in September and not see a soul.

She tried to force her mind to be empty because she knew what would fill it if she didn’t. Sadness. Loneliness. Despair. Longing. Self-hatred.

But she couldn’t really keep errant thoughts and worries away. Why hadn’t George wanted Phoebe before as his wife? Would he find fault with her and correct her over and over again? Would he come to hate her because she wasn’t whatever he wanted? Because she wasn’t normal?

A few hours into her tramp, she asked herself the most important question.

Would *she* come to hate *him*?

She almost fell down. Not loving George would be like not loving her father or mother. Her mother. Her mother had gotten home from her trip last night. She must see her mother. Phoebe picked up her skirts and broke into a run.

She ran all the way to the duchy.

The duchess was sitting on a sofa in the morning room. Phoebe went in and laid down and put her head in her mother's lap and cried.

Her mother stroked her hair and said "there, there" and hummed.

"Mama!" Phoebe howled. She had not called her mother *Mama* in ten years.

Finally, her tears slowed.

Her mother spoke in her gentlest voice. "Tell me why you're crying, dearest."

"I'm crying because all I do is cry. I can't be a good wife. And George doesn't understand me and is disappointed in me."

"It sounds like you're being awfully hard on yourself. And awfully hard on George."

Her mother was defending George?

"Phoebe, the one thing that is undeniable in this world is that George was always devoted to you and you, to him. You know he taught you to walk. Your father always loved to tell the story about how George called us into the nursery that day to show off what you could do."

"Yes."

"But do you know what your first word was a month before that?"

"No."

"Jahj."

"What?" To Phoebe's ears, it was some impossibly exotic word.

“Jahj.” Her mother saw she still didn’t understand and translated. “George. You said it long before you ever said Mama or Papa. You would clap your hands and crow his name whenever he came into the room. And it was because he paid such attention to you, Phoebe, and he thought everything you did was a miracle. And when you got older, he never ignored you or teased you as so many older boys do when younger girls tag along after them. And when you were a very young woman and he was a man, do you remember how often I would come into the library when you had your chess lessons? Your father tried to calm my worries, saying he had undertaken to have a good chat with George about it, but I still thought George might try to take advantage as most men would with a doting girl. But he never did.”

“Yes, but how do you know that?”

“You could never keep an important secret from me, Phoebe. I would have known if you had been kissed or interfered with in some way. I knew something had happened to you the week you got engaged to Thornwick. You were no longer a maiden, I was sure of it. I thought it was His Grace you had been with, but when I saw you and George together at the house party, I knew it had been him.”

“I’m sorry, Mother.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about to me. Aren’t I lucky to have my baby girl so close to me even though she’s married? And to have a grandbaby on the way whom I will get to cuddle to my heart’s content? But you must promise me to try to let go of this idea that you aren’t good for George or he isn’t good for you or he thinks you’re not good enough for him. It simply isn’t true.”

“It feels true.”

“But it’s not. He was your teacher for a long time. Now you must be teachers to each other. Give him husband lessons. Let him give you wife lessons. You don’t have to be perfect pupils, but you must try. I promise you’ll never stop learning. You two have such a long and loving history together, Phoebe. This is just another chapter in it. Maybe not the most pleasant

one or the sweetest one. But it is one. I would give anything to have one more chapter of any kind with Razzy.”

Razzy. Short for Erasmus. Phoebe had not known her mother had a pet name for her father. She had only ever heard her call him Abingdon.

“It’s hard, Mother.”

“Yes, it is. But you have your whole life together ahead of you. It will be worth it.”

## THIRTY-FIVE

George came in from his long morning ride, only wanting to see and talk to Phoebe. She hadn't come to breakfast before he had left the house. That had been too much to hope for. Of course, she was still upset at him for what he had confessed. And he had not made anything better by taking her that way in her bed even though she had asked for it, had said she wanted nothing else from him.

But he wanted something else from her.

He went to her bedchamber. She wasn't there. He rang for Dawson and when she came and he asked her where Phoebe was, Dawson's face turned white and she said she had thought my lady was still sleeping.

He tried to calm himself.

He went through the house. Not here. Where was she?

She had promised. She had said she wouldn't run away. Of course, this was before she had found out George was responsible for her failed Seasons, for feeling herself unwanted and unloved. It had been bad enough he had given her no reassurance that she was desirable those years. He had also kept others from doing so.

He went through the stables, the outer buildings.

Then he remembered the priest hole. Not the one at the Abingdon house, but the one here, in the cellar.

Phoebe knew about the Danforth priest hole. She had gone in it once when she was six and he was ten. He had stood

outside the door, calling for her to come out but unable to force himself to go in after her. Finally, she had crawled back out, giggling, her dress and face and hands dirty, and he had scolded her, angry because she had scared him so much, made him feel so weak.

He went down to the cellar that held the priest hole and managed to heave the heavy metal door open.

“Phoebe!” he called.

There was a sound, some faint whisper of something, a soughing. It could be her crying. He crawled in, calling her name. The door closed behind him with a clang.

She wasn't in the passageway or the blackness beyond. He listened and called and went over every bit of the chamber with his hands in front of him, feeling the walls, and didn't find her.

He blindly groped to the passageway and crawled back through. To his horror, he found he couldn't get the door open. When it had fallen shut, something had bent or broken and there was no budging the door now.

He yelled and shouted and pounded for a long time.

