

BED ME, EARL



THE BED ME BOOKS
BOOK THREE

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*
SERIES

Niven is a masterful storyteller, deftly weaving beautifully drawn characters with taut, witty prose. A sensational new voice in historical romance.

— ERIN LANGSTON, AUTHOR OF *FOREVER YOUR ROGUE*, *THE NEW YORK TIMES* EDITORS' CHOICE

BED ME, EARL

BOOK THREE OF THE BED ME BOOKS

A rake falls for a beautiful recluse, but being bad is all he's good for.

A tall maiden with nothing to lose. Caro knows she will never marry, never bear children. But she *will* seduce the first man who asked her to dance 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 hallway. Alone. Naked in a bed. He wouldn't refuse her request, would he? Surely, his reputation means he takes all-comers.

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.

Complete content warnings available at author's website: www.felicityniven.com.

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THE BED ME BOOKS
BOOK THREE

FELICITY NIVEN

BLETHERSKITE BOOKS

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The characters and the events in this story are fictitious.

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to silent women everywhere
&
imperfect heroes

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PART ONE

ONE

SEPTEMBER, 1819.

M mmmm. 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 dotting 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 September night air.

And before he had retired, he had passed a most agreeable evening. Edmund had a sister, but she was indisposed. It had

been all men at the table and, therefore, they had felt free to indulge in the most masculine of conversations. The elderly and tall marquess, the even taller Edmund, and three other friends who had all come down from London with Phineas and Edmund: 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 appetizing 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 old marquess had gone to bed, when the men had taken the opportunity to exchange some truly filthy stories the white-haired gentleman might have frowned upon.

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 he entirely disapproved of the recounted escapades. Good God, did the man have no sexual appetite whatsoever? He was an enigma. A virginal, blond 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 find a way to bolster the young man's 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 ensnared all his previous mistresses.

One of whom Phineas had stolen away from George to add to his own harem of playthings. 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 had fussed as usual when Phineas had come up to bed. Dashwood had made the earl use the tooth powder and then he had neatly tucked the dinner clothes into the clothes press, clucking at the whisky spill on the waistcoat.

Phineas slept 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. Snug and 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. Phineas 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 on 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 pillow.

“You're a lovely one, now, aren't you? Get into this warm 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 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 brought a fistful of her dark hair to his face. “What beautiful hair you have, Caro. I didn’t know our host would be providing us with this kind of bedwarming, but I should have known Edmund might do something like this for me.”

The girl’s body went stiff and there was the hint of a frown as she brought her dark brows together.

Oh, no. He was a fool. This was no village whore hired by Edmund for Phineas’ pleasure. The breast had been too susceptible to his touch. The girl wore no rouge, no perfume. And there was no coyness here. Perhaps a very well-disguised bit of 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 before nodding.

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 areolas. 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 his kisses were devastating. Had he lost his knack?

No, no, he hadn't. 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 deliciousness and he lapped at that pink tongue of hers that 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 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 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 member 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 of his cock 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 this 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 over 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 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, 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 intent on what she was doing, brows knit. What a lovely, long, lean torso she had. And that hair. Just an abundance of it. Mmmmmmm. 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 onto 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.

He growled and sat up and with both hands seated on her hips, he lifted her off him and threw her down on the mattress and twisted himself so he was on top of her, pinning her down.

“Are you determined then, darling? To have my cock inside you?”

She nodded, not in the least perturbed or intimidated by the change in their positions. Such a bold girl. Fearless and unflinching.

“Sweetness, let Phin make you spend first.”

He had some idea she might relax after climax, allowing less pain with penetration. And even if that weren't true, this lovely girl might be so delighted with her own pleasure she would forget about having him deflower her and would take him in her mouth instead. He would much prefer that to the fuss and the mess of doing away with her virginity.

But if she continued to insist he penetrate her—well, in truth, he needed to calm himself down a bit so he wouldn't spend immediately once inside her.

He had not worried about such a thing in years.

He lay down, partially on her, partially on the bed, and put an elbow around the back of her neck and pressed his forehead to hers so she was breathing directly into his mouth and he let his other hand go again to her quim.

And then he did what he always did when he needed to calm himself, to reassert himself.

He babbled.

“Oh, darling, you’re so wet for Phin, aren’t you? Such a sweet, little, warm, wet place you have here, just right for my hand and my cock. All nice and ready for me, aren’t you, darling?”

He brushed her nubbin and her whole body came off the mattress and into him, her hands grabbing at his back and shoulders.

“That’s right, darling, sweet Caro, let Phin make you feel good before I take you and make you all mine,” he brushed her nubbin over and over again, “that’s a good girl, you’re already so close, so soon, and I want you to spend for me, sweet one —”

She was arching her body up into him and shaking.

“Yes, that’s right, little darling—” He stilled his hand when he felt a little rush of hot fluid spurt from her in rhythm with the clenching of her muscles.

Damn. If he hadn’t felt the need to talk, he could have had his tongue buried in her sex right now, had his face at the center of all this ecstasy. He could have captured that sweetness in his mouth.

She was still convulsing into him. This was a remarkably long climax. But he urged her on.

“It feels so good, doesn’t it, Caro, that’s right, darling, keep going, aren’t you lovely, don’t you want to keep going, sweet girl—”

Although he could swear she was still coming, one of her hands found his member and pulled on it. His speech was arrested only momentarily.

“Oh, you want that, Caro? You want my cock? You finish spending for Phin now and he’ll give it to you, darling, but not until you’re all done—“

His mind wandered away to what it would have felt like to have been inside her during her extended climax. Unquestionably, he would have lost control and released as she contracted around his shaft.

“Such a lovely, good girl you are. Have you finished now?”

One final spasm of her body and her hand, which had blindly grabbed his cock, was now moving over it with purpose. Her green eyes, which just moments before had been glazed over by her pleasure, had become determined and her brows came together rather fiercely.

There was something familiar about those eyes.

But he was so hard, so throbbing, it didn't bear thinking about.

And he wanted her now. Not just her hand or her mouth. He wanted to be inside her, virgin or no. He had to have her. He had to bury his cock in that hot, wet cunt that had responded to his touch in such a drawn-out frenzy of passion.

“Oh, now, that's enough, darling, although it's absolutely lovely.” He took her hand off his shaft. “But you are far too good at arousing Phin.” He moved her legs farther apart. The muscles in her thighs were slack. She would definitely be more relaxed now. He knelt and grasped his member.

“I'm going to take you now, Caro. There, that's the head of my cock sitting right now at your entrance and I'm going to push in just a little—“

In truth, he could sense no appreciable change in the size of her opening. But at least he had made her feel good before he started hurting her.

“Oh, yes, you're very small here. Try not to tense against me, brave Caro.” He could not read her eyes, her face. “You must tell me if you want me to stop, darling, because although it would be difficult, it would not be impossible, never impossible, for Phin to stop once he starts, never let a fellow ever tell you otherwise.” He pushed in a little farther. “And now, my whole head is inside you.”

Her hands came up and curled around his hips and, to his delight, she pulled him toward her.

“You want more, is that right? Well, there's plenty more of that where it came from.”

At least six inches more, you lucky girl.

A whimper escaped from him as he eased forward. He licked his lips and spoke with a voice hoarse from animal need and anticipation. “Phin’s going to use a little more force now, darling.”

Her green eyes stared up at him, inscrutable, but her fingers clenched into his buttocks. He pushed in a bit farther.

Heaven. Tight, sweet, warm, wet, female heaven.

And then he lost control and sank into her, all the way into her, pushing past any resistance that remained. He closed his eyes with the sheer pleasure of it. As he pulled out partially in order to thrust into her again, she raised her pelvis up with his, her quim chasing his cock. He opened his eyes.

“Oh, darling, no, can you just stay still? That’s right.” He couldn’t remember ever asking a woman to stay still before. “I’ll go slowly at first, but I want to stroke myself inside you, you understand?”

She nodded, her brows knit together.

“So sweet you are, so perfect, you’re doing so well. I have to move now, darling, but you don’t have to worry, Phin will be careful.”

You bloody better be careful. You’ll be lucky to be able to stay inside of her for a dozen strokes.

“I’ll be careful with you, darling, you lovely little thing, Caro, so good.”

Oh. Ungh. So. Ungh. Fucking. Ungh. Perfect.

He managed ten or so complete thrusts before he found himself pulling away from her delicious heat, and with one stroke of his hand, his blood-streaked cock was pulsing between her legs, barely out of her before his seed was spilling down into the linen.

And like her, the waves of pleasure rode over his body for a long time, much longer than he could ever remember a climax lasting. Not the minute or so her release had taken, but a long time, perhaps fifteen or twenty seconds, and at the end,

he felt himself milked dry in a way he had not felt in years. And through it all, her hands stayed on his buttocks and he felt her eyes on him.

He drew in several deep breaths and gazed into that pair of emeralds edged with black lashes. So familiar, somehow, and yet unfathomable. Her dark brows were relaxed, no longer fierce as they had been before when he had been inside her.

“How are you, Caro? Are you all right? There’s some blood here, see, but not a great deal. You shouldn’t bleed next time and it won’t hurt as much, if at all, darling. And you don’t have to worry, I spilled outside you.”

He leaned down and kissed her between her eyebrows and then collapsed onto his stomach off to the side of her.

“Ooof. That was lovely. You are just lovely.” He put a hand over her dark maidenhair and lightly cupped her mound. “You are just lovely here.”

He yawned before he could stop himself. “Some man is going to be very lucky, darling, to get to be surrounded by that loveliness every night for the rest of his life, but don’t tell him Phin said so.”

His eyelids were so heavy. Oblivion was nigh.

“Fellows don’t like hearing that, we all like thinking we’re the only one . . .”

TWO

You are *the only one. Now and forever.* She watched his eyes close and his face soften on the pillow next to her, his hand still on her sex, holding it possessively.

A sharp pain surged in her chest.

What nonsense was this? She should feel triumphant. She had done what she had set out to do. She had been deflowered. By him. That mystery was no more.

She chewed on her lip. He had said the next time would hurt less. It was too bad there would be no next time for her. She would have liked to have coupled with him again, to have had more time with him inside her. To have kissed more. To have sucked on *his* nipples. To have rubbed her face in his chest hair, coated her face in his smell.

But she had gotten to do so much, to experience so much. Not just the actual coupling, but the kissing and his attention to her breasts and his touching of her pearl as he spoke to her.

Oh, that. That had been revelatory. His body against hers, his beautiful words flowing over her. He had not done anything with his finger that differed from what she did to herself, but how his words had induced such ecstasy in her. In truth, even now she thought she could spend without touch, just recalling what he had said to her.

She shuddered and felt a throb between her legs where his hand lay, motionless.

And she had handled and stroked his cock herself, and he had told her what she had done was lovely.

And he had said *she* was lovely, too.

The earl breathed quietly, evenly. She sat up and allowed herself to look at the back of his head. There was so much more silver there than twelve years ago. Her gaze swept down over the smooth muscles of his back, his beautifully round buttocks—were those her handprints there?—and the backs of his muscled legs with their sparse, wiry brown hair.

He hadn't moved or twitched when she sat up so she slid herself out from under his hand. She felt a little sore, but not much. There was some stickiness between her legs. She needed to get back to her room and get cleaned up.

She turned down the lamp at the bedside, scooped up her nightdress from the floor, and crossed the room on tiptoes. She opened the communicating door to the other bedchamber, the one she had deliberately kept unoccupied by other guests so she could use it to access his room. In the darkness, her hand found the dressing gown she had left on a chair here. She put on the dressing gown and crept from the room and the guest wing and crossed the gallery.

Only when she was safely back in her own bedchamber and taking off her dressing gown so she could clean between her legs did she realize she had picked up the earl's shirt and left her own nightdress on the floor of his bedchamber.

She held the shirt to her face. It was full of his scent and induced an ache in her chest and between her legs.

This is the smell of the only man I've ever wanted, the only one I'll ever have.

A familiar coldness brushed against her thigh. She reached down to pet the warm velvet head attached to that wet nose. Lavinia had been very good, staying quiet despite being alone in the room at night, something she wasn't used to. But now Lavinia was following her bloodhound's instinct, interested in the odor of an unfamiliar person on her mistress' body, wanting to smell the shirt, too.

She stroked her dog's ears.

Tonight, I was told I was a good girl, too, La.

She folded the shirt and tucked it under one of her bed pillows. The morning would be the time to find a safe way to get rid of it.

She cleaned herself and put on a cotton nightdress. She got into her cold bed, lay on her side, and hugged her knees to her chest. She could hear the sounds of Lavinia settling herself on the carpet next to the bed. All was as it ordinarily was.

But she didn't want to go back to ordinary just yet.

Despite knowing what she was doing was foolishness, she took the shirt out from under her pillow and held it to her face and inhaled.

Yes, yes, yes. Him. That smell of him. Oh.

She had done it.

She had coupled with him. With Phineas Edge. She had bedded the earl. Or he had bedded her.

It was a pity she didn't still keep a diary because she would have had a great deal to record in it. About what he had said to her. And how his lips and skin and hair and cock had felt. How he had touched her. But a diary's purpose was to help one remember, and she didn't need help remembering. This night would be etched into her memory forever.

Of course, the coupling would have held no meaning for Phineas. To him, she was one of many. Merely an unexpected diversion. A wench, forgotten as soon as he closed his eyes.

She hadn't intended to deceive him but it had worked out so well, hadn't it? He might have had some small scruple against fornicating with his friend's sister. As it was, he hadn't wanted her virginity even thinking she was a serving girl. She had had to make the seriousness of her intent perfectly clear to him.

And now she must make sure the earl never discovered the wanton woman he had bedded tonight was Lady Caroline Haskett.

She would continue to stay in her bedchamber while he was here in Sudbury. Last night, she had begged off greeting

the guests and dining with them, pleading a headache to her father. Tomorrow morning, Caroline would have the marquess come to her bedchamber so he could see she was well, and she would tell him she was too shy to come out of her room with her brother's friends here.

Her father wouldn't like her asking for something, but he wouldn't force her to join the guests. He might even be glad she wouldn't embarrass him in front of his son's friends. She would stay safe here in her own bedchamber until Phineas and her brother and the other guests had done their shooting and returned to town.

She would be sorry to have missed seeing and talking to her brother, but it couldn't be helped. She would write a letter to Edmund once he was back in London to convince him to come to the manor at Christmastide. He hadn't had a Christmas in Sudbury since Mother had died. And surely he would come alone then.

Yes, Phineas Edge would never know. There was no reason he would ever see her again, there was no need for their paths ever to cross. If he hadn't recognized her tonight, he would never recall their first meeting.

It had been just a few minutes, after all. Over a dozen years ago.

Phineas had been the first man to ask her to dance at her first and only ball of her first and only Season. Every other man she had ever met—and she admitted there had been very few—had failed to meet the very exacting physical standard he had created in her mind that night.

His thick brown hair with a premature sprinkling of silver. Just at the temples back then. Tonight, by lamplight, she had seen his hair was now almost all silver and that was even more attractive to her. And his chest hair had flecks of silver in it too. Of course, she hadn't known about his chest hair twelve years ago. But now that she had felt that virile pelt, pressed her own hands and breasts to it, it was hard to put out of her mind.

At Lady Huxley's ball, she had had only the merest whiff of his scent during their dance. She had instead been taken by

his roguish hazel eyes that met hers as his words flowed over her. And the impeccably tied cravat, the tailored jacket hugging his broad shoulders and chest, the satin breeches clinging to his muscular thighs. A perfectly formed man, to her mind.

And, oh. Oh. Oh. His beautiful mouth with its lush, full lips. Lips that moved constantly, bathing her in words. Lips that were perfect for the kissing she had wanted even when she was seventeen.

Yes, he was not tall. Not to say he was short. He was probably just right for most women. But for her . . . then, when she was seventeen, they had been almost the same height. Now, she must be much taller than Phineas since she had grown several more inches later that year.

He had danced with her perfectly that night. It was not that his dancing itself was perfect. It was how he had treated her. He had complimented her dress, her hair. He had asked questions but had not waited for answers, instead filling every moment they had danced together with a constant flow of softly murmured comments, leaving no space where she might have felt herself obliged to try and stammer something out. Even at the end of the dance, when she would have certainly been expected to curtsy and say, “Thank you, Lord Burchester,”—and how she had been dreading that bitch of a *bee* in *Bur*, knowing she would be crucified by the *ess* in *chester*—he had rescued her.

“Please do not even think of thanking me for what has been truly my honor and my pleasure, to dance your first dance with you at your first ball, when you are the embodiment of grace and charm and so beguiling, and now let me take your arm, and please smile so everyone thinks I have said something amusing so I can maintain my reputation as a wit and I will bring you to a chair and fetch you a glass of lemonade.”

She had tried her best to smile as he had requested. She would have done anything to please him at that moment. She had been so full of relief at how well her first dance had gone.

But her smile must have appeared unnatural since she rarely smiled.

Rarely smiled? Ha. Never. Except that one time. That one night. For him, because he had asked it of her.

She had made her mouth into a smile-like shape for him and allowed him to take her to a chair, although she would have preferred to stay standing. He had fetched her the lemonade and he had bowed and then he had . . . disappeared. To dance with other young ladies. And, now she knew, likely to bed one of much lower rank and much greater experience later that night or the next day.

Her mother had died two days afterwards, and Caroline had never had another ball, another Season, and she had never seen Phineas again. Until tonight.

He was thirty-five years old now. He was her brother's age, six years older than she, and still not married. From what her brother had told her, Phineas and Edmund were part of a band of London rakes who wandered from theater to club to brothel to gaming hell, occasionally making appearances at balls, but not to seek wives seriously, only to cause fluttering in the hearts of the mamas of the *ton* who wanted titled husbands for their daughters.

Phineas Edge was a dedicated philanderer and would never settle on just one woman. That—in addition to his physical perfection—made him the ideal man for what she had wanted from him tonight.

In retrospect, she knew her brother must have imposed on his friend to dance with her at that long-ago ball. She could imagine Edmund growling over cards the night before, “Here, Burchester, you’re just tall enough. You must dance with my flagpole of a sister.”

She had had that one dance with Phineas and three more dances at the same ball. But none of the other young gentlemen who had partnered her could touch Phineas Edge's charm and good looks. One of them had openly laughed at the few words she had said and not in a kind way.

There had been no future husband at that ball.

And then there had been no more balls, no more Seasons, no more London. Here in Sudbury, she never had occasion to meet any gentlemen suitable for her station, only servants and tenants and tradespeople. She had dreamed of a man, a husband, but he had never manifested. Now she knew he didn't exist.

Was it any wonder then that when she had touched herself in her own bed over the last dozen years, she had thought of the only attractive man who had ever paid her any attention? A gorgeous man who had wrapped her in a warm blanket of kind words and seemingly-sincere compliments.

She had imagined Phineas' arms holding her. She had writhed in ecstasy at the thought of those irresistible lips skimming over her collarbone, her neck, her breasts. And after her lonely spasms had left her body, she had cursed, knowing her fancies would always stay just that. Fancies.

She was soon to be thirty. She was on the shelf. She would never wed, she would never know the delights of a marriage bed, she would never have children.

She was done.

Well, she had been done at seventeen, she just hadn't known it yet.

But tonight, she had taken something for herself. And now she would not live the rest of her life unkissed and untouched. And unpraised.

For one night, she had been a *sweet, lovely darling* and she would have the memory of those beautiful words in her head, forever.

That would be enough.

That would have to be enough.

THREE

Phineas' morning cockstand pushed into the mattress and he rocked a bit, enjoying the friction on his member. So lovely.

Lovely. The raven-haired Caro. He opened his eyes, hoping against hope, but the bed was empty. Except for him and his hard cock.

Well, he would be a fool to expect anything else. Caro likely had early morning duties, whether that be laying fires, slicing rashers, gathering eggs, emptying chamber pots. And she couldn't risk being discovered in his bed since she was not the strumpet he had first assumed she was. She must keep her position in the house. Phineas didn't think the old marquess, a hard-edged curmudgeon, would take too kindly to a chambermaid, or scullery maid, or whatever Caro was, permitting a guest so many liberties.

He turned from his stomach onto his back. It had been stupid of him to think she was some local courtesan whom Edmund had brought into the house for Phineas' pleasure. The truth—that she was a serving girl who had sought him out—had been so much better. Her passion, her wetness, her kisses. Mmmmmmm.

And how wonderful for his vanity that she had chosen *him*. A man needed a fillip like that sometimes. It was tiring, always being the hunter.

Although if he were truthful with himself, he rarely had to do much stalking in pursuit of his pleasures. He found it easy

to keep several mistresses at once, and he seemed to hold a special attraction for widows. True, most of them didn't last long with him. He never remembered ending things with any of them, but one would wander out of his life and in a few weeks or months, he would hear she was in the bed of some other man. Some more serious man. Some more substantial man. One who often became her second husband.

But there were always more delightful and amusing widows to replace those he lost. His friends carped to him that women seemed to fall into his lap.

“You're not a hunter, you're a woman trap, and that damn Phineas gab is the bait,” William Dagenham had said only last night after Phineas had told a story about one of his mistresses who had insisted on including her buxom stepsister in their romps.

But still, how absolutely charming to be the prey instead for a change. To have been singled out by a beauty like Caro and to have the honor of being her first lover. A distinction. And distinctively arousing despite her inexperience.

Unfortunately, he would have to talk to his valet about last night. Dashwood would need to make sure the blood on the sheets was taken care of in some way that did not get Caro into trouble.

Because Phineas wanted no harm to come to his darling. He wanted her happy. And happy with him. He would prowl around today and catch the tall girl somewhere in the house and persuade her to repeat her visit to him tonight. He wanted to get a good look at her quim, bury his face between her legs, lick her sensitive little nubbin. She had spent for so long and with such vigor under his finger. If he got a chance to use his mouth on her . . . oh. He wanted to be the one to give her that rapture.

Phineas chuckled and sat up, swung his legs off the bed, and stood. His feet nudged something soft and white. Thinking it was his own shirt, he leaned over and picked it up.

It was her shift. He held it to his face. Yes, her scent clung to the material. An intoxicating and indefinable scent that was

also the taste of her skin. And the shift was so soft. So much softer than linen. Or cotton. It slid like silk over his nose and his lips and the stubble on his jaw.

Like silk.

He looked at it now. It *was* silk. And the intricate lace at the neck and the hem had not been made by some country granny's clever needles.

What was a serving girl doing with a silk nightdress trimmed with lace made on bobbins in Brussels?

Phineas suddenly had a bad feeling.

Dressed and shaved by the fastidious Dashwood, Phineas crossed the gallery, heading toward the stairs that would take him down to breakfast.

His thumb played with the bit of linen his valet had insisted on tying around his left fourth finger.

Dashwood had sniffed. "I will say you cut yourself, my lord. The laundress will know it's a lie given the other material on the sheet, but that excuse will suffice for the rest of the staff. I will make sure the wench doesn't get into trouble, don't worry."

And indeed, Phineas didn't worry about discovery once reassured by Dashwood. He trusted Dashwood. Dashwood could handle a gaggle of country servants and hush any gossip. But Phineas couldn't ignore the gnawing concern he had felt ever since he had rubbed the silk nightdress against his face.

Was Caro really a serving girl? Perhaps she was a governess? But were there children at Sudbury Manor who needed a governess? He had seen none, heard of none. But what manner of woman both worked in a house and owned a silk nightdress?

Perhaps for his seduction, Caro had stolen the nightdress?

He grinned. How gratifying if it were true. This darling girl choosing him and taking so many risks just to be with him

Good God.

He came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the gallery.

Holy fuck.

His heart and lungs sank into his stomach and stayed there. His grin vanished and his mouth hung open.

Rising above him, enshrined in oil paint and larger-than-life was the green-eyed, raven-haired, square-jawed temptress whose flower he had plucked last night.

She was dressed in some horrible, frilled confection of a dress. Her gorgeous hair was largely obscured, swept up into a curl-infested tower that surely added another six inches to her height.

But it was her. Unmistakably.

Her green eyes were as unreadable as they had been when he had stimulated her slick nubbin, when he had penetrated her. Her brows were relaxed, just as they had been after he had finished outside her. But in the painting, her lips—those lovely lips he had ravished with his own—were curved in a smile.

He smarted. She hadn't smiled once in his bed last night. Why was that? She would smile for some portrait painter but not for the Earl of Burchester?

She was the absent sister, of course. The one who hadn't been at dinner. The sister whom he knew he should remember from some time ago. Some ball. But surely she had been his height then? Not the Amazonian princess she was now.

What would happen next? Would he go down to breakfast and be met with an ultimatum to marry from her brother, her father? Would he be challenged to a duel by his friend? Were these his choices? Marriage or duel?

Marriage. Without question, marriage. Definitely.

He had not thought to marry so soon, but he knew he would eventually. He had to make an heir. And to marry the lovely sister of his best friend?

It was a totally suitable match.

In a way, how fortuitous the decision had been taken away from him. Otherwise, he might let decades slip by before taking a wife.

He turned from her portrait and started down the stairs.

And he had been sincere last night when he had said her future husband would be a lucky man. And now that future husband would be him. He felt himself harden in his buff breeches with the thought that in the future he would have the liberty—nay, the obligation—to spend inside her as many times as he could muster.

And he thought he might muster a great many times with her.

Now, what was her name? It wasn't Caro, but that was close, wasn't it? Caroline. Lady Caroline Haskett.

But, wait. She wasn't twenty years of age. It had been at least a decade since he had agreed to help Edmund out and dance with his sister at her first ball.

And wasn't there something wrong with her? He couldn't remember any details, but he had never seen her at any other ball during any other Season. Edmund never spoke of her.

No matter. There was nothing wrong with her lips, her breasts, her skin, her wet quim. Even more importantly, there was nothing wrong with her desire for him.

She would make a beautiful Countess of Burchester.

As he entered the breakfast parlor, he was momentarily arrested by the two pairs of green eyes that lifted to his, but both under much bushier eyebrows than Caroline's—Edmund's black ones and the marquess' white ones. Phineas looked around the room. No Lady Caroline.

“Good morning,” he ventured.

Both men gruffly wished him a good morning back.

Ah, the Haskett men didn't know about the tryst. Hmmph. Was that disappointment coursing through his veins? A wise man would have been relieved the colossus Edmund Haskett knew of no reason to bash him about, but Phineas Edge had

never made any pretense of being a wise man. And in just the last minute or two, he had very much taken to the idea of being forced to marry Edmund's sister.

Phineas sat down and waited for breakfast. And for Lady Caroline.

But she did not come. It was the same group of men who had been at dinner last night, but now Phineas found the company tedious, the men's voices grating. Surely, as hostess, Lady Caroline would make an appearance?

He interrupted a discussion of the marquess' dogs. "And your daughter, Lord Sudbury? Will she be joining us for breakfast? Or for the shooting, as some ladies do? I hope she is not still indisposed."

The old marquess wiped his mouth with his napkin. "You are kind to inquire, Lord Burchester. Lady Caroline is well but has asked to stay in her room today, and I have granted her leave to do so. She is shy."

She wasn't shy last night when she was handling my cock. Phineas ducked his head to hide his smug grin and dedicated himself to getting exactly the right amount of cream into his flawless cup of coffee.

After breakfast, he went directly to the library, plucked a book at random, selected an extremely comfortable chair, and began flipping pages. He couldn't read a word without his spectacles, but he had left those upstairs, not thinking he would need them for today's hunt. He hadn't planned on reading; the idea had come to him over the last bit of breakfast.

But he didn't need to read, really. He just needed to create the illusion of reading. He was going to sit in the library and pretend to read and beg off the morning's shooting. Then, when everyone else had left the manor, he was going to find Lady Caroline and have a good talk with her. Find out what this was all about. Find out what *her* intentions were toward *him*.

Ha! That was a turnabout. What an adventure she was.

He heard Edmund shouting his name.

“In the library,” he called out and turned a page.

“Phin.” Edmund put his head in the door. “Blazes, here you are. We’ve been looking for you everywhere. We’re ready. Let’s go.”

“I’m going to read, you go ahead.” He waved vaguely and crossed his legs. “I’ll find you later.”

“You’re going to read?” Edmund crossed the room in long strides and pulled the book from Phineas’ hands to read the title. “*The Young Woman’s Companion?*”

Phineas snatched the book back. “Yes.”

Edmund frowned. “I would have expected to find George holed up with a book, but you? We’ve been talking about this day of shooting for months. And now you’re going to miss it to read a girls’ etiquette book?”

Phineas glared up at him. “Yes.”

Edmund threw his hands in the air. “Fine.” He stalked from the room.

Phineas sat in the chair until he was sure the other men had departed the manor. He put the book down and left the library and went up the main stairs.

As he had hoped, Dashwood was still in Phineas’ bedchamber. The valet was shooing a little chambermaid out the door, her arms full of bedsheets.

“My lord?” Dashwood quirked an eyebrow. “Why are you not out with the shooting party?”

Phineas waited until the chambermaid was down the hall and out of earshot. “Change of plans, Dashwood. I need you to go downstairs and find out from the staff which bedchamber is Lady Caroline Haskett’s. Subtly. You know.”

“Lady Caroline Haskett?”

“Yes. The hostess.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Phineas could tell Dashwood was itching with curiosity, but he was damned if he was going to tell the man anything until he had spoken to Lady Caroline himself.

And perhaps proposed to her? At the very least, propositioned her.