He closed his eyes. He thought it might help him forget he was lying in the dark, trapped, alone, sure to die. It didn't. He hated being in the narrow dark passage, so much like a coffin to his mind, but no one would ever hear him if he backed up into the larger chamber beyond. He had to be by the door.

Every few minutes or so, he would rouse himself to bang and shout. Over time, his knuckles and the sides of fists become sore from pounding. Already, his voice was hoarse from shouting.

He twisted his neck so his face was directly next to the bottom of the door. He thought he could feel the barest whisper of fresh air coming to him through a minuscule crack between the door and the stone floor. But there was no light.

Hours must have passed. Was it night now?

It was always night here.

And Phoebe, Phoebe, where was she? She had broken her promise and run away. Of course, she had run away. Why would she want to stay when she was so quashed by him? She had always been so glowing, so full of life before. He had dragged her down with his own selfish darkness.

Please let her be safe. Please let her be safe. If only he could get out of here and go looking for her again. Find her, see her. That would be enough for him. He wouldn't have to touch her. He wouldn't have to have her by his side, in his house, as his wife. He just had to know she was safe somewhere, happy.

He'd find a way for her to have that. Whatever she wanted. Her own house in London. Or a life with her mother.

He shuddered.

It would be terrible to have his wife and his child live apart from him, but if that's what she needed, he would make sure she had that.

He rolled onto his back.

It was so much easier to be noble and generous when you were lying in your grave.

He must have fallen asleep because he went from being in the dark passage to standing at the edge of a large meadow watching his beautiful Phoebe shoot arrows over and over again directly into the sun to being back in the dark passage and hearing the most wonderful sound in the world.

Phoebe's voice.

"George, George, are you in there?"

He shifted and got back onto his stomach and raised his head. There was a small trace of light coming from the crack under the door. He opened his mouth and no sound came out. He took a deep breath and managed to croak out, "Yes."

"Thank God, thank God, thank God." He heard her speaking to someone else, giving instructions about something. Then her voice coming through the crack to him again.



“George, sweetheart, we’re going to get you out, all right? I’m here with you. Can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m so sorry. I went walking and then to see Mother, it was so selfish of me and I didn’t even think about you being worried. And then when I got home and Mead told me you had been looking for me, I felt awful. And then I couldn’t find you to apologize to you for worrying you and no one had any idea where you were and we’ve been looking for you everywhere. I never thought you’d be here. I’m so happy to have found you.”

“I’m happy you found me, too.”

“George, I’ve been such a bad wife to you so far and so maddening, I’m sure, and I just want you to know I’m going to be better, sweetheart.”

“You haven’t been bad.”

“Yes, I have. And you’ve been very patient, waiting for me to grow up. And I’m going to reward that patience.”

“I just want you to be happy.”

“I will be, I can be. I’m so happy right now to be talking to you.”

“I don’t . . . feel well. It’s so dark in here, Phee. I . . .”

“I want you to close your eyes. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes.”

“Close your eyes now. Think about something else.” A pause came here and George panicked.

“Phee!”

“I’m still here, sweetheart.”

“Keep talking.”

“Of course, I can’t think of anything to say right now except I wish I was in there with you and I could put my arms around you.”

“Rub my head?”

“Yes, rub your head and put my face in your neck.”

“That would make it . . . very crowded in here.” His breath quickened.

“Don’t think about that. Think about—I want you to picture a square. A square made up of sixty-four other squares. Half of them dark and half of them light.”

An empty chessboard.

“Now put the pieces on the board. With the white pieces closest to you, sweetheart. Can you do that?”

George nodded. *Fool. She can’t see you.* And he needed her to keep talking. Phoebe. His light, his life. Desperately, more than anything, he needed her to keep talking.

“Yes,” he said.

“You go first, darling.”

“I-I can’t do this.”

“Yes, you can. Close your eyes. We’re in your study in town, all right? It’s Monday evening. You’re done with your business for the day and it’s time to play chess. With your best and oldest friend in all the world.”

“I’d rather play with my wife.”

“Oh, George. Oh, sweetheart, darling, yes. Play with your wife.”

“What are you wearing?”

A pause. “Right now?”

“In my mind. In my study.”

“I’m wearing one of my good-girl dresses, all right? Pink. High-necked. Nothing distracting.”

“The one with the little bit of lace at the elbow?”

“That old thing?” She laughed. “I’m surprised you remember it. Yes, I’m wearing that one.”

“And how is your hair?”

“Tumbling down, of course.”

“And are there biscuit crumbs on the carpet?”

“Heaps of them. You’re quite grumpy about it, and I’m giggling. George, I want you to concentrate on the game.”

“Yes.”

“Make your move, sweetheart.”

He summoned the chessboard to his mind again although he longed instead to keep the image of Phoebe in her pink dress there instead.

“I’ll take out my King Pawn two squares.”

“I’ll do the same.”

He pictured the two pawns out in the center of the board, facing each other. Tilting at each other.

“I’ll take my King Bishop out to the fourth square at my Queen’s Bishop.”

“Queen Bishop Pawn one square.”

“Queen Pawn two squares.”

“My Pawn takes yours.”

Of course, it did. “Uh, my Queen takes your Pawn.”

“Queen Pawn one square.”

“King Bishop Pawn two squares.”

“Queen Bishop to the third square at my King.”

Blindfold chess had always been a strain for George. He was a man who didn’t see things in his head easily. But he had forced himself to learn to memorize the board, the location of the pieces. But it had always been simple for Phoebe. She had taken to it like a duck to water, as easy for her as if the board were right in front of her. And she was very good about reminding him where the pieces were when he got muddled.

All those hours at balls standing next to Phoebe, playing blindfold chess with no blindfolds, watching the dancing, keeping a wary eye on Alice.

All those hours. At balls. Playing chess with Phoebe. While other women were dancing.

“Phee, Phee,” he cried out.

“George, I’m here, I’m waiting for your next move. What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for playing chess with you at balls.”

“We were just doing what we always did together, that’s all.”

“I should have danced every dance with you instead. Or wandered away so someone else had a chance with you.”

A silence.

“Phee!”

Her voice came back to him, strained, heavy. “I’m here. I could have wandered away myself, you know. Gone to speak to my mother, the other ladies. But I didn’t. And I don’t care about other chances. I was with the man I wanted. The man I’ve always wanted.”

“Do you still want him?”

“I do.”

“I’m glad, Phee. If I weren’t in here, I’d be the happiest man in the world.”

Noises coming through the door. Indistinct voices. Her voice again. “You know, my lord, there are a great many people around now. To help us get this door unfastened.”

“Don’t stop talking to me, Phee.”

“No, I won’t. I’ll keep talking. I’m right here. Just know . . . there are some things I have to tell you. Later. Now, make your move.”

He took a deep breath. The chessboard came to him and he saw the pieces with surprising clarity. But he wanted to hear her voice. “Remind me where the pieces are.”

She told him.

“Uh, King’s Bishop at my Queen to the third square.”

Five moves later, she said, “The farrier and the grooms are here with some tools, George. I’m going to back away so they can work on the door. I want you to keep going with the game. You know what I would do, anyway, don’t you?”

He wanted to scream, *No, no, I don’t know what you would do. Don’t go away. Don’t stop talking to me.*

A whisper. “I’m going to embarrass you by kissing you all over when this door opens, George Danforth, and you won’t be able to stop me.”

His voice was weak. “All right.”

“Now play the game in your head.”

But he didn’t, he couldn’t. The air was so close. The darkness, so black. He was in his grave. He was dying, if not already dead.

No. No. His light, his life was on the other side of the door. And she was going to embarrass him by kissing him all over, in front of the farrier, the grooms, whatever other staff members were there. And he didn’t care one bit because he wouldn’t be embarrassed. He would feel the most blessed relief. As long as he didn’t die in the next five minutes.

It took ages longer than five minutes.

Her voice again. “Move away from the door, sweetheart. As far from the door as you can.”

*No.* He couldn’t. He couldn’t move farther into the darkness and away from her voice.

“Do you hear me, George? Say yes.”

“Y-yes.”

“Move away from the door now. I promise you it will be all right.”

With her promise, he found the strength to slide on his stomach away from the door, down the little passageway, back into the main chamber.

*Oh, my God. This is going to be my tomb.*

Loud bangs, creaks, scuffles. Then one tremendous clang and George could feel the air around him had changed. He opened his eyes and there was light coming from the passageway into the chamber. He heard Phoebe's voice, louder and clearer than before.

"The door is open. Can you come out, George? Or should I come in there?"

"No, no, no. I'm coming out, I'm coming out." And he crawled toward the light.

He came out into the cellar, blinking, drawing deep breaths. Bright lamps everywhere, men clapping him on his back, a cup of water being given to him. He drained it, then looked around.

"Where's my wife?"

"I'm here." She stepped from behind the men. He had a moment of not believing it was her, so firmly was her old pink dress in his head. She was in the black mourning she had worn every day since they had married and she had tears in her eyes and her nose was running and her hair was hanging down and she was the most beautiful woman in the world. He opened up his arms and she came into them.

"Give me your dirty face to kiss, George." He leaned down and she kissed him all over just as she had promised with "I'm sorry" between each kiss.

"Don't be sorry, Phee," he whispered and captured her mouth with his.

George was surprised to find the cellar empty when he stopped kissing his wife.

"Everyone left." She giggled. "I didn't embarrass you. We embarrassed them."

She stepped away from him, holding his hands and looking up at him. Now she had smudges on her cheeks she must have gotten from his own face. "But I'm glad, George. Because I have something important to tell you."

"What's that, Phee?"

“I love you, and I forgive me.”

“You forgive you?”

“Well, I forgive you, too, but that’s easy because you’re George and I’ve always forgiven you. But this time, I forgive me. For not liking myself, for being a silly girl for so long, for not being a good wife to you.”

“There’s nothing to forgive.”

“You don’t live in my head, George.”

“No.”

“I need to forgive myself. Believe me, I do. Now, let me be wifely and arrange for a bath for you and dinner for both of us.”

“What will we do after that?”

“Shall we play chess? Finish our game on a real chessboard?”

“No.” He gathered his wife into his arms. “I just want to hold you and look at you and whisper all my secrets to you.”

“You have secrets?”

“I don’t want them to be secrets anymore. I love you. I’ve always loved you. You’re the one who taught me love. You’re everything good in the world. You’re everything to me. You.”

She tipped her face up to him, her eyes shining, her hair a golden corona in the lamplight, and he kissed her.

She was his light, and his whole business on this earth was to nurture that flame and keep it burning.

She had taught him that.