FOUR

Lady Caroline Haskett looked out the window at the park. It was a perfect day for fowling. Clear. Crisp. A good hostess should be able to ensure good conditions for a shoot, and she had done just that. Her father would have no complaints about the weather.

She herself had eaten a large breakfast. She usually ate a good breakfast, but she had been especially hungry this morning and had attacked her tray of ham and eggs and cakes with a lusty appetite.

Lusty appetite. How appropriate for her first day as a woman of experience.

A knock on the bedchamber door, indicating Jones had come back with Lavinia. It had been so good of her lady's maid to take the hound out even though the gentle giant made Jones nervous. Of course, Caroline was usually the one who took Lavinia out for a scamper just after dawn. But not today, not this morning. Not while the Earl of Burchester was about.

Caroline said nothing in response to the knock, kept her gaze directed out the window, and waited for the door to open and for Jones to come in with the dog.

After a curiously long pause, she heard the knob turn and a male voice.

“Lady Caroline?”

Phineas. He had not gone out for the shooting with the other men.

She heard the door close, the cushioned tread of his boots on the carpet.

She should be frightened. A man was in her bedchamber, a man she had deceived and who had reason to be angry. But she wasn't frightened. Because it was *him*, of course, and she could never imagine him doing her any harm.

“Lady Caroline, you must forgive my intrusion. I'm sure you think me a cad and unbelievably stupid. I did wonder at the silk nightdress you left in my room, but only when I saw your portrait in the gallery—”

Her portrait. She was so used to ignoring that travesty of a painting she had forgotten it hung right where anyone could see it. Right where Phineas would almost certainly see it.

“Then I realized, of course, I had had the pleasure of meeting you before.”

She did not move. She wanted to stay still and just listen to his voice.

“And certainly, meeting you again last night was also an undeniable pleasure. Your brother did not see fit to run me through with a butter knife in the breakfast parlor this morning, so am I correct in concluding no one else knows about our nocturnal rendezvous?”

She could answer that.

She turned slowly. Damnation, the man oozed raw masculine sensuality. Those full lips. That broad chest. Those tight leather breeches encasing his muscular thighs, hugging his bulge.

His bulge. His cock. She had seen it, touched it, had it in her, stained it with her own blood.

Still, she should be able to manage these words. As long as she was calm and careful.

“N-no one,” she said.

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. She had run her fingers through it, too, last night. That thick, wavy, silvery mane.

Her hands flexed by her sides involuntarily.

“That is most fortunate, Lady Caroline. But we must talk. I’m flattered by, uh, your visit last night, any man would be, but I can’t help thinking you imposed a dreadful risk on yourself and on me.”

She had not thought of that. How she had been putting *him* in danger. She had only thought of herself.

But she could not say she was sorry. Literally, she could not. The sibilance of *sorry* would reveal her lisp and likely induce her stutter.

He knew who she was now, but he still didn’t know *what* she was. And she must make sure he never did. She wanted to stay his *lovely girl*. Not deformed, not slow-witted, not evil, not cursed. She didn’t know why she cared since she would never see him again. But still she wanted to be *lovely* for him. And for herself.

“I r-regret that,” she said carefully.

He took several steps toward her and seized both her hands.

“I hope you don’t regret everything about last night. Our beautiful night together.”

He raised her hands to his mouth, to those full, almost-pouting lips, and kissed the back of each one. She trembled at his touch. What power her own desire had over her.

“No,” she got out.

“And if you ever come to London where we might repeat our encounter under safer circumstances, I would like that very much indeed, Lady Caroline.”

That was impossible. She took her hands out of his. “No.”

His hazel eyes—which had been sparkling mischievously just a moment ago—now took on a look of hurt.

“I see. You think once with me was enough for you, eh? Well, then you won’t be surprised to hear there are a large number of other women who are just like you. I hold onto the

notion it's because they worry I might quickly ruin them for anybody else, but I suppose some other detraction might exist. But if you gave me another chance, I could—”

She bristled at his mention of a large number of other women. She knew he was a rake. Did he have to rub it in? But it was unfair to allow him think she was disappointed by anything that had happened between them last night. She had been let down by nothing except that he had fallen asleep when she had wanted to couple again. But she had no idea how to stem his flow of words. No idea how to express the very complex sentiment *I liked fucking you very much, but I won't be doing it again.*

So she kissed him. And she kissed him the way he had taught her. With her tongue and teeth and wetness and heat. And she added her own ferocity.

After all, this was one more opportunity to get the last kisses of her life.

He kissed her back and grabbed both cheeks of her bottom and pulled her into him and she could feel his rigid member exactly where it should be to pleasure her pearl.

He and she would be uniquely positioned by their relative heights to couple while standing against a wall. She might have to bend her knees just a trifle, but it would be worth it. And he could keep his boots on.

As if he knew what she was thinking, he took a step and pushed her back toward the window. She shoved at his chest, and they stood, facing each other at an arm's length, panting.

She knew she wasn't really strong enough to push him off her if he had wanted to continue to hold her. He was very strong.

“N-no,” she gasped.

“I want you to know,” he said, his breathing as heavy as hers, “if it comes to light what happened last night between us, I am fully prepared to offer for your hand. It would be not at all offensive to marry you.”

Not at all offensive.

She almost slapped him.

Had she become like her father and her brother, unable to control her rage? Not that the Haskett men were physically violent. Their fury came in loud lashings of shouted curses and angry words.

But she had no words.

And a slap would only convince the earl she desired more time in his bed. Convince him even more thoroughly than the kissing had. She took a deep breath and willed herself to speak smoothly.

“No, thank you.”

The hurt in his eyes was back. But what could she do about that? Nothing. Nothing, short of bedding him here again in her bedchamber at ten o'clock in the morning when her lady's maid Jones was certain to walk in at any moment with Lavinia.

And besides, he had injured her. *Not at all offensive*. She was surprised by how much those words stung. Shouldn't she be used to contempt by now? But she had never thought she would hear it from him when he had been so kind to her last night. So solicitous of her pleasure and forgiving of her inexperience.

And now he had tainted her memory of the hour she had spent in his bed, being his *lovely girl* and his *darling*.

For a man of many words, he had chosen very badly. Let him stay hurt.

Get out of here, she willed him. *Get out, before I kiss you again*.

Because, despite her anger, his hazel eyes were melting her core, igniting a desire to vanquish that injured expression and replace it with the feral hunger she had seen on his face while he had been inside her.

He drew himself up and bowed. “My lady.”

She curtsied and watched him walk out of her bedchamber. As soon as the door closed behind him, she staggered and

collapsed into a chair.

It was a pity he knew who she was. But she had originally counted on his knowing her anyway, hadn't she? When Edmund had written to their father months ago and mooted a shooting party for him and his friends, when she had first planned to seduce the earl, she had foolishly thought Phineas would know her right away. How stupid it had been to think that the best moment in her life as a young woman, a moment which had fueled every release she had ever had, would hold any significance for him. That *she* would hold any significance for him.

Thank God he would go back to town tomorrow, having no idea of her shameful deformity, no idea of how limping and hideous her speech was. She had kept that from him.

Tomorrow, she would be shut of the physical phenomenon of Phineas Edge, forever. Her chest would stop hurting. And, if she could manage to forget *not at all offensive*, she would be able to comfort herself by conjuring his cock and his hands and his lips and his other words, his *lovelies* and his *darlings*, for the rest of her life.

Her breathing had returned to normal and the throb between her legs had almost subsided when Jones came in with Lavinia.

"She did very well, my lady," Jones said, untying the leash. "She didn't pull my arm off this time."

Lavinia bounded up to Caroline and naughtily put her front paws in her mistress' lap and sniffed Caroline's mouth before swiping it with her long tongue.

"La," Caroline said and snapped her fingers and the dog got down. Lavinia must have smelled Phineas, and, could it be? Caroline could swear Lavinia had a smirk on her droopy face as she lay down at Caroline's feet.

He tastes good, doesn't he, La? Well, I hope you enjoyed that. Because my lips will never, ever taste like his again.

FIVE

“I say, Edmund, how is it that your sister never comes to town?”

“Caro? I mean, Lady Caroline?” Edmund frowned. “Why do you ask, Phin?”

Phineas had been only half an hour behind the shooting party and had managed to catch up since the men were strolling and stopping frequently. However, he had neglected to bring his gun out with him and so could only watch as the gamekeeper and his assistants and the pointers flushed birds and the other men tried to bring them down.

Caro, her brother said. So, Caro *was* her name. Her family name, or at least, her brother’s name for her. And Caro had given that name to Phineas last night.

That had to mean something.

“I seem to remember dancing with her a long time ago at a ball. I’ve never seen her again until . . . well, I saw her portrait in the gallery this morning.”

Edmund grunted while reloading his flintlock. “She hates that painting. Father commissioned it and insisted it hang in the gallery. My sister says the whole thing is a lie, and she has never smiled like that, ever.”

Ah-ha! Phineas couldn’t restrain his own grin. Caro *hadn’t* smiled at the portrait painter. His own powers were *not* failing. She was just a woman who did not smile. And that was perfectly fine since her kisses, her groans, her wetness had told him she liked him and what he had done.

She *had* liked what he had done, hadn't she? And liked him?

But why then the rejection in her bedchamber? The short answers. The persistent *no*'s. The iciness. Well, until she had kissed him again quite savagely and then rejected him once more.

His darling little Caro liked to blow hot and cold, did she? Well, it was a good way to keep him on his toes. And two could play at that game. And a very fun game it might be. Although he would prefer the darling to blow only hot. As she had last night.

"But she never comes to town?" Phineas persisted.

Edmund looked over at his father who was having a word with the head gamekeeper. He answered in an undertone, "After my mother died, the marquess decided my sister had much better stay here and take over the duties of mistress of the house. She is shy, you know."

Again. The shyness. It was an abominable falsehood.

"But how is she to meet gentlemen when she is cloistered like a nun on your father's estate? Doesn't she need Seasons like every other young lady? To show herself off?"

And to make herself available to Phineas again. He didn't want to wait another decade for an invitation to come to Sudbury Manor so he could be seduced by the quiet Amazon. He wanted to seduce her himself, at his leisure, in his own bed, with no brother or father nearby.

Edmund grimaced. "She's no longer a young lady. She's nearly thirty. The marquess says she has missed her opportunity."

Phineas was astounded. Her father had kept her here, away from society, running his house, out of selfishness. And Caro might not be in the first flush of youth, but for her own father to say she was undesirable because of her age? The marquess was a cruel man. And wrong. Because she was very desirable.

The look on Phineas' face must have communicated something to Edmund.

“I know,” Edmund muttered, looking down. “I have been inattentive and not done my brotherly duty. I must have a word with the marquess about it. But he and I don’t really rub along very well, as it is. Both of us with our vile tempers. We’ve come near blows in the past. So I stay in town, and he and she stay out here. The two of them get along.”

Phineas clapped Edmund on the back. “I’m glad you know your sister deserves more. And you are resolved to speak to your father on the matter.”

That was enough for now. If he pushed the issue, he might betray his very real interest in getting Caro to town. And into his bed.

A tasty luncheon to savor back at the manor and again, the lady of the house was absent. George Danforth perked up a bit, saying he was anxious to get home tomorrow and see what the post held. Still hoping for a letter from Lady Phoebe, no doubt. And William Dagenham tried to make wagers on the afternoon shooting, who would get the most birds, *et cetera*, and there was some good-natured laughing and joking, even from Sir Matthew Elliot who had done very well that morning for a man who had lived in London for most of his life. Sir Matthew said he was well-rested and had slept like a bear in his winter den last night and weren’t stag house parties ideal?

Phineas, after much mockery from the others about his sudden interest in reading about the training of young women, remembered to take his gun out for the afternoon and bagged two dozen brace of grouse.

The pleasure of his successful shooting was diminished, however, by the knowledge that he was not going to be able to boast to Lady Caroline about his prowess. Because, of course, she was not at the dinner table.

And then there was a long night by himself in that very comfortable bed with a new set of fresh-smelling sheets where he was not able to demonstrate his prowess to her in other ways. Surely, a second time, he would have been able to contain himself longer. And he couldn’t stop thinking about

putting his tongue on her tidbit and what she might do and the sounds she might make when he did so.

He had several wild moments during the night when he almost crossed the gallery to her bedchamber. No, even without the danger, it would be madness. To invade her bed with no encouragement from her? He would be a villain, and he rather liked thinking of himself as a lovable rogue instead.

Thank God the men all planned to travel back to town the very next day. He had not been sure how long his control would last. Another night of obsessing over Caro, knowing she was just yards away, would have been unbearable. He would have found himself breaking down her door at midnight like some kind of Norse berserker, only coming to his senses again once he had spent inside her.

He had to find some legitimate way to get to her. So he could make her crave him as he was craving her right now. He had managed to induce cravings in dozens of women. Why should she be any different?

He had to visit Burchester in October to pay some much-needed attention to his estate. Meanwhile, for the next several weeks in London, he would work on getting Edmund to bring his sister to town for a visit. Because if she were in London, Phineas would find a way to get Caro into his bed.

And there was something else he should do upon his own arrival back in town. It would be unpleasant, but necessary. His time away—and yes, his assignation with Lady Caroline—had tipped him over into making a decision he should have made a month ago. He did so hate upsetting the applecart. He liked things to be smooth and easy. But this was inevitable and he might as well face up to it.

He shared a carriage back to London with George Danforth. And, yes, with Sir Matthew Elliot, but the blond baronet fell asleep as soon as they left the environs of Sudbury. The man could sleep anywhere, anytime.

Another carriage was behind them, carrying William and Edmund. Edmund's size had necessitated the extra carriage; it would have been hellishly crowded if he had tried to squeeze

in with the four other men. A third carriage, with all five of the men's valets, trailed behind.

"George," Phineas said in a low voice.

A bleary baron turned from the carriage window. He looked exhausted, and his eyes were sunken. Poor, wretched fellow.

"Sorry to add to your burdens right now, but I felt I should apprise you," Phineas said.

"Apprise me of what?"

"I intend to end my arrangement with Lady Starling upon my return to London. We don't suit, as it turns out."

"I could have told you that. But I didn't. On purpose." George smiled thinly.

Phineas winced. "Yes, just deserts and all that. But I wanted you to know she'll be on the hunt, wanting some conciliatory male attention. She might come looking for you since you were her last before me."

George ran his hand over his shiny pate. The young man had finally given up wearing a wig this summer. "Thank you for the warning."

Phineas chuckled. "Maybe you should take Horatia up on whatever she might offer. Get your mind off the bright little bird known as Lady Phoebe Finch?"

George scowled. "You have no idea what you're saying, Phin. Just shows you've never been in love."

Phineas shrugged. "I've said it many times. Love is for other men."

"Lucky you," George said grimly and went back to looking out the window.

Yes, lucky me. Phineas leaned back in his seat. But why was that? Why was love for other men and not for Phineas Edge?

Well, in truth, because he really could not be bothered. Love, for the most part, seemed very uncomfortable. Just look

at weebegone George. Look at their friend Jack who had passed almost half a year in misery, pining for a plain, skinny Scottish spinster who would as soon put a dirk in you as look at you. Phineas expected to hear news any day from Scotland that Jack's bride had murdered him in his sleep over the maltreatment of sheep in the Highlands or some other bone of contention.

Yes, love wasn't for Phineas Edge because love changed one's circumstances. And he liked his circumstances. His club, his sport, his friends, his freedom to arrange his life exactly as he liked.

Yes, love was definitely for other men. Men who didn't have the wonderful life Phineas had. Men who couldn't anticipate the upheaval love would bring.

Good thing Phineas was immune to the silly thing.

He sighed contentedly and thought about the brandy he would have in front of a roaring fire once he got back to his rooms in London. And then he thought about how much better that brandy would be if he were sharing it with darling Caro, dribbling it into her navel and licking it off her as she moaned.

Yes, Phineas would have to get to work on Edmund.

SIX

Father was not well. He had started coughing the day after Edmund's shooting party went back to town.

Caroline endeavored to make the marquess understand he must stay in bed, he must permit a doctor's visit. But, as always, he resisted her.

"I'm perfectly fine," he growled. "A sniffle from shooting in the damp. And then having no hot drink afterwards. The tea was tepid rubbish."

Even though it had been perfectly dry the day he went out to shoot, her father had found a way to cast aspersions on her management of the house party.

"There's no need for a damned physician. You tend to your business, daughter, and I'll tend to mine."

She might remind him that for twelve years, he and his possessions had been her business. Her only business. To step into her both her mother's shoes in the organization of the manor and her father's shoes in the care of the estate. To make sure her father was comfortable and wanted for nothing, that he was not troubled with anything he considered piffling—which was almost everything.

And that he had a biddable female to tend to him.

A biddable, silent female.

Because, of course, her speech was at its worst with him. She did well with the servants and with Jones, in particular. She was understandable to her brother. But she had never

spoken well enough in front of her father to be able to convince him she would not expose him to public shame if she went out into good society again.

It had started with her lisp. Adorable when she had been three. But the lisp had persisted and her father said her tongue thrust forward toward her front teeth when she spoke.

“Disgusting to see your tongue that way,” her father would say, his eyes on her mouth, his voice dripping with disdain.

But she had never known how to correct herself. An *ess* continued to be an *eth*. This was not so awful on the whole, but her father’s scowls made her whole mouth seize up when she came to a word which contained any *ess* sound.

She developed a stutter at age seven in addition to her now-permanent lisp.

The stammer might occur with a word containing an *ess*, but could erupt at other times, such as when she was anxious. Avoiding *ess* words was not a guarantee she could speak as her father would like her to.

Her mother had spent many hours with her, soothing her, and then having her read aloud. Caroline would be doing well, words fluent despite the lisp, but as soon as her father came into the room, she would begin to stutter. And he would snort, turn on his heel, and leave.

Even so, her mother had convinced her father that Caroline must have a Season when she was seventeen.

“You’re a tall beauty,” she had said to Caroline. “No one will care how you speak. And the right man will understand you.”

It was the last time anyone had ever called Caroline a beauty. Because two days after her first ball where she had danced with Phineas Edge, her mother had tumbled down the stairs in the Haskett town house, hit her head, and stopped breathing three hours later, unconscious to the end.

After that, her father had sworn never to return to the town house or to London again. “The goddamn stairs in that

goddamn house,” he had cursed, his eyes boring into Caroline. Later, he had said worse.

The marquess had taken his daughter back to Sudbury, and she had become the mistress of Sudbury Manor and the administrator of the sprawling estate in all but name. Her one Season was over and she would never have another.

Her brother, however, had stayed in London and lived in the town house.

“It doesn’t haunt me, Caro,” Edmund had explained on one of his rare trips home to Sudbury. He had tactfully chosen a time when their father had been away visiting the elderly Earl Drake at Sommerleigh. “I know that was where Mother died, but she could have just as easily fallen at Sudbury Manor.”

Because it had not been the fault of the stairs. Her mother had been the most genteel sort of drunk, but a drunk nonetheless, and had imbibed a great deal of sherry before her fall. Caroline and Edmund and the marquess had all witnessed her swaying unsteadily as she had left the small upstairs drawing room and gone out onto the landing and toward the reviled stairs.

Perhaps her perpetual inebriation had been why her mother had thought Caroline a beauty and that no one would object to her lisp. Her mother’s vision had been regularly hazed by alcohol. And her own words had often slurred.

No, that wasn’t fair. Her mother had loved her and that love had made her see her daughter in a generous light.

And Caroline had still not entirely given up on the dream that she might one day earn her father’s love. He wanted her to be better. Better than her lisp and her stutter. Better than her mother, the tippler.

However, although she became better at running the house and the estate, learning to keep rigorous accounts to the penny, mustering the backbone to hire servants and not let them intimidate her, her speech did not improve.

She stayed almost mute in his presence and felt no love from her father.

She looked at the marquess sitting in his wing chair in front of the fireplace, a screen around him to keep the heat in. He was sweating and shivering at the same time.

“Y-y-you a-a-are ill, F-f-f-f-father.”

Thank goodness, the word *father* had no *esses* in it. What a torture that would have been. Indeed, it was bad enough that his title was a horror in her mouth. *The Markwith of Thudbury*.

Her father scowled at her, his bushy white eyebrows pushed together. “You are impertinent, daughter.”

But when she finally sent for a physician, the marquess did not have the strength to refuse the examination or to protest when his tall body was carried by footmen to his bedchamber.

“Pneumonia,” the doctor said.

Four days later, her father spoke to her for the last time as she was giving him some warm broth. His eyes were closed, but when she nudged his lips with the spoon, he would open his mouth and accept the liquid and swallow.

“Caroline,” her father croaked.

“I’m h-h-here.”

He opened his eyes, rheumy with illness. What would he say? Would he finally tell her he loved her? Ask her forgiveness or offer his own?

His words, when they came, were barely audible. “Remember that . . .”

She leaned forward.

“Remember I kept you safe.”

He closed his eyes and took no more broth.

He died two days later.

That night, alone in her bed, Caroline wept. She knew most would not understand why she shed tears for her father. A man who had thought it was best she be kept isolated and apart. So that she would be *safe*, he said.

When really he had just despised her.

But, in truth, she wept for herself. Because she had wasted her youth. She had been certain the rest of the world must be more harsh than her father. Because if her own sire thought she was shamefully flawed, wouldn't others think something even worse? And so she had clung to him, to her place, to Sudbury, and had not dared to imagine or to ask for more.

But her night with the Earl of Burchester had shifted her thinking a bit. She hated to think Phineas had affected her, but he had. He had treated her so sweetly when he had thought she was just a serving girl. That sweetness had shown her that a stranger could be kind, even if the stranger thought he was high above her in the social strata.

Of course, he had wanted to frolic with her. Perhaps that was why he had been so warm. Maybe he would not have been, otherwise.

But still, when he had come to her bedchamber the next morning, knowing who she was, he had been hurt by her refusal. Almost as if what she thought of him was of consequence. Almost as if she were a person with the power to injure someone else's feelings, not just be injured herself.

Phineas Edge had given her a peek at the world outside Sudbury Manor and shown her that it might not be filled only with sneering people who mocked her speech and shunned her.

As she penned a letter to her brother to inform him of her father's death, she allowed herself a heretical thought—she might have a friend in the future.

Maybe her brother.

No, not her brother. He loved her, but he knew too much about her and pitied her too much to befriend her.

Maybe a woman. A woman friend who would be like her mother, patient and kind. A woman who would be willing to wait for Caroline's words and want to know her thoughts. Not all of her thoughts. Just some of them.

Caroline must turn her energies to finding a friend.

SEVEN

Phineas jerked.

He was sitting in *the chair*, the best chair in the reading room of his club, ostensibly reading a newspaper, his eyelids drooping behind his spectacles.

Damn, he should get up and get active, arrange to do some boxing, sweat a little. He shouldn't be napping in the afternoon like Sir Matthew Elliot or the octogenarian Lord Marsburn, snoring over there in the corner.

And Phineas needed the exercise. He had noted a bit of roundness to his belly lately and as a man who was—well, not tall, he couldn't afford to carry any extra weight. He needed to stay trim. In fighting trim.

But he was so tired of late. So tired and yet unable to sleep. His nights were restless, filled with dreams of a pink-tongued mouth and dark hair and a long, sleek body with endless legs that wrapped around his waist. And governed by the demands of his own cock. He hadn't used his own fist so much since he was a boy. At least twice a night since coming back from Sudbury, followed by a few hours of brandy-induced voyaging to the land of Nod. And both the hunger for his enchantress and the exhaustion were still present when he woke.

Strangely, he did not seek relief from anyone but himself. He had broken ties to all his mistresses. He had simply stopped calling on most of the widows, and they soon found other gentlemen to occupy them.

However, Lady Starling had required some special handling. As he had anticipated, Horatia had not taken the news well. At all. She had flown into a rage, screeching at him without surcease for fully a quarter of an hour about how she had abandoned George Danforth to take up with him and now, he had the temerity to leave her? Phineas had weathered it only by uncharacteristically biting his tongue and ducking out of her drawing room when Lady Starling began to hurl china statuettes at his head.

And he had not been to a brothel even though it had occurred to him. But he knew it would be an exercise in futility. He wouldn't find what he was looking for there.

Instead, he had made do with his hand and thoughts of Caro's kisses, her groans, her unbelievably sweet quim—the memories as vivid and arousing as they had been the morning after that night.

He was off to his country seat of Burchester in a few days. Maybe the problems he would have to face there could distract him from his thoughts of Caroline. Caro. Mmmmm. That soft skin, those sweet plums, those green eyes.

The darling.

Normally, the problems of his estate would be the last thing to interest Phineas Edge. He preferred to look on the brighter side, to ignore difficulties until they faded away or became insurmountable and then there was nothing he could possibly do about them, was there?

But he needed to sink his teeth into something and since he hadn't yet devised a way to get his incisors into Lady Caroline, he might as well have a go at trying to save his finances. Then he could buy her some lavish gift. Something with emeralds in it, maybe, to go with her eyes. All ladies liked jewels.

And town had been so dull for Phineas recently. His friends were disappearing like flies after the first frost of autumn. The Duke of Dunmore, Jack-the-Lady-Killer-MacNaughton, was married up in Scotland and had written he had no plans of coming back to London in the foreseeable

future. And George Danforth had married his friend Lady Phoebe Finch less than a week after the shooting party's return to London and was now out at his barony with his new wife.

Phineas had been a witness to the small, private ceremony. Given the expeditious nature of the wedding, the paleness of the bride, and the anger on the face of the bride's brother who had just been made the Duke of Abingdon, a new Danforth would almost certainly be found under a gooseberry bush in fewer than nine months.

George had gotten careless with his little Phoebe. Lucky George.

Lucky? Wait, what? Not lucky. Stupid George.

Hmmm. Maybe stupid *and* lucky. After all, George had gotten what he wanted, his Phoebe.

Meanwhile, Phineas' woman was just as unattainable as ever.

Phineas sighed. The blue devils had him in their grip, and he must exorcise them. This was so unlike him. He was a cheerful man. Jovial. Light of heart. And, currently, light of purse as well. He sighed again.

Maybe he could think of a reason to drop by Sudbury Manor on his way to Burchester? Not for baby-making—as much as he wanted coitus, he could imagine no circumstances under which it would be possible—but for tea? Sudbury was quite a long distance out of his way, but he'd like to flirt with the Amazon who ruled his dreams. Caro.

“Phin.”

He started again and looked up. Edmund Haskett stood over him. Oh-ho, the brother of the beauty about whom he had just been brooding. Here was a chance to talk about Caro and bringing her to town. The day was improving. Phineas sat up out of his slump.

Edmund dragged another wing chair closer as Phineas folded the unread newspaper and removed his spectacles. Edmund's brow was furrowed, and he looked gloomier than usual.

“I just received news. My father died two days ago.”

Edmund was the marquess now.

Phineas cleared his throat. “My condolences. He looked so hale when we were in Sudbury just a few weeks ago.”

Edmund rubbed his forehead. “Pneumonia. It was quick. As you know, we weren’t close. That trip was the first time I had seen him in two years. He was an arsehole and he got a better death than he deserved.”

“Well, arsehole or not, he was your father. And I’m sure your sister is grieving. Please offer her my condolences, and I would be pleased to be of service to either of you in any way I can.”

Edmund grunted and nodded.

“You’re the Marquess of Sudbury then.” Phineas tapped his knee. “So it’s both condolences and, I suppose, congratulations. Shall I arrange for a splendid dinner tonight? What are your plans?”

“Leaving in an hour to go to the march. Funeral in two days. And I need to get acquainted with the place again.”

“Probably some estate business you need to attend to, eh? Your father might have let things slide in his dotage and during his illness. Although things looked in quite good order from what I saw of the place when I was there.”

“No. No estate business to worry about. My sister sees to all that.”

Lady Caroline Haskett managed the whole Sudbury estate and not just the house? The little darling was as capable as she was enthralling.

But he should have expected no less from a virgin who had tried to take him from on top. Fearless, determined, and even more lovely because of it.

“Speaking of your sister, do you think you might bring her to London now that your father is gone?”

Edmund ran one of his huge paws through his dark hair, making it stand on end. “You’ve made me realize I’ve been a very bad brother. Yes. Yes. I’m going to try to talk her into coming back with me. Show her around.”

“Capital. A tremendous idea. Just lovely. Wonderful.” Phineas suddenly realized he was maybe being just a little bit too enthusiastic. “I mean I’m glad you’re going to make sure she sees a little more of the world.”

And a little more of me.

“Yes.” Edmund stood. “We’ll be back in London after Christmas. Until then, Phin.” He stalked out of the reading room.

Christmas? After Christmas? No, no, no, no! That was months away!

Damn.

But Phineas would see the lovely Caro in the new year of eighteen hundred and twenty. And there would be no father blocking his planned seduction. Only Edmund, and Phineas had been friends with Edmund for a long time. Surely, he could devise ways around Caro’s hulking brother.

Suddenly, the blue devils were vanquished. Phineas chuckled and felt himself again. He leapt up from the chair, full of vim. He’d go and see if he couldn’t get a boxing lesson right now at Number 13 from Mr. Jackson. There was no time to waste. The charming Earl of Burchester needed to be in peak physical condition to keep up with that darling tower of loveliness, Lady Caroline Haskett.

EIGHT

Her brother came back from town. Caroline didn't like having Edmund in the manor, taking up the space her father had once occupied. Although her brother had never directed his temper toward her, his size and his voice reminded her so much of their father she couldn't help feeling she must tread on eggs around him. And she was worn to the bone with making arrangements for the funeral. Edmund's presence was one more call on her flagging strength.