## FIRST EPILOGUE

A chessboard appeared in the morning room, the pieces lined up in their starting places, not how George usually left a chessboard. Phoebe noticed it for the first time at the end of September and thought it peculiar and remarked on it that night when she shed her nightdress and slipped into George's bed.

"I don't remember a chessboard being there before."

"Before?" George stroked her stomach gently.

"Before I married you. Last year, for example."

"You had occasion to be in the morning room last year?"

"Yes, when I paid calls on Alice."

"Well, it's there now." His hand slid up to a breast and cupped it.

"Alice has written back to me."

"She has? What does she say?"

"She forgives me for taking so long to forgive her and says Italian men are divine and I should divorce you immediately and come and live in Venice with her and take an Italian lover."

George growled and rolled over on top of Phoebe, pinning her arms to her side.

"You can't go to Venice. You've been captured by a pirate king." He bit her shoulder.



She giggled. George had become so playful with her in the last week or two. It was like he had some boyish part of him he had never used and he was finally letting that boy out to romp. He would always be seen by others as a very serious man, but it was her privilege to see this silly side in their bed. And to encourage it. She hoped he would also be silly for the baby, not just a teacher and a rule-maker. She would have to encourage that, too.

“I’ve been captured?”

“Yes, you have.” More growling and nipping at her shoulders and neck as she giggled and squirmed. “And the pirate king has imprisoned you in his cabin on his ship and intends to ravish you three times a day.”

“When will he release me?”

“Never. When he retires, he plans to lock you up you in a quaint seaside cottage where he will ravish you five times a day.”

“More times a day on land than on sea?”

“He’ll have more time once he retires from being king.”

“Will I be let out to get fresh air?”

“No.”

“What if I’m willing?”

“Are you willing?”

“That depends. Does the pirate king look like you?”

“He looks exactly like me.”

“Does he smell like you?”

“Yes.”

“Does he like his head rubbed?”

“Yes.”

“Does he need a pirate queen?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m willing.”

“Then you can have some fresh air.” He pursed his lips and blew into her ear.

“Stop!” She shrieked and wiggled underneath him.

“Your struggle is futile.”

“Is it?” She wiggled some more. “But futile means producing no result.”

“Yes.”

“I think I’ve produced a result, George.”

“You have?”

“A result that’s getting bigger and harder by the second.”

“What do you think we should do with that result?”

“We could ignore it, and it would go away eventually.”

“Not the right answer.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper as she moved her legs out from under him and pushed her hips up against him. “We could put it inside me.”

“But if I let go of your arms you might batter me with your little fists.”

“Or I might use my hands to rub your head.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

He released her arms and raised himself off her to bring one hand to her mound. “Is this where you want your result?” He touched her, slid one finger into her wetness and teased her.

“Mmmm.” She bit her lip as her own fingers traced lines from his forehead to his occiput and back and she wrapped her legs around his waist. “Yes, please.”

He took his cock and pressed it against her entrance. “Are you sure this is where you want it?”

“George!”

He grinned and leaned down to kiss her. And then he gave her the result she wanted.

The next day, Phoebe noticed White had made a move on the chessboard in the morning room.

*You sly thing, George. You think you'll get an extra game this way.*

But still she made a move in response as Black. Then she sat down at the secretary to write a letter back to Alice, telling her she was welcome to cut her trip short and return to England and to the Danforth estate, but Phoebe was deliriously happy and had no intention of coming to Venice.

A whole week passed before White made another move even though Phoebe checked the morning room chessboard every day. She moved another Black pawn.

Five days, a week, sometimes ten days would pass between White's moves. She knew her husband was deliberate and careful, but this was the slowest game she had ever played with him.

She was very near her confinement when she finally won the game on a dark, cold, damp March morning. The White king had no escape, no matter what move George might make. Phoebe felt a little daring and a little impatient, so she tipped George's king over for him.

She sat at the secretary, her large belly in front of her, and read her letters. Alice and her aunt Lady Simmons were in Austria now but Alice wrote she would be home in June to see the newest Danforth who should be born at the beginning of April.

*I'll grant you some nesting time. And besides, this way, the baby will be much more handsome by the time I meet him. I don't know if I like babies, but you know I'm a fool for handsome.*

Clearly, Alice thought the baby would be a boy.

Phoebe wrote a reply that warned Alice she would have to love a niece as much as a nephew. Then she went out into the hall and asked Mead for a carriage to take her to her mother's house for a long visit. She and her mother had luncheon and sat together and read their novels and talked about her sisters and her brothers. Andrew came in briefly and kissed her and then disappeared to go to the music room.

"You must help me, Phoebe," her mother said. "In a few years, we have to find a good match for your brother."

Phoebe laughed. "I'm not sure I know anything about good matches. Wasn't I born into mine?"

It was dusk when she got back home. The lamps in the drawing room were already lit and shining, the room ready for her and George to sit there and talk before they went into dinner.

George came out in the wet to meet the carriage, helping her down himself, elbowing the footman out of the way.

"You won," he said. She looked at him without understanding. "The game in the morning room. You won."

"Yes. Let's get inside, it's cold." She leaned on him going up the few steps to the front door. "I actually think I won a move earlier, but I didn't realize it. You didn't either, obviously."

He gripped her arm tightly. "It's wonderful, Phee. Congratulations!"

"You act as if I've never beaten you before. And you made me work for it this time, you know." They stepped into the hall and Mead helped her off with her coat.

"Yes, but you didn't beat me."

"Yes, I did." She smiled and handed a glove to Mead. She didn't know where the other one was.