How selfish she had become, how accustomed to her isolation. She must make her brother welcome. It was his house, not hers. It would never be hers.

"I hope you'll help me with the estate as you helped our father. At least until you get married," Edmund rumbled, sitting in the drawing room with her.

Until she got married? Was he making fun of her? The Edmund she knew from her childhood would not mock her, but they had lived apart for so long now. Had he become a sardonic wit after years as a London rake?

She darted a look at him. His face was serious. But he must know she would never marry. She would be thirty in January. No one had a Season at thirty.

Of course, even the daughter of a marquess might marry outside the Season. Not her, of course. But someone else might make a match with a man in trade. Or a barrister. Or a physician. Or a bookseller.

Yes, marrying a bookseller would be rather cozy. She could do his accounts, write his bills, and bury herself in written words. Surely, the bookseller would be a great reader, too, and not expect her to speak much. And with her height, she could reach the books on the tall shelves for him.

Of course, her bookseller-husband looked a great deal like Phineas Edge with spectacles which made no sense at all. Why would a bookseller have the broad shoulders and big chest and muscular thighs that a lord acquired from riding horses and boxing and fencing? No, a bookseller would be slender like herself. Together, they would have quiet, waifish children and live in a house with no stairs.

But he might have full lips. Like Phineas. That was it. She must look for a slight bookseller with spectacles and full lips. Of course, there was only one bookseller in Sudbury and he was fat, fifty, and already married. She might have to look farther afield. But when was the last time she had left Sudbury? Could it have been over twelve years ago?

Yes.

What a strange set of thoughts she had just had. A dream with her eyes open. It was as if her father's death coming on the heels of her dalliance with the Earl of Burchester had shaken something loose in her mind and made her conceive of the inconceivable. First, to imagine a friend. Now, a husband!

She blinked several times as if that might clear her mind of such silly delusions. She knew she would never marry. She was a burden. She had nothing to offer and too much to hide.

But maybe Edmund might marry? He was long past the age when he should. At least her father had said so for years.

The infrequent times the two men had coincided at the manor, the marquess had berated Edmund about acquiring a wife and producing an heir. Most of the time, Edmund had either muttered under his breath or stormed from the room, but once, he had answered back. Caroline had been outside the drawing room, hovering, not wanting to enter while the two men were in such a temper.

“What’s wrong with you?” her father had shouted at Edmund. “Don’t you know your duty, you ungrateful arse?”

“I am never going to make some woman’s life a fucking hell on earth like you did to my mother, you miserable old man. Never. Is that clear?”

Her father had been silent for a few seconds. But only a few.

“You’re going to let those shitsacks, your cousins, inherit all this?”

“You’ll be dead, what do you care?”

“You’ll be dead, too.”

“Exactly!”

“You think either of your cousins or their sons are going to make allowances for your sister?”

“I’ll make sure Caro is taken care of.”

“You know they’ll put her in an asylum, don’t you? You’ll be dead, and your damn cousins’ sons will lock her away her in an asylum.”

“Like you’ve locked her away here?”

She had fled then to her bedchamber, not wanting to hear what next would be said about her and her future.

Sitting now in the drawing room with her brother, she realized her father had been right. Edmund should marry.

Again, how selfish she was. Because, yes, if he were to marry and have a son, the son would be her nephew. The boy would grow up with her, would accept her, and if his father, her brother, died before she did, the new Marquess of Sudbury would not put his Aunt Caro in an asylum, no matter how poor and halting her speech was.

She would be safe.

But more immediately if Edmund were to marry a nice woman, a good woman, Caroline might have a friend. Someone to sit with besides La. Someone who would tell her

things and might be willing to wait, as her mother had been, to hear what Caroline had to say back.

Two birds, one stone. Or really, one woman.

Her brother was speaking.

“—you have everything in such good order here. We’ll stay through Christmas and after Epiphany, we’ll travel back to London.”

What? London? She couldn’t go to London. She opened her mouth.

“I won’t let you say no, Caro. I know you’ve been bullied so long by our father, it isn’t really fair for a brother to come along and bully you, too. But you must see it would be so good for you to come to London. I have been neglectful and yes, cowardly. I should have stood up to Father years ago and insisted you come to town.”

London. Did she dare go? Could she face the town house? All the people?

But once there, she might find a way to encourage her brother to marry. She might even be able to sway him in favor of a woman she would want as a friend.

“It’s October now,” her brother said. “It would be perfectly acceptable for both of us to be out of mourning by the end of March. But even in mourning, there would be so many delights for you in London in January and February.”

“C-can La c-c-come?” Lavinia heard her name and raised her head from where she had been lying at Caroline’s feet.

“The dog?”

Caroline nodded. Edmund shrugged. “She’s a big dog for London, but I don’t see why not.”

And then her brother cannily discussed museums and shopping and exhibitions and the theater and all manner of fascinating outings that would not require Caroline to speak. And, consequently, would not expose her to ridicule.

He was clever, her brother. But why should she be surprised at that? She was clever, too. Just no one knew it.

She was certainly clever enough to find her big brother a wife in London.

NINE

William Dagenham showed up in the street in front of Phineas' rooms just as Phineas was about to get into his carriage with Dashwood.

"Where are you going? Can I come?" William switched the grip of his leather bag from one hand to the other.

"I'm off to Burchester."

"Perfect." William climbed into the carriage, and Phineas grinned and got in after him.

Dashwood stayed on the pavement. "My lord."

"Get in, Dashwood."

"I'll sit up with the coachman since you have a guest, my lord."

Phineas poked his head out the carriage door. "It's just Dagenham. He won't care."

The young man shuddered. "It would not be proper."

"Yes. As always, you must suit yourself." Phineas withdrew his head back into the carriage, knowing argument was useless. His valet was punctilious to a fault.

But Phineas' irritation was short-lived. Because now he would have a companion in Burchester. A distraction, a partner for walks and cards and conversing. How splendid that William had come along.

The carriage started moving, and Phineas chuckled and rubbed his hands together.

“So, Will, to what do I owe this pleasure? You need to make a speedy escape from town?”

But he stopped laughing once William turned to him. His friend’s hands were shaking. His shoulders were stooped. His eyes were red, with bags underneath and creases at the edges. A stained shirt. Waistcoat buttons straining against his belly. No cravat. Lord Dagenham with no cravat? Unheard of. And no watch fob and no signet ring.

The viscount, once slim and almost-feline in his movements and sartorial elegance, had grown paunchy and haggard in the last six months. Yes, he had not looked quite himself this summer and on the hunting trip in September, but Phineas had not really paused to consider what a huge change had been wrought in the man.

“Yes. I need to get out of London,” William croaked.

“Husband of a lover wants to meet you at dawn with pistols, eh?”

William laughed bitterly. “That’s a problem for you and His Grace, Jack MacNaughton. I don’t have that kind of difficulty. Wish I did.”

“I prefer widows, as you know.” *At least, I used to,* Phineas amended in his head. *Before I became besotted with Caro.*

William took a flask from his bag and downed a swig. He offered it to Phineas who held up his hand and shook his head.

“So, is it your vowels, Will?”

“At this point, it’s every damn letter in the alphabet.”

“But . . . you win.”

“I only tell you about the wins.”

“A peer never goes to gaol over gambling losses. And there are ways around debt.”

William took another gulp from the flask. “Are there? I might have exhausted all of those.”

“You know you’re very welcome in Burchester. A few nights of good sleep, some country air. You’ll be a new man.”

“I just need to be in a place where there are no gaming hells. No dice, no cards. I need to remove myself from temptation since temptation will not remove itself from me.”

“Ah.” Phineas nodded and made a noise of agreement, but, in truth, he didn’t understand temptation. He never had. Surely, you either did something, or you didn’t. You bedded a pretty lady if she’d let you, or you didn’t. You gobbled an extra rasher or two, or you didn’t. You drank whisky, or you didn’t. What did temptation have to do with it? Surely, life was much better without it.

But his own desire to break down Caro’s bedchamber door on the last night of the hunting trip? He quickly dismissed that as an aberration. Caro would be in London in a few months, and he would easily find a way to satisfy all his fantasies. *He* would tempt *her*, rather than the reverse.

Because Phineas Edge was not susceptible to temptation.

He reached across and patted William’s knee. “Good news for you. There are no gaming hells in Burchester.”

“Yes. Good news,” William said weakly.

“And we’ll find something else to do in the evenings besides cards. We’ll talk.”

“Do you ever do anything else, Phin?”

It was a jab, but Phineas didn’t mind. His friends liked his chatter. They wouldn’t be friends with him if they didn’t. And see? William had the beginnings of a smile on his face. Phineas was cheering him up already.

“And you have a good head on your shoulders, Will. You can help me with my problems on the estate.”

William took another swig. “What problems are those?”

“Money problems. The estate was in arrears when I got the title and it’s only become worse since then. I’ll take some of that now.” Phineas reached for the flask and William handed it to him with a grim look.

“Your money problems drive you to drink, too, eh?”

“Yes.” Phineas had been about to add *and Edmund’s sister is driving me out my skull with lust*, but he swallowed his words in the nick of time and took a swig instead.

Argh. He coughed. Whatever was in the flask was harsh and burned his throat. William was drinking the cheap stuff.

William shrugged and took the flask back. “I’ll look at the numbers if I can stay sober long enough. Try to pay you back for taking me in.”

“There’s no need for paying back. We’re friends, aren’t we? That’s what friends do. Offer shelter, succor—”

“A loan?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll look at the books and see what you can afford to loan me.”

“It’s too bad Jack isn’t around.” Jack MacNaughton was the wealthiest among their circle of friends. Even before he became a duke.

“Yes. But all his money is going to save farmers in Scotland now.”

“Really?”

William nodded. “I wrote to him last month about a loan. He didn’t turn me down when he wrote back, but, even six hundred miles away, I could tell he was reluctant.”

“Jack watches his pennies.”

“Yes. Not like you and me.”

Phineas felt a little sting. Yes, he outspent his income, but didn’t every gentleman? Well, every gentleman except Jack and George. No wonder they could afford to marry.

But Phineas was no gambler like his friend, the Viscount Dagenham. He wasn’t a wastrel. He was just open-handed with his friends, his acquaintances, himself. And he liked nice

things. Nice clothes, nice food, nice drink. And nice things were expensive.

But he really must get his estate in order and stanch the hemorrhaging of his pounds and his pence. He had gotten rid of all his mistresses, he was sparring again on a regular basis, and now he needed everything else tidied up in time for next year so he could devote himself to pursuing Lady Caroline Haskett with no distractions.

William fell asleep shortly after finishing the flask but roused once they arrived in Burchester. He stumbled into the house without assistance, and the two men had a very poor dinner. The bird was flavorless and not sauced. The potatoes had caught and tasted vile. The claret was sour and could not touch what they had drunk while in Sudbury and what Phineas procured for himself in London.

Phineas sighed. He had forgotten how really miserable it was to be in Burchester. But William ate hungrily and made no comment.

After dinner, despite Phineas' notion that they might talk into the night, William pleaded exhaustion. After bidding his friend goodnight, Phineas went to the drawing room alone and sat in front of the fire.

The fire burned weakly and threw off very little heat. And the chimney did not seem to be drawing properly as smoke billowed up and stained the front of the fireplace and mantel. Phineas banked the fire and went to open a window to let the smoke out. He looked around the cold room. Really, it was so dingy here, so depressing. Not at all like the comfortable rooms he had sat in at Sudbury Manor.

No wonder he hated coming here.

Once, he had been so proud of being earl. And of this house and the land. Now he only felt frustration and his own lacking. Everything good here was crumbling, slipping away.

No. He thumped a fist against a wall. No. Tomorrow, he would settle himself in with Albion Chambers, his steward and lifelong friend, and try to solve the mystery of why the estate

was so poor. Then he would take William for a long walk to get his blood coursing and revive his spirits. Exercise had cured Phineas of his short bout of melancholia. It should do the same for William.

Of course, Phineas had the prospect of Caro to look forward to in the new year, and poor Will had no one.

But still, a walk should help.

“Albion.” Phineas poked his head around the door of the steward’s office and grinned.

“My lord.” His boyhood friend stood and bowed.

Phineas came into the room, both hands out, one to shake Albion’s hand, the other to clasp his shoulder. “Please, please, when it’s just us, you must call me Phin like all my other friends do.”

“Yes, my—Phin.”

“Good. I hope you’re well?”

“I am. And you?”

Phineas sucked in a breath. Should he tell Albion about his infatuation with Caro? Albion didn’t know Edmund and wouldn’t be put in an awkward position the way Will or George or Sir Matthew would be.

Phineas wiped his mouth. “I’ve been in just a bit of a welter over a woman.”

“You?” Albion laughed. “I find that hard to believe.”

Phineas shrugged. “Well, it’s true.”

“Doesn’t she respond to the Phineas Edge charm in the typical way?”

Phineas suddenly realized it had been a mistake to mention the subject, even in this indirect way. Caro and his thoughts about Caro were something quite private. She didn’t deserve to be discussed with other men, even with an old friend like Albion.

And Phineas wasn't sure she *would* respond to his charm in the typical way and that was a distressing thought. But worrying about it wouldn't help him. In a few months, he would see her again and she would find him irresistible, wouldn't she?

Yes.

He waved his hand to change the subject. "Let's talk about the estate. How goes Burchester?"

Albion winced. "Not well. Expenses keep rising."

"Blast." Phineas flopped into a chair. "Any place we can reduce costs?"

"We have things rather close to the bone now, but I'll keep looking for ways to cut more."

What a good, responsible man Albion was. "Excellent. You do that. And how are the farmers doing with their harvests?"

The steward took his seat again. "Not too poorly."

Phineas seized on that bit of good news and smiled. "Huzzah. Well, do you think we might raise rents the next quarter?"

Albion shook his head. "A little, perhaps. But not much."

"Yes. We must be fair. I wouldn't want anyone on the estate to feel the pinch." Phineas leaned forward. "I feel myself fortunate to have you looking out for my tenants. And for me."

"It's my duty."

"I hope it's not just duty. You can't imagine how comforting it is for me in London to know my friend is here, ensuring Burchester is as solvent as possible."

"I'm glad. Glad to have your trust."

Phineas settled back in his chair. "Of course you have my trust. All of it. I've never forgotten how you kept your mouth shut when you caught me trying to snare a pheasant on your father's estate."

“Yes. I fell under the Phineas Edge charm myself that day.”

“Twenty years ago when you grabbed me by the ear, who would have thought I would become an earl and you would be my steward?”

Albion raised his eyebrows. “No one?”