"No, no, no, you won. But you weren't playing me. I mean, I moved the pieces, but someone else was your opponent."

She stared at her husband who was grinning like the baby had already come.

“Phee, you’ve been playing correspondence chess. With Valois.”

“Valois?”

“Yes. And he was White. A decided advantage. And you trounced him.” He seized her hand. “Come with me.” He went down the hall at a fast clip, pulling her behind him.

“Wait, George.”

“Oh, yes, I’m sorry.”

“I just have to go more slowly.”

He took her to his study and showed her the letters from Valois and his copies of the ones he had sent back. He had written to the Frenchman just a day after their wedding, asking him to play a correspondence game. Valois had agreed, remembering George from the chess tournament in London. Then the letters back and forth, detailing Valois’ moves in response to Phoebe’s moves.

“It’s extraordinary, Phoebe! A woman has beaten Valois. We’ll get the game written up and published.”

“Don’t be upset, George.” She reached up and stroked the skin behind his ear. “But I’d rather the game weren’t published.”

“Don’t you want everyone to know? A woman beat Valois. No one will believe it.”

“Yes, that’s right. No one will believe it. They’ll think you did it. There’s no proof I made the moves. All the letters written to Valois are written by you.”

“You and I know you did it.”

“Yes. You and I. That’s what’s important.”

“You don’t want the world to know you won, Phee?”

“The world isn’t ready for a woman to win that way. But I’m so lucky you are, sweetheart.” She went up on her toes

and he bent down and she kissed him, her large belly between them.

He rested his hand on her swelling. "The baby is kicking. I could feel it when you kissed me."

"Yes."

"The baby is happy its mother is so clever."

"The mother is so happy she's married to the baby's father."

They kissed again.

"George," she said against his lips as his hands moved up to her breasts.

"Mmm?"

"If the baby is a girl . . ."

He pulled away. "Yes?"

"Would you be willing, if I asked you, to teach her chess?"

"You would want me to?"

"Yes."

"You don't think it would ruin her? Her chances?"

She shrugged. "Her future husband wouldn't be a very good one if that put him off her. I see that now. And maybe, by the time she's grown, we can have prepared the world for a woman chess champion."

"You wouldn't want to teach her yourself?"

"I'll teach the advanced lessons." She grinned. "After all, I'm the one who beat Valois."

"Yes, you did." He kissed her once more.

"You'll teach all the babies chess. All six of them."

"Six? Let's just get through this one, please."

She tutted. "What about your calendar, George? I'm sure you've planned out when we are to have the six."

“I haven’t, Phee. I’ll take the babies you give me, when you give them to me, and I’ll be happy. As long as I have you, too.”

“You’ll always have me.”

“My queen.”

“My king.”

He growled. “Your pirate king.”

This provoked some giggling and quite a bit of kissing.

They were both late for dinner.

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I’m so delighted you’ve read *Bed Me, Baron*, the second book in *The Bed Me Books* series!

Hungry for more of Phoebe and George? Want to see how these two negotiate their marriage after their rocky start? Their love story has a **free second epilogue** which takes place six years into their marriage. The steamy second epilogue is novella-length and exclusively for my newsletter subscribers. You can receive the second epilogue and other free novellas and stories by signing up to receive my newsletter at [www.felicityniven.com/bedmebaron](http://www.felicityniven.com/bedmebaron). If you are already a newsletter subscriber, you still need to sign up at the above webpage to get the second epilogue.

If you enjoyed *Bed Me, Baron*, it would be lovely if you would give it a rating or a review. Reviews are crucial to the success of independent authors, like me.

Please page ahead for a sneak peek at the next book in the series, *Bed Me, Earl*, Phineas and Caroline’s love story. This third book starts during the same hunting trip George mentions in chapter 28 of *Bed Me, Baron*.

# AUTHOR'S NOTES

Arthur Montague, the Duke of Thornwick, and Lady Anne Cavendish both appear in future books in this series. All questions will be answered and all mysteries will be solved and all wrongs will be righted. But none of it influences George and Phoebe's life together as husband and wife, father and mother. They have found their happily-ever-after.

All chess game excerpts in this book are taken from François-André Philidor's *Analysis of the Game of Chess* (1749).



# BED ME, EARL: SNEAK PEEK LOOK AT BOOK THREE OF THE BED ME BOOKS

**She's a tall maiden with nothing to lose.** Caro knows she will never marry, never bear children. But she *will* seduce the man who first asked her to dance at her first and only ball a dozen years ago. She *will* be bedded by the Earl of Burchester once in her lifetime. And as fate would have it, the gorgeous man is just down the hall. Alone. Naked in a bed. The rake wouldn't refuse her request, would he? Surely, he takes all-comers.

**He's a shorter-than-average rogue who is about to lose his mind. And his heart.** Phineas Edge knows what he likes. And right now, he very much likes the darling girl who just showed up in his bed at his friend's country house. True, she doesn't say much, but what happens between the two of them has a magic that he would do *anything* to experience again. Even if it involves a ring and a church.

And falling in love.

[Bed Me, Earl](#) is the third book in the steamy Regency romance series *The Bed Me Books* from author Felicity Niven.

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## Chapter One: September 1819

Mmmmm. Phineas Edge, the Earl of Burchester, was content. More than content, he was wholly gratified. If he were a cat, he would purr.

He was warm, well-fed, slightly tipsy, and naked in a most comfortable bed.

He inhaled through his nose. The sheets were fresh-smelling and very soft. The mattress had the perfect amount of firmness. The pillows were abundant and—what was the word?—pillowy. He was going to have a very good night's sleep.

It was hard to believe he had been friends for so long with Edmund Haskett, Earl of Longridge and heir apparent to the Marquess of Sudbury, and yet Phineas had never been invited before to Sudbury Manor. Of course, it was really the residence of Edmund's father, the current marquess. But if Phineas had known how welcoming the country house was, he would have begged to come years ago.

Everything so far had been perfectly arranged. He was ensconced in this delightful room, complete with this marvel of a bed. The oil paintings that dotted the walls of the bedchamber were all seascapes, his favorite type of picture. He gave full marks to the perfectly banked fire, the soft carpet underfoot, the thick velvet drapes keeping out the very small amount of chill in the autumn night air.

And before he had retired, he had passed a most agreeable evening.

Edmund had a sister, but she had not been present at the table. They had been all men at dinner and, therefore, had felt free to indulge in the most masculine of conversations. The elderly and tall Marquess, the even taller Edmund, and three other friends of Phineas and Edmund's that had all come down from London: Lord Danforth, Lord Dagenham, and Sir Matthew Elliot. At dinner, the men had toasted the absent Jack MacNaughton, the Duke of Dunmore. He had absconded to Scotland last month and married a savage Scottish countess behind everyone's back.

Despite the sister's absence, the delicious and well-chosen menu at dinner had shown the sure-handed management of the mistress of the house. Good claret with dinner. Excellent port after dinner. Even better whisky in the library after the elderly

marquess had gone to bed, and the men had taken the opportunity to exchange some truly filthy stories the white-haired gentleman might have frowned on.

Well, William Dagenham and Edmund and Phineas had exchanged the filthy stories. Sir Matthew Elliot had pinched his lips together in that priggish way he had, making it clear he had no stories of his own to share and that he entirely disapproved of the recounted escapades. Good God, did the man have no sexual appetite whatsoever? He was an enigma, a virginal enigma.

And George Danforth had moped, just as he had for the last two months, still heartbroken over that sweet morsel, Lady Phoebe Finch. George was more despondent than ever. Phineas would really have to take the young man in hand and find a way to bolster his spirits. This evening, George hadn't even been able to summon an interest in discussing the Danforth Method, his own special concoction of seduction that he claimed had brought him all his previous mistresses.

One of whom Phineas had stolen away to add to his stable of many mistresses, widows all. The young Dowager Viscountess Starling. Ah, Horatia. A handful of a woman with a body made up of many tempting mouthfuls. A voluptuous vixen of vicissitude and violent tempers. It was so very pleasant to have shed her temporarily on this trip.

But no more thoughts about Lady Starling right now. Phineas wouldn't let her ruin his perfect evening.

Yes, it had been a perfect country evening, with all the benefits of a lady in the house but none of the burden of listening to her prattle or censoring one's speech.

And the promise of good shooting and sport tomorrow. What could be better?

Now, to slumber. His valet Dashwood had fussed as usual when Phineas had come up to bed. He had made the earl use the tooth powder, and then he had neatly tucked the dinner clothes in the clothes press, clucking at the whisky spill on the waistcoat.

Phineas liked to sleep naked but the rather prudish young Dashwood disapproved, so Phineas had kept his shirt on until Dashwood had left the room. Then he had stripped it off, lowered the wick on the lamp on the bedside table until it went out, and climbed into the bed.

This heavenly bed. Mmmmmm. Lovely. He was adrift in a sea of comfort.

He had almost floated away when he heard a door open.

“Who’s there?”

There was no answer. He didn’t like that. His peace was shattered.

He sat up and lit the lamp next to the bed, fumbling with the tinderbox and the match.

“Dashwood? Blast, say something.”

A tall, white figure came toward him. He saw long, dark hair. A woman in a shift came right next to the bed and stood in the pool of light from the lamp he had lit.

He looked up into a pair of green eyes and instantly relaxed.

“Why, hello.” He grinned. “I think you’ve wandered into the wrong room, miss.”

She looked down at him. She did not smile back. She crossed her arms in front of her. Her hands grasped the sides of her shift, and it went up and over her head and fell to the floor. She stood in front of him, naked.

He drank in a long expanse of perfect skin and a sable thatch of maidenhair right at his eye level. His cock, perhaps a little sluggish from the whisky, stirred to life at the sight of that dark triangle and the promise it hid, and he felt the familiar throb.

He realized now what had been missing from his perfect country evening. Country matters. Or a vigorous bout of rutting with a country wench.

True, if he had his preference, he liked a more generously proportioned woman. Softer, rounder. But coupling could still be satisfactory even if the girl was like this one here by the bed, on the lean side. And the tall side.

He wasn't too fussy. He liked all sorts of women. And more often than not, they liked him.

He reached out and slid his hand over one of her buttocks. So smooth and warm. The girl shivered.

“Are you for me, miss?”

She nodded. He shifted over and patted the bed.

“You're a lovely one, now, aren't you? Get into the bed and tell me your name.”

She turned and slipped under the counterpane, folding up her long legs, taking up the space on the mattress he had just occupied.

“That's better, isn't it?” Phineas got up on his elbow and pulled on the girl's waist so that she faced him. First things first. He cupped one of her breasts. Smallish. A plum, not an apple. Oh, but a sensitive little plum with a plum-colored areola and a little bit of a nipple aroused and firm and puckering already under his hand. She shuddered.