Phineas grinned. “Well, after all, I was twelfth in line, the son of a rather impoverished country gentleman. Didn’t my father have to borrow the price of my naval commission from your father? Certainly, it was reasonable to think my chances of being earl were little to none. And with your being a baron’s son and your cleverness with finances, I would have thought you would be in London, running your own bank by now, loaning out money at exorbitant rates to profligate scoundrels like me. I’m so lucky you prefer the country.”

Phineas couldn’t identify the expression that crossed Albion’s face for a moment. It disappeared as the man smiled. “I feel myself lucky, too, Phin.”

“So, we’ll raise the rents a little?”

“I’ll see if that’s possible.”

Phineas clapped his hands together. “Good. Now, let’s do something more pleasant. Shall we go see the tenants together?”

Albion laughed. “Yes, let’s ride out to the farms. I know that’s your favorite thing to do, to greet your adoring people.”

Yes, besides seeing Albion, it was the best bit of being in Burchester. Phineas chuckled as he stood. “It reminds me I’m an earl, even if I’m a pretty poor excuse for one.”

“Nonsense.” The steward plucked his coat from a hook on the wall.

“I just wish we could get the money right.”

“We will, Phin. We will. You needn’t worry.”

Phineas felt nothing but relief as he and Albion walked out the back of the house to the stable yards.

His financial situation had to improve. Albion was hopeful, so Phineas would be hopeful, too.

About the money.

And about Caro, too.

After all, optimism was as much a part of the Earl of Burchester's character as his legendary charm.

PART TWO

TEN

JANUARY, 1820

Lady Caroline Haskett's last weeks at Sudbury Manor were busy, taken up with making sure the affairs of the estate were in order.

"After all," her brother said. "We might not return until the end of July."

July? Seven months in London? It seemed like such an endless stretch of time right now, but would it be long enough to find a wife for her brother?

And then the rush and the bother and the packing were done, and it was wondrous to be in London. It was all that her brother had promised her and more.

First, the town house. She had forgotten what a beautiful home it was. The sun-splashed cream-and-pink morning room with its striped wallpaper where her mother had done her correspondence. The elegant downstairs drawing room with its carved mahogany furniture and its still-life paintings of fruit and flowers she had pictured in her mind over the last dozen years. How good it was to see the tiny brushstroke details again for herself. And the small library across from the drawing room with deep leather wing chairs, just begging for one to sit down and get lost in a good book.

Her brother had been right to stay in town all these years. There were no bad feelings in this house. Instead, there were memories of playing in the small back garden, sitting in her mother's lap in the morning room, running up the stairs to the

nursery, chased by her brother, laughing merrily. After all, there is no lisp or stutter when you laugh.

In many ways, the London town house had always been more her mother's house than her father's. Perhaps that is why it felt so pleasant despite the ghost that ought to haunt the upstairs passageway.

And Lavinia was adapting well to town life. Caroline would slip out of the house with her at dawn. No ladies were up and about at that time. If seen, she would be mistaken for a servant and left alone. There had been a mild contretemps with the gardener over La using a bit of grass in the back garden at other times for her necessary functions, but Caroline had handled that easily. Her brother had made it clear she was the mistress here now, after all.

Edmund arranged for a modiste to call at the house to discuss her clothes. Yes, the modiste said, my lady could, of course, make do with the black mourning dresses she already had. But surely she might move to half-mourning now and get some dresses in gray or lavender? And in the latest fashion. And then, of course, they must plan for her Season, when she would be out of mourning entirely at the beginning of April.

Season? No, the modiste must have misunderstood. Caroline would have no Season. She would be thirty this month. But how to say that? She looked at her lady's maid in desperation. Jones knew there was no need for ballgowns.

But Jones stayed as silent as her mistress.

The modiste went on. "Yes, I can see your reluctance, my lady. Your brother warned me you might be hesitant about new gowns with your father's recent death. Well, the marquess has already paid for the dresses, so you might as well have some in colors you like."

Caroline managed to point to some samples—this sedate sage for a day dress, this apple-green taffeta for a ball gown—and suffered her measurements to be taken.

"You are so tall, my lady. You will look elegant in anything," the modiste said.

Caroline felt the pricking of tears in her eyes and had to turn away quickly. How soft she had become. So susceptible to compliments. Perhaps because she had heard so few for so long.

Good girl. So lovely. A baritone purr making her throb between her legs.

Shut up, she raged in her head, and after the modiste left, she dedicated herself to dusting all the perfectly clean trinkets from her girlhood which still sat on her dressing table. Then, shamefully, she opened the drawer where she had hidden Phineas' shirt and looked at it and touched the weave of the linen with her fingertips.

The day after the appointment with the modiste, she went with her brother to an art exhibition at a gallery on Pall Mall.

"Is g-going to an exhibition p-p-proper?" she asked Edmund.

"Absolutely," he said and assisted her into the carriage.

She knew every painting in Sudbury Manor intimately. She had spent hours looking at all of them. No, not all of them. Not the one of herself. She hated that one. That lie. That stupid dress, that overcurled and overdone hair, that smile. But all the rest of them she had memorized. The landscapes. The still-lives. The portraits of the ancestors in their old-fashioned clothes and their square jaws like hers. What a pleasure it would be to see new paintings. She had already felt enormous delight in rediscovering the paintings of the town house.

Edmund was patient at the exhibition, standing behind her and holding his hat as she paused in front of each picture for long minutes, devouring them with her eyes.

There was a painting of a dark, storm-tossed sea, wreckage of a boat and human bodies afloat. She could not tear her gaze from it. She had never seen an ocean except in paintings, but with this picture she could feel the terrible power of the sea.

She knew Phineas had been in the Royal Navy when he was young, and he had faced the possibility of a tragedy like the one in this painting. A ship going down. And not just

because of a storm but because the ship had been fired upon by the French. The vessel filling with water and then that water dragging him down into the deep. Horrible.

Horrible to think of him in harm's way.

But why was she thinking of him at all?

After a long time, she went on to the next painting, a pretty picture of a blonde girl child, but her eyes kept going back to the shipwreck.

She and her brother spent two hours at the exhibition and she only looked at two dozen of the paintings. However, Edmund promised he would bring her back to the exhibition again.

“Or you might come with someone else,” he said.

Since she knew no one in London besides her brother, perhaps he had a person in mind?

“Your lady f-f-friend?” she asked hopefully.

Edmund grimaced as if in pain. “I don't have any lady friends.”

The next morning Edmund took her for a drive in Hyde Park. “It's not a busy time of day in the Ring, but if I should spy any acquaintances of mine, would you like to meet them, Caro?”

“No, Edmund, no. Please.” *Pleathe.*

Her brother frowned. “Fine. We'll take the closed carriage and have Russell drive us.”

And so Caroline's first glimpse of Hyde Park in thirteen years was through a carriage window as her brother sat back and brooded. This had been a mistake. How was Caroline ever going to find him a wife unless she forced herself to be brave and meet people?

“I'm sorry, Edmund. We can take the open carriage when we g-g-go for a drive again.”

A faint trace of a smile on his face. “Good.”

They returned to the town house and after luncheon, she went to her room, planning to take a nap because tonight—tonight!—her brother was taking her to the theater. But as Jones was unlacing her stays, a knock came at the door. A footman passed the message that his lordship needed her ladyship down in the drawing room.

Her brother needed her? Perhaps some discussion of tomorrow's plans. He had said they might go to a bookseller's soon.

Jones helped her put back on her black bombazine, and she went downstairs, thinking she should make a list of the books she wanted. Lavinia followed her.

Caroline saw her brother when she entered the drawing room.

Then she saw *him*.

The rogue.

Damnation. She should have foreseen this possibility and prepared herself.

Phineas was facing away from her, but she knew that broad set of shoulders, that silver hair, those round buttocks interrupting a smooth fall to the vent on his tailcoat. Surely, with so much care to a perfect fit everywhere else on his body, that peek at his rear afforded by his tailcoat was intentional? Damn him and his tailor.

“Caro, do you remember my friend Phineas Edge, the Earl of Burchester? He says he danced with you at a ball when you were seventeen. Phineas, this is my sister, Lady Caroline Haskett.”

Her brother crossed to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. How kind of him to do that. They were not a family who expressed physical affection, but perhaps that might be changing now. His hand there made her feel a bit bolder. She drew herself up. She was equal to this encounter.

Phineas turned and grinned. Lavinia immediately went up to him and put her nose in his groin.

“Oooh,” Phineas said, looking down and backing up slightly just as Caroline barked out, “La!”

The bloodhound begrudgingly moved her nose away from Phineas’ bulge and looked at Caroline as if to say *Are you sure? This seems very nice.*

Caroline snapped her fingers and pointed at the floor and Lavinia very slowly walked over to Caroline and lay down, looking even sadder than usual.

“The bloodhound’s name is La?” Phineas asked.

“Lavinia,” Edmund said.

“Ah. Miss Lavinia. Lady Caroline.” Phineas bowed.

Caroline curtsied and suddenly discovered she was wrong. She was not equal to this encounter. She could not say *Lord Burchester*. She could not. Only a few seconds later did she remember she might have said *my lord* instead. Still, her sudden onslaught of anxiety was so great she likely would have muffed *my lord*, getting hung up on the *em* of *my* for an eternity.

However, Phineas let no more than a moment pass before speaking again. “First, let me offer you condolences on the death of your father. I know that must have been a very great loss.”

She blinked.

He went on, easily, smoothly. “Your brother tells me you have been enjoying London and have already visited the art exhibition at the Pall Mall gallery. However, he said you were not able to see all the paintings. It’s a shame because there are some particularly fine ones near the end, and, perhaps, at some point, with an appropriate chaperone, you might allow me to escort you back to the exhibition so I might point out my favorites and, of course, I would be delighted to discover which ones were yours.”

She would never go to an exhibition with him. Once there, what would she say? How would she say it?

However, in typical Phineas fashion, he did not wait for a response from her but carried on speaking in his buttery, low voice.

“And I hear you are to go to the theater tonight. Lovely. I think your brother’s box is a trifle better than mine so I will not offer mine instead. But, of course, if you had been in need of a box, it would have been my pleasure to have hosted you and your brother.”

That flow of words washing over her. That interjected *lovely*. She might attempt a *thank you*. But she could not. She licked her lips. She looked at her brother.

Help me, Edmund.

“Caro, Phin is like a brother to me. You don’t need to worry. You would be safe with him.”

Ha. Would Edmund still call Phineas a brother if he knew what Phineas had done with his sister? Would Edmund think she was safe with Phineas if he knew how the earl had touched her most sensitive place with the tip of his cock? Before making her spend with his sweet words and his fingers and then plunging into her maidenhead.

Phineas apparently had a similar thought since he was blushing.

The rake could blush. How . . . surprising.

But now Phineas looked concerned. “And what would Lady Caroline have to worry about, Edmund? Has someone else importuned her?”

She almost laughed then. How he revealed himself so flagrantly. The use of the words *someone else* rather than *someone*. Someone else besides *himself*, he meant.

But Edmund did not seem to make much of his friend’s choice of words. “No, we have not seen anyone socially since arriving in London. You’re our first caller. And I think our friends know I would thrash anyone who was inappropriate with my sister.”

“As-as would I,” Phineas stammered. “As would I.”

“No, I didn’t want Caroline to worry because she has a bit of difficuty—can I tell him, Caro?”

“No!” She got it out. Loudly. Quickly. Forcefully.

Too forcefully. Both men were looking at her with raised eyebrows. Lavinia had gotten to her feet and was also gazing up at Caroline’s distress.

“Just as you wish, sister,” her brother said and bowed.

He was dismissing her. She had embarrassed him. And now he would speak privately with Phineas and tell him that her speech was impeded. That she mangled words and could not make herself understood. That she was deformed and her tongue was too far forward.

She would no longer be a *lovely girl* to Phineas.

She curtsied, and Phineas made a deep bow as she left the room with Lavinia.

But she had misjudged her brother. When she came downstairs for the dinner they would eat before the theater, Edmund came out of the library and took her arm as they went into the dining room. He seated her at the table himself.

“I said nothing to Phin, Caro, just so you know. And he did not press me. Really, even though he and I are friends, he can be very polite and behave well. He’s not a rough beast like your brother. I’d like you to like him since we’ll see so much of him here in town. And he understands women wonderfully well. He could see you were upset and wanted to make sure you knew he didn’t—what did he say? He didn’t want to be the source of any distress to you.”

Then, during soup. “I wish you would let me tell him about your problem. Phin’s a bit of a joker at times, but unstinting and well-meaning. He would never tease you, Caro, or make you feel bad. And it would be good for you to have a friend besides me in London. He would know some nice women you could meet. He knows a lot of women.”

I know he knows a lot of women. And he probably calls them all darling. I don’t want to meet any of his women. I want

to meet a woman for you. For us. A wife for you, a sister for me.

Her brother went on. “And I understand you perfectly well when you speak.”

She swallowed a spoonful of soup. “You do? Really?”

“Yes. See? That was perfect.”

“No *esses*, Edmund.” Of course, she actually said *no etheth*. Even after a lifetime of hearing herself say *eth* in place of *ess*, her lisp was like a knife in her heart. “*You and do and really h-h-have no esses.*” *Etheth*.

“I still wish you’d let me tell him.”

“No.”

“Not everyone is like our father. Not everyone thinks the way you talk is a damning flaw.”

She frowned.

“All right, I’ll stop badgering you. Tonight is to be a night of enjoyment. Your first night at the theater.” Her brother put down his spoon. “I am thoroughly ashamed you are just shy of thirty and this is your first outing to the theater.”

She would have loved to have gone to the theater during those years alone with her father. But it’s hard to miss something one has never had.

“I’m glad to g-g-go n-now.”

“I’m glad for you to go now, too, Caro.”

And perhaps at the theater, she would have a chance to meet a lady for her brother. One with some mettle. One he wouldn’t frighten with his large size, his frowns, his thundering voice. One who could see the good man Caroline knew Edmund was and the good husband and father he would be in the future.

ELEVEN

The theater was not what she had expected. The audience talked during the play! Why would you pay money to come to a play and then talk during it?

The actors spoke loudly, thank goodness. And she knew the play from reading it. *Much Ado About Nothing*. She marveled at the Beatrice, so cuttingly clever, so fiercely intelligent. Such crystal clear *esses*. And Beatrice, like Caroline herself, did not intend to marry.

But then Beatrice melts, of course, after matching wits with her Benedict.

I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.

Caroline did not think much of the Benedict, however. A little haughty. Calves too slender in his hose. Benedict should be warm and mischievous and his legs should have some roundness of muscle, some meat to them.

When she realized whom she had conjured as her perfect Benedict, her face got hot. Would every man for the rest of her life be held up to Phineas Edge and found wanting?

Why not? Hadn't it been so for the last thirteen years? Why should things change? In fact, wasn't it even worse now since she had bedded him? She had thought having him once, kissing him, touching him, would quench some part of her yearning. But it hadn't. It had only inflamed her imagination and desire.