“And your name, sweet one?”

“Ca—” She gulped. “Caro.”

He saw a flash of a pink tongue as she spoke, and his skin prickled. Oh, he wanted that tongue.

“Caro,” he crooned and took a fistful of her dark hair and brought it to his face. “What beautiful hair you have, Caro. I didn't know our host would be providing us with this kind of bed warming, but I should have known Edmund might do something like this for me.”

The girl's body went stiff and she frowned, bringing her dark brows together.

Oh, no. He was a fool. This was no village whore hired by Edmund for Phineas' pleasure. The breast was too susceptible

to his touch. The girl wore no rouge, no perfume. And there was no coyness here. Perhaps a little nervousness instead?

“Oh, I’m sorry, did I get the wrong end of the stick, you lovely girl? Of course, I did. I always do. Pay me no mind. I’ve always been just this side of imbecilic. Do you work in the house, Caro?”

She hesitated, then nodded.

He released her hair and put his hand on her jaw. A strong, square jaw. “You live in the house then?”

She nodded again. He ran his thumb over her lips. Not exactly plump but generous enough. Dark to match her areolae. A wide mouth to match her jaw.

“Do you have a sweetheart or a husband? Is anyone going to burst into this bedchamber to thrash me?”

She shook her head. He ran his thumb over her lips again and chuckled softly.

“Did you fancy a night with a lord, Caro?”

She took both her hands and placed them flat on his chest, lacing her fingers into his hair there.

“With . . . you,” she whispered.

Again, he saw her tongue. Oh. Oh. Oh.

“With me, in particular?” He grinned. “I am very susceptible to a bit of flattery, darling.”

Indeed, he was becoming more engorged by the second. And, yes, part of it was her compliment to him, the flash of that pink tongue, her warm body next to his. But part of it was how little she had spoken so far. He did detest a chatterbox. Maybe because he was so voluble himself.

He should reward her terseness. It was such an admirable quality in a woman.

He tipped her chin up with one finger and leaned down and kissed her. A soft kiss, just a brush of his lips. Followed by a more demanding kiss, pressing his mouth to hers more firmly.

She did nothing. She did not kiss him back. Her mouth was still, immobile. He had been told in the past that his kisses were devastating. Had he lost his knack?

No, no. She was straining up toward him, and he met her halfway, and she was kissing him.

Mmmmm. How very sweet. Such sweet, little kisses. He ran his tongue along the seam of her lips. She stopped kissing him, but kept her mouth on his. So he did it again. She pulled her head back and looked at him.

“Open up for Phin, there’s a good little darling.”

She nodded and kissed him again and this time, she parted her lips, and his tongue pushed its way into her delicious mouth and he lapped at that pink tongue of hers he craved. While he filled her mouth, she put her hands up to his head and sank her fingers into his hair.

Good, that was good. He wanted her to touch him.

When he withdrew his tongue, the girl followed it with her own. Better and better.

She did everything with her tongue inside his mouth that he had just done to her. She ran it over his lips and his teeth, alternating a light stroking with a firm pressure. And then she grew quite fervent and did things he had not, sucking and biting on his tongue and lips as if she couldn’t get enough of him.

His hand found her buttock and squeezed.

She moaned softly and curved herself backward, her fulcrum at her navel, pressing her lower abdomen and pelvis against his groin and his cock. The arching of her back tore her mouth from his.

And she pulled on his hair.

Oh, the pulling of his hair. There was something about that fierce tug that made him feel crazed. For her. He chased her with his lips, his chest, his cock, and she fell back flat onto the mattress.

As he plunged into her soft, hot mouth again, he seized one of her breasts and kneaded it, pulling on the small nipple.

The girl's entire upper body arched again and her spine came up off the mattress.

"You like that, darling?"

She gazed at him with her green eyes and nodded.

"Wait until you feel my mouth." He ducked his head and put his lips on her other breast, and she grunted as he suckled and swirled his tongue around her sweet, dark peak.

And now he was on top of her, his hard cock nested between her lovely, long thighs. He put all his weight on her and delighted in feeling her still trying to buck under him as he lavished her erect nipples with attention. Her hands were in his hair, pulling when he bit a nipple, rubbing and stroking when he made his tongue soft and took almost her entire breast into his mouth. Oh, she was marvelous, this tall, lean woman with the warm, smooth skin that tasted of . . . what? He didn't know. But the taste and scent of her skin was all her. And it was ambrosial.

Yes, she had been slow to kiss him back, almost as if she didn't know how. But once she had started, she had been so concentrated, putting everything into her kisses. And she was so responsive. He couldn't remember a woman this eager for his touch. Ever. And now he himself was very eager indeed. For her and what lay under her maidenhair.

He took his mouth from her breast and raised his body up and used his hand to place his cock against her quim. He worried it into her folds, spreading her. Just a bit. Yes, that got a reaction. She grabbed his shoulders and there was a look in her eyes. A lost look. He brushed the head over the top of her warm, slick cleft again and she pushed her pelvis up to him, wanting, needing. He shifted his weight off to the side and put a hand on her sex.

"Oh, Caro, my little darling, you are so wet."

Indeed, her cleft was dripping. How could she be so ready for him, so soon? She must have oiled herself with something



before coming to him. He sucked on his own fingers. No, no, she tasted completely of woman. Of her. She really was that aroused, and she had only been in bed with him for a minute or two.