She had not slept during her supposed nap after seeing him this afternoon. She had passed the hours in her bed thinking of him downstairs in the drawing room and how he might come to her bedchamber and find her with her hands on herself and murmur *darling* and *lovely* and *sweet girl* to her before showing her his cock and taking her again.

During the interval between the Shakespeare and the pantomime, her brother pointed out the Burchester box to her. She did not see Phineas, but there was an angry-looking woman in the box with another man.

“Who?” she asked her brother and gestured with her head toward the box.

“Oh, that’s one of Burchester’s mistresses, the Dowager Viscountess Starling.” Her brother scowled. “And that good-for-nothing Rhys Vaughan. She’s probably added him to her string. For her to bring him into Phin’s box when he’s not here? Unconscionable, damn it.”

Caroline suddenly could not get a breath in and her gut twisted.

But why should she have pain over this? She felt only lust for Phineas. He was not the man for her, if even such a being existed in the world. He was a man who would always have many women. She had no claim. There was no competition. This woman was not a rival.

But she couldn’t help turning her head back toward the Burchester box. She must see the viscountess. A mistress. She had never knowingly looked on a mistress before.

Lady Starling was a pretty, rouged woman, perhaps in her mid-twenties. How sad that she was a dowager already while still so young.

And then the comparisons started. Blonde hair, curly and a trifle wispy, not thick and straight like her own dark hair. But, of course, what did hair matter? The woman had breasts. Abundant breasts. A bosom of wonderful size, lifted high, straining her dress. A dark shadow between the tops of her

breasts, hinting at further pleasures once the dress was removed.

Caroline's very straight shoulders bowed a bit. Her little lumps were nothing to that. Of course, Phineas would want a woman who was the epitome of femininity when he was the epitome of masculinity. And Caroline was sure that when the woman stood from her seat, she would see evidence of rounded hips, a pair of buttocks matching her bosom.

And this Lady Starling was short. Phineas likely towered over her. She probably fit into his arms perfectly. He could pick her up easily and there would be no dangling legs sticking out everywhere. Like if Phineas ever picked her, Caroline, up.

But that would never happen.

She did not enjoy the pantomime at all. But she clapped when others did. She must show her brother how much she appreciated her outing.

She stole furtive glances at the Burchester box several times during the pantomime. She never saw Phineas there. But had he been there earlier, during *Much Ado*? No, she would have felt his presence, she was sure.

The young, pretty viscountess continued to look angry. Mr. Rhys Vaughan, the man next to her, at one point caught Caroline's eye and grinned and inclined his head to her. She looked away quickly and forced herself to direct her gaze toward the stage for the rest of the pantomime.

The next afternoon, she was summoned to the downstairs drawing room again.

Phineas was the caller. His full lips were not smiling. Serious, for a change. But now she thought about his lips pressing against that woman, that viscountess, kissing the tops of her breasts.

Stop. She didn't want to think about that.

She rested her hand on top of Lavinia's head. Lavinia had raised her muzzle and sniffed coming into the room but had stayed at Caroline's side. She had been good and had not gone

and nosed at Phineas' bulge even though the tension in her neck showed she wanted to.

How alike we are, La.

Phineas bowed. "Lady Caroline. Miss Lavinia."

She curtsied. She looked around. Her brother was not in the room. Of course he wasn't. He had told her this was the day and time when he went to fence at Antonio's Academy. And she thought Edmund had said Phineas usually went with him.

She started to edge toward the open drawing room door.

"Lady Caroline, I will be just a moment, and yes, please do stand there, in the doorway, where your butler can see you. I will speak softly, but if I am overheard, I will cause you no embarrassment. I noticed I may have prompted some upset for you yesterday, and for that, I am most apologetic."

His eyes had the same hurt look they had held months ago in her bedchamber. The adorable, sad look she was sure made scores of women want to reassure him. To kiss him. To stroke him. His hair. His skin. His—

Stop.

"I deliberately did not go to the theater last night because I wanted you to enjoy yourself there and not worry about my presence. But I found out this morning my box was used in my absence." He swallowed. "And Edmund may have told you something of those who were in my box. But your brother has been many months from town since your father's death, and he has not been privy to changes in my life. Indeed, changes made after my visit to your house in Sudbury. I want to assure you—"

She held up her hand. "No."

He took one step toward her. "What do you mean by *no*, Lady Caroline? You must believe me."

She took a deep breath. She must choose her words very carefully. "You owe me . . . n-nothing."

She had done it.

But again, his eyes were hurt. What a riddle he was. Much less of a rogue than she had thought.

Or maybe even more of one. Because would he have rather had her react with anger? Is that what he had expected?

“I thought, I hoped, Caro, darling, our one night together was as enjoyable to you as it was—”

She darted forward and clapped her hand over his mouth. Their bodies were close together. His beautiful hazel eyes looked up at her. Now the eyes were sparkling with some kind of naughty joy. And his lips were warm against her palm.

And she wanted him. Oh, how she wanted him.

Phineas wanted Caro vexed. He wanted her jealous. He wanted the imperturbable woman who dominated his most wicked thoughts injured by the knowledge of his previous lovers so he had evidence she felt something for him. And so he could soothe her with the honeyed words which came to him so easily. She might even permit a caress or a kiss or two, so he could show her even further how much he thought of her, how much he desired her. And that kiss or caress might slake his lust for her. A little.

Or would a kiss act as a bellows and fan the flames of his ardor to the point where he might take her in this room, butler or no butler, brother or no brother?

After all, Phineas had been months now without female companionship. No other woman could hold his attention. No one could touch the beauty of his Caro, spare in speech, spare in flesh. So reserved when he came to speak to her in her bedchamber but then so passionate with her kiss. And so desirous of him during their one night together.

He had been able to restrain himself from returning to Sudbury only because he had had Edmund's word that he would bring Caro to London. Otherwise, Phineas would have been in Sudbury, stopping on his way back from Burchester to London, hat in hand, breaking all rules of propriety within two weeks of her father's funeral.

But had it really been restraint? Or had it been nerves?

Because Phineas had also delayed coming to see Caro when she and her brother had finally alighted in London. The day after Epiphany, he had stood at the far end of their street in Mayfair and watched the Sudbury carriage come to a stop. And then he had seen her—oh, my God, *her*—be handed down by the footman.

She had tilted her bonneted head up to look at the house. Then a small horse had gotten out of the carriage. No, not a horse. An enormous dog. A bloodhound. What did Edmund mean by bringing a hunting dog to London?

Caro had touched the animal on the head and looked down as if she were speaking to it. Edmund had gotten out of the carriage next, and the three had disappeared into the town house.

Phineas had turned away, feeling like he might retch. No, not today. He would not call on her today. Showing up her first day in London would seem overly eager and . . . needy. Let her settle into the house. He would call tomorrow.

But, surprisingly, he had not felt equal to seeing her the next day either. He had waited five long days after he had already waited more than three long months for her.

Phineas Edge was not a man who waited for anything.

And now she was near him, her hand on his mouth. He had evoked something from her, finally. Not anger or jealousy, but anxiety or embarrassment. That desperate lunge to shut him up, to keep him from mentioning their coupling where the butler might hear.

He didn't care what reaction he had produced. He had produced one. And now she was close to him. Her green eyes were on him and only him. He had her attention. Did he dare kiss her palm as she covered his mouth with it?

No. Instead, he reached out and rested his hand lightly on the same buttock he had stroked when he had first seen her by the side of his bed at Sudbury Manor.

“No,” she said.

The dog growled.

He dropped his hand. How could she have been so responsive to him that night and not want him now?

She took her hand from his mouth and stepped away from him.

“Caro,” he whispered, “darling, let Phin kiss you now, just a little kiss. Please, darling.”

He couldn't believe himself, begging for a kiss. He had never done such a thing. Not even when he was fourteen and desperate for female attention, walking around with a half-hard cock every hour of the day it seemed.

But maybe he should beg more often. Because Caro came toward him and nodded and said, “A l-little one.”

Her pink tongue flashed to the front of her mouth and he was lost. Lost in thinking about that night. And the nights that might come. Hell, the days that might come.

He remembered in time she had said *a little one*. So he inched toward her and put his hand on the back of her neck and bent her head down and put his mouth on her warm lips and felt her quiver.

A little kiss. Not too short, not too long. He did not suck at her tongue as he longed to do. He kept his own tongue in his mouth.

He came away from her lips just a bit, and pressed his forehead to hers. Yes, she was trembling. Her breath was ragged.

“Maybe one more little one, darling?”

She nodded, her head going up and down only a fraction of an inch. Yes.

And this time, her lips parted slightly and he could feel the heat of her mouth. Oh, his cock was so stiff now with just two kisses. But he had said a little one and he kept his word. And it was just as delicious as the first little one. But now he was greedy.

“And darling, maybe, a bit bigger one?”

She nodded and parted her lips and he held her chin between his thumb and the knuckle of his forefinger and kissed her deeply, softly, his tongue tasting her gently, swirling over her tongue. He had not kissed her like this yet. This was a different kiss from the ones they had shared in Sudbury. Those kisses had been fervent, driven by their genitals. And yes, he was throbbing most painfully in his tight breeches right now. But despite that, this kiss was something else. This was a kiss for the sake of a kiss.

Yes, this kiss was bigger.

Quite a bit bigger.

Because it was in the middle of this kiss, he decided he had to marry her. He couldn't imagine a life without this kiss. Without her. Without his tall, taciturn beauty with her dark hair, her smooth skin, her beautiful cunt. He wanted her by him all the time, for the rest of his life. And surely that was possible with a special license and some good behavior on his part.

In a way, it was idiotic he had not come to this realization earlier. He had decided he was willing to marry her back in September when he had seen her portrait and grasped that he had just deflowered his friend's sister. But he had not made the leap from being willing to marry her to absolutely, without a doubt, *needing* to marry her.

What had he been thinking all these months? That somehow upon her arrival to London he would conduct a secret affair with her that would be satisfying to him? That a few clandestine afternoons would glut his desire for her?

No, no. He would have to make her his. Entirely. Forever. He had to have her. In his life, in his bed, all the time.

He ended the kiss. He released her neck and her chin and stepped back. Her eyes were far away. He felt sure if he put his hand under her dress, he would feel an aching, swollen slit there, as wet right now as he was hard. Ready for him.

“I would,” he said.

She blinked.

“I would like to take you to the exhibition to see the rest of the paintings. So I might get to know more about you, Caro, ask you questions, get you to talk to me.”

Her eyes opened wide.

“Not this afternoon. I’ll approach your brother and help him find a chaperone if he doesn’t want to come with us.” He chuckled. “Just between you and me, your brother hates picture-gazing so I am sure he has had his fill for the next five years just going with you once.”

He could see her fists clenching by her side.

“No.”

“No to the exhibition?” He gulped and ran his hand through his hair. “Or no to me?”

She looked hunted, her worried eyes darting around the room as if seeking an escape.

“Please, Caro, don’t say no so quickly. I promise I won’t do this again. I won’t ask you to kiss me. I won’t try to get you alone. I will do everything as it should be done. I promise.”

She shook her head, angry or frustrated, he could not tell. The dog nudged at Phineas’ leg with its nose. He looked down and petted the dog’s head, wishing he were touching Caro instead.

He looked back up at his future wife. “I’ll be good, I promise, darling.”

That caught her. She stared at him. She stepped closer to him and put both of her hands on his chest.

Oh, yes. She was putting her hands on his chest just as she had when she had told him she wanted to bed him. Him, in particular. Of course, at that time, he had thought she was a serving girl who had only set eyes on him for the first time that day. He didn’t know he had met her over a dozen years ago. Had she wanted him all that time? Unlikely, but how glorious if it were true.

To have been the object of her desire for so long.

She spoke. He watched her lips, saw her tongue.

“I don’t want . . . you to b-be good.”

She dragged both her hands down his waistcoat and gave a quick, brutal stroke over and then back up his fall-covered shaft, using both of her palms. As he was still choking over that unexpected fondling, she fled the room, the dog following her.

Phineas knew the butler was in the hall and must have seen Caroline leave the drawing room. Still, he needed a good ten minutes to calm himself before he could make his way to the front hall to tell the butler he would not wait for the Marquess of Sudbury any longer.

And then he was in a hurry. He needed to get home. He needed to get to a private place and finish what Caro had started.

She was incredible. Incredibly beautiful. Incredibly arousing.

And she didn’t want him to be good. Could anything be more ideal? Because Phineas Edge was very good at being bad.

TWELVE

She had been so weak. But when Phineas called her *darling*, she had trouble remembering why she shouldn't kiss him. And he had promised a little kiss. But that little kiss had been just as perilous as being in a bed with him. Because it had led to another dangerous little kiss and then another kiss with his tongue in her mouth, sparking her desire to have him inside of her again.

Hellfire, the man knew how to kiss.

Of course, he did. Hadn't he practiced enough?

She had been mere seconds away from lifting her skirts in the drawing room and taking his hand and putting it on her sex.

Thank God he had jolted her out of her lustful daze with the revolting notion that she might find herself stuttering and lisping in the Pall Mall gallery as he cringed away from her, his full lips curled in disgust, seeing his *darling* transformed into a grotesque.

She knew then she had to end this. With an absolute finality. He needed to satisfy his appetites with his other women, his viscountesses. He needed to give up whatever silly ideas he had about future social occasions and intimacies.

She had to make her wishes known to him, but she couldn't say *stop* or *stay away*. At last, she managed to find the words to reject him. Words that did not contain a single *ess*.

Although, in retrospect, she shouldn't have touched his cock. But he had made her so wild, so unreasonable, and she had wanted to feel that evidence of his desire for her one more time.

The morning after she had made it clear to Phineas that he was to leave her alone forever, her brother called her into the drawing room and introduced her to a very pretty woman. She was plump with dark, curly hair, round pink cheeks, and dark eyes.

“Caro, Lady Lutton will be your chaperone in case there is anything you want to do, and I'm busy.”

She curtsied to Lady Lutton who could not be more than a few years older than she was herself.

When Lady Lutton curtsied back, she smiled shyly at Caroline. Caroline felt something immediately with that smile. Lady Lutton carried her own wounds she hid from the world.

Lady Lutton nodded at Lavinia. “How beautiful your dog is, Lady Caroline.”

Caroline nodded.

Edmund cleared his throat. “I felt I needed to tell Lady Lutton about your difficulties with speech. She will be discreet. But she had to know.”

Caroline looked at her brother. His expression, usually stoic or frowning, was almost pleading. He had been so good to her these last months, so patient, but he must be so ready to have her be somebody else's responsibility.

She turned back to Lady Lutton. “I'm happy to m-meet you.”

Lady Lutton's smile became more genuine. “And I, you, Lady Caroline.”

“So, Caro, is there anything you want to do? I think I have a guess,” Edmund said.