He returned his hand to her mound and his fingers slid over her silky folds and found the already swollen nubbin he wanted.

“Now, what is this, darling? A sweet little tidbit that needs some attention from my fingers, I think.”

She was pushing up against his hand and groaning. Full-throated groans. Much too loud for an assignation in a country house, no matter how thick the walls of the manor.

Phineas leaned into her even more and put his other hand on her mouth as he continued to rub her. “You can’t be that loud, darling. You understand?”

She nodded. He took his hand away from her mouth.

“Now, I don’t want you to worry, Caro. I won’t be putting any baby in you tonight.”

He had no French letter so he would not spend inside of her. He would explore her with his hand and then get on top of her and pleasure himself a bit inside her before withdrawing and making her spend with his finger or his tongue. And then he would see how much she knew about using her mouth on his member. He suspected very little, but it would be fun to teach her. If her treatment of his cock was anything like her kissing, he was in for a thrilling experience.

And then they might do something else if he could stay awake. He had become a once-a-night man in recent years, sadly, but this girl was very, very exciting to him right now.

He placed a finger in her opening, thinking he might pump his finger in and out a few times, to give her a taste of the much larger cock to come. But his finger encountered resistance. Her entrance was very small. Very small. Very tight.

Damn it.

He took his finger out.

He shifted off her body entirely and lay down on his side on the mattress next to her. She turned her head to look at him, her small breasts heaving, her mouth open, panting.

“Caro, is this your first time being bedded by a man?”

A hesitation. She nodded.

No, no. He rolled onto his back and without thinking, began stroking his member.

“Darling, how old are you?”

“Tu-twenty-nnnn—”

“Twenty?” He turned his head to look at her. A hesitation. She nodded.

“Well, I suppose twenty is old enough to know your own mind. But the first time you have a man can hurt a great deal. Wouldn’t you rather it be with a sweetheart of your own?”

She got up on her elbow and shook her head, looking at the movement of his own hand on his cock.

“Are you sure, darling? We could just make each other spend.” Her eyes followed his hand, up and down, up and down. “You could do this for me, you lovely girl, and I could do it for you.”

She licked her lips and tore her eyes away from his cock and looked at his face. “No.” Her beautiful pink tongue flashed at the front of her mouth, pushing against her teeth.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

Fuck. He had only ever been with one other virgin, and he swore he would never, ever do it again. What a misery that had been.

Her eyes moved back to his own fondling, and she reached out and seized his cock.

“Ahh,” he exhaled and took his hand away, surrendering his place to her. Good. She had changed her mind. He put his

hands behind his head.

“Hold it tighter.”

She sat up now and adjusted her grip. She was concentrating on what she was doing, brows knit. What a lovely, long, lean torso she had. And that hair. Just an abundance of it. Mmmmmm. And her unschooled touch was so much more arousing than his own hand.

But she would need *some* schooling.

“What you’re doing is fine, but you can do it faster,” his breath hitched, “darling. And a bit, just a bit, of a tighter hold.”

His hands came from behind his head and one clutched her hip and the other scrabbled for purchase on the mattress. His eyes closed.

“That’s fine, that is, aren’t you lovely, what you’re doing is lovely, and feels so lovely . . .”

She let go of his cock. He groaned and opened his eyes and was shocked to see her swinging one of her long legs over him. Her flower hovered over his member.

“Caro . . .”

She took his cock in her hand again and put the head of it on her nubbin. She rubbed herself with it, just as he had done. He observed her eyes roll back into her head and a spasm of pleasure coursing through her body. Then she dragged his shaft down her wet cleft to her opening and held it there and started lowering herself on to it.

Her face held a grimace of pain as she attempted to spear herself on him. He had never heard of female virginity being lost this way, with the maiden on top of the man. He supposed it was possible, but was he going to let it happen this way? Let her use him this way? Let her dictate how and when his cock was to go inside her?

No, not Phineas Edge.

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The rest of Phineas and Caro's love story is in *[Bed Me, Earl](#)*, the third book in *The Bed Me Books* series from author Felicity Niven. Please go to the *[Bed Me, Earl Amazon page](#)* to get the book.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Felicity Niven is a hopeful romantic. Writing Regency romance is her third career after two degrees from Harvard. And you know what they say about third things? Yep, it's a charm. She splits her time between the temperate South in the winter and the cool Great Lakes in the summer and thinks there can be no greater comforts than a pot of soup on the stove, a set of clean sheets on the bed, and a Jimmy Stewart film on a screen in the living room. She is the author of *The Bed Me Books* series (*Bed Me, Duke* and *Bed Me, Baron*, etc.) and *The Lovelocks of London* series: *When Ardor Blooms* (prequel novella), *Convergence of Desire*, *Clandestine Passion*, and *A Perilous Flirtation*.

Subscribers to her newsletter receive free second epilogues, prequel novellas, and holiday stories. Go to [www.felicityniven.com/bedmebaron](http://www.felicityniven.com/bedmebaron) and sign-up for her newsletter to get the free, steamy, novella-length second epilogue to *Bed Me, Baron*. Finally, in addition to following her on social media, consider joining her historical romance book club on Facebook, [The Ungovernables: Historical Romance Readers](#)—she and fellow hist-rom author Alexandra Vasti host a monthly discussion of canonical historical romance novels, along with newer books.