“The g-g-gallery.”

“Wonderful,” Lady Lutton said. “Shall we go today?”

“Now?”

“No, I regret I have another engagement this morning, but I would be delighted to come back this afternoon. If that would suit, Lady Caroline?”

After luncheon, Lady Lutton returned to the Sudbury town house, and in the carriage on the way to the exhibition, Caroline eyed her chaperone. As she had noted before, Lady Lutton was pretty with her big, dark eyes and her round, dimpled cheeks. However, now Caroline observed Lady Lutton’s clothes were as out of fashion as Caroline’s dresses from Sudbury had been.

“Lady L-L-Lutton, how d-did you come to b-b-be a . . . ?” She could not say *chaperone*.

Lady Lutton looked down at her lap before raising her eyes to Caroline’s to answer her.

“My late husband was the Earl of Lutton.”

Lady Lutton was a widow! Could she be a potential wife for Edmund? And might her brother already have an interest? Because how had Edmund come to choose her as Caroline’s chaperone? He must think very highly of Lady Lutton.

“But we had no children, and the estate is entailed to the heir, of course. And I found I needed to have a bit of money to survive in London. Being a chaperone is very respectable, and I am very lucky you and your brother needed me.”

“Are y-you the mistress of my b-b-b-brother?” *Mithtreth*. She could not think of a word to substitute for *mistress* and she wanted her meaning to be absolutely clear. Caroline had not sensed Lady Lutton was attracted to Edmund—yet, she told herself, yet!—but she thought she had better make sure. She knew so little about men and women, and mistresses seemed commonplace in London. But if both parties were unmarried, surely a mistress could become a wife?

The Dowager Viscountess Starling could become the Countess of Burchester. The uninvited thought made her unaccountably angry and she tightened her hands into fists.

Lady Lutton looked startled at Caroline's question but then laughed, a small laugh. "I am happy you are direct, Lady Caroline, and you asked me rather than making an assumption. No, I am not your brother's mistress. I will never be any man's mistress, I assure you."

Although Lady Lutton's voice was sweet and calm, there was some strong emotion stirring her that Caroline could not place.

"I w-w-won't either." One time coupling and a few kisses didn't make someone a mistress, did it?

"Of course, you won't. Not that I scorn or blame women who are. It's very difficult to be unattached and unprotected. You are very lucky to have your brother. He obviously gives you a great deal of consideration."

How wonderful that Lady Lutton sensed Edmund could be caring, not just a gruff behemoth. Now, if Caroline could only get him to stop scowling so much. And soften his voice.

True, Lady Lutton wasn't what she had pictured for her brother—perhaps a bit too sweet, too fragile, too decorous—but she still might be a match. And Caroline liked her already.

"And you have another protector, as well. Please tell me the name of your mastiff."

"Lavinia is a bloodhound."

"A bloodhound named Lavinia. Why is she named Lavinia?"

Should Caroline tell her? "*Titus Andronicus*." Of course, she said *Tituth Andronicuth*. Disgusting.

Lady Lutton winced. "The play? I've never read it or seen it performed, but I've heard it's shockingly violent."

It was far too complicated to explain why she had named her dog Lavinia. Of course, paramount was that there were no *esses* in the name and it shortened easily to La. And, yes, *Titus* was a play full of gory and brutal acts and one of those was the rape and mutilation of Lavinia. But two years ago, Caroline had found it was the only Shakespeare play she had not yet

read. She had been in the middle of reading it when one of her father's bitches had birthed a litter and she had worked up the courage to ask for a puppy of her own. And she had thought of Lavinia, the woman with no tongue and no hands, who still found a way to communicate by writing in the dirt with a stick in her mouth. Of course, if she had finished reading the play before naming her dog, if she had gotten to the part where Lavinia's father kills her because she had been raped, Caroline might have chosen differently.

But by then, her puppy knew her name. And Lavinia was a pretty name.

"But Lavinia is such a pretty name."

Lady Lutton had said exactly what Caroline had been thinking at that moment.

Caroline nodded.

"My given name is Amanda. Would you call me Amanda? And could I call you Caroline?"

"I'd l-l-like that. Amanda." She might really be a friend for Caroline. Not a single *ess* in her name.

"I am so grateful you wanted to go to the exhibition. I haven't been to a painting exhibition in years."

"I enjoyed it before."

"I heard from your brother that you looked at the paintings near the front. Shall we start in the back and work our way to the front, going against the stream of everyone else?"

"Can we d-do that?"

"Yes, we can." Lady Lutton laughed again, her little laugh. "Isn't that what all really remarkable women do?"

When they got to the exhibition and bought their tickets, Lady Lutton tucked her arm under Caroline's and took her all the way to the back of the gallery. And it was even better than when she had come with Edmund. She felt Lady Lutton was looking at the pictures with her, not just standing by patiently.

After viewing a dozen paintings in the first hour, Caroline suddenly felt a change in the gallery. She couldn't put her finger on the reason, but she knew Phineas was nearby. She didn't smell him. She didn't hear him. She just knew he was there.

She turned her head, and he was holding his hat in one hand and moving in the same direction as the rest of the patrons. He was looking at the landscape two pictures ahead of Caroline and Lady Lutton. They would cross paths at the next painting.

He turned and saw her.

"How splendid. I thought I might have missed you." He stepped over to them and bowed. "Ladies."

She and Lady Lutton curtsied, and Caroline managed to get "My lord" out.

"Lord Burchester," Lady Lutton said.

Caroline rose out her curtsy and stared at her chaperone, aghast. Lady Lutton was acquainted with Phineas.

Her dismay must have been apparent because Lady Lutton spoke quickly. "Lady Caroline, I see you did not know Lord Burchester was the one who recommended me to your brother."

"Yes," Phineas said, grinning. "I thought you should see more of London and Lady Lutton would let you do that. And then how fortunate it was to find you here."

Fortunate? Not bloody likely. Lady Lutton must have told Phineas they would be here. And likewise, she would have told him about Caroline's lisp and stutter.

She felt the rise of vomit in her gullet.

"Shall we look at this picture together, Lady Caroline?" Phineas said, turning his hat in his hands, still grinning.

But Lady Lutton understood the look on Caroline's face. "I think Lady Caroline is ready to leave, Lord Burchester."

Caroline nodded and walked toward the front of the gallery as fast as she could, Lady Lutton and Phineas following behind.

“Wait, Caro—Lady Caroline, let me go find your carriage for you.” Phineas sounded anxious as they came out of the gallery and onto the pavement.

But Caroline could not wait for a carriage. The town house was only a mile away. She would walk. She set off in what she thought was the right direction, Lady Lutton at her heels. Phineas had disappeared somewhere, probably looking for the carriage.

“Lady Caroline, I want to assure you, first of all, I am employed by your brother and no other.” Lady Lutton was out of breath. “Lord Burchester was merely the one who gave my name to Lord Sudbury and I am grateful to him, but I would never break the confidence of an employer.”

Caroline’s stride slowed.

“Thank you, Caroline. My legs are much shorter than yours and I’m afraid I don’t have your youthful energy.”

Caroline came to a stop when she reached St. James Square and turned and faced Lady Lutton who was quite red-faced from the brisk walk.

“How did Lord B-B-B-Burchester know we would be at the g-gallery?”

“You must believe me, I have no idea. I did not tell him, I promise you.”

“How c-can I trust you?”

Lady Lutton looked down. “I’m afraid you can’t. My duty is to your brother, not you, unfortunately. I will always be obliged to report everything to him. That is the function of a chaperone.”

Caroline waved a hand in dismissal. “I d-dont c-c-care about Edmund. What about Lord B-B-B-B—Phineas?”
Phineath.

“As I said, I will disclose nothing to anyone besides your brother.”

“You didn’t tell the earl we would b-b-be at the gallery? Or about other m-m-matters?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Are you the m-m-mistress of the earl?”

“No. I told you I have no attachments. Lord Burchester just knew of my situation and offered to help me find suitable positions. He is very kind.”

The Sudbury carriage rolled up alongside them at that moment, Phineas hanging off the back with the footman. He jumped down and took off his hat.

“Your carriage, Lady Caroline.”

She couldn’t look at him. She didn’t accept his hand but climbed into the carriage on her own and Lady Luton followed her.

Caroline could no longer hold back her tears, and she surprised herself by sobbing the whole way back to the Sudbury town house. She almost never cried. And when she did, she cried in private, alone, away even from Jones, with Lavinia as her only witness. What was happening to her?

Lady Luton let Caroline cry and did not try to hush her up or comfort her. She did offer her a handkerchief for which Caroline was grateful as she did not seem to have one in her own reticule. She would need to remedy that in the future if she continued to be as soft as a spongecake. Crying in public!

Lady Luton followed Caroline into the town house. As Caroline began to ascend the stairs to her bedchamber, Lady Luton spoke for the first time since they had left St. James Square.

“Lady Caroline, I will talk to your brother now. But I want you to know, outside this house, all secrets are safe with me.”

Caroline had paused to listen and now she continued climbing the stairs. She heard Lady Luton knock on the door

to the library and ask to enter.

Hours later, when Caroline came down to dinner, Edmund gave her a searching look.

“I heard you were upset with Lady Lutton and accused her of telling Phineas you would be at the gallery.”

“Yes.” *Yeth.*

“Well, she didn’t. I told Phin. He had come round to talk about organizing some cricket for when it got warmer, and I mentioned it to him because he had said he wanted to show you his favorite pictures, remember?”

“Y-you told him?”

“Yes. If I knew you objected to him that much, I wouldn’t have. But why have you taken against Phin so strongly, Caro?”

How could she tell Edmund she couldn’t be around Phineas? Edmund would ask why and she couldn’t tell her brother that. Her mind raced. She had gotten it all wrong. She was so anxious about her secrets being discovered that she saw plots everywhere.

“N-n-no, I haven’t taken, I mean...I will have to apologize to Lady Lutton.”

“Does that mean you’re still willing to have her chaperone you?”

Lady Lutton already knew the secret Caroline wanted to keep from Phineas. She would either tell him or she wouldn’t. But now, Caroline was inclined to believe Lady Lutton wouldn’t, and she wanted to trust her. She was the first woman in London Caroline had met apart from the servants. She could already see Lady Lutton as Lady Sudbury someday. A sister for Caroline, a wife for her brother.

But Caroline didn’t trust Phineas. Phineas would ask Lady Lutton questions. Phineas was a rogue and a rake and was used to getting what he wanted. She would have to hope Lady Lutton could be strong and resist him. And that Caroline could devise a way to get Phineas to confine himself to his other

women. To leave her alone until he lost interest, as he inevitably would.

“I am willing,” she said.

“Good.” Edmund’s tone was one of relief. But maybe not solely because his sister still had a chaperone, but because he wanted an excuse to see Amanda?

“Do *you* like Lady Lut-t-ton?” she asked.

Her brother gave her a quizzical look. “What? Er, yes. I wouldn’t have you chaperoned by someone I didn’t like.”

It was not the rapturous answer she had hoped for, but it was a start.

THIRTEEN

“I am very apologetic, A-m-m-m-manda, for not believing you.”

Lady Lutton smiled uncertainly. “I accept your apology. I quite see how you might have come to the wrong conclusion. I’m so glad your brother was able to clear up our misunderstanding. Where shall we go today?”

“Maybe to buy a book or two?”

“Wonderful. Do you know which bookseller’s you would like to go to?”

“No.”

“Shall we go to Hatchards? We can walk. If you find yourself making a large purchase, they will deliver it back to the house.”

Caroline nodded. “Thank you.”

A half an hour later, she was on the highest floor of surely the most wonderful shop in the world, having wandered away from Lady Lutton who was two floors down, thumbing through *Poems, In Two Volumes* after Caroline had said Lady Lutton might like Wordsworth.

As for Caroline, she was lost in the bliss of having so many books to look at and the luxurious feeling of not needing to make a choice. She might buy one book today, but she could come back tomorrow and buy another. It was delightful.

She was browsing spines, not paying attention, when an arm suddenly curled around her waist. Before she could cry

out, she was pulled into a dark nook where the edge of a large bookcase shielded the corner from the gaze of anyone who might come into the room.

She had thought she was alone.

She experienced two seconds of panic as she was backed into a wall by a sturdy force until she heard “Darling, you did say you didn’t want me to be good,” and she started to throb from his voice alone.

Then her nostrils were flooded with the enticing smell of Phineas’ body. That bewitching male scent he had, the smell that had lingered on his shirt she had taken from his room. The shirt she had held to her face as she had touched herself for weeks afterwards until she had finally been forced to admit the shirt now smelled more of her own body than of his.

She was going to have to figure out a way to get rid of that shirt she had brought from Sudbury to London. It had been stupid to keep it so long.

But *he* was here now. The real article. The body that made that scent. He had both her wrists pinned to the wall on either side of her and he was pressing into her.

He whispered, “Phin has to make sure this is what you meant, darling. When you said you didn’t want me to be good? Is it?”

No, it wasn’t. She had meant she wanted him to stay a rogue and stay away from her. He was not for the likes of her. She knew her place. She had accepted her fate. Now he needed to let her alone and not torture her.

Because his torture was the most exquisite agony she had ever known.

She could feel his rigid length against her through their clothing. His warm breath was in her face. His scent surrounded her.

There was a moment of *I can’t* and *I shouldn’t* and then she banished her reason and allowed desire to overtake her. *Just once more*. She leaned down and brushed her mouth against those lips she could barely see. Those full, dangerous lips.

But his tender kiss back to her did not match what was happening below his waist. His cock was demanding, rubbing against her, causing her to ache and to dampen. But his kiss was sweet. Delicate. An innocent kiss. There was no ravishing of her mouth with his tongue.

She didn't want a sweet, delicate, innocent kiss.

She broke her wrists from his hold easily and took her hands down to his fall and rubbed his shaft there one, two, three times and he moaned into her mouth. Then she undid his fall, almost tearing his buttons off in her haste, and took his bare, hard cock into one hand and cupped his soft, warm scrotum in the other. She squeezed his testicles.

He groaned loudly now. That wonderful groan. "Oh, darling, you want me to be very bad, don't you?"

She nodded and was not convinced he could see her well enough to know she was encouraging him. But she could not say *yes* to him or even *please*.

So instead she said, "Take me," and was surprised by the huskiness of her own voice.

That got her the kind of kiss she wanted. The wild, dark, possessive kind that heralded what he was about to do to her. His hands went to her breasts under her unbuttoned coat and then to her skirts, pushing them up to her waist, and he was lifting one of her legs and putting it around his own waist. She released his cock and scrotum as he took hold of himself and she felt that hard shaft sticking into her wetness and his hand, fumbling a bit in his eagerness, looking for her entrance and then finding it.

She gasped. He was in her.

"Are you all right, darling? Am I hurting you?"

She answered him by grinding against him.

He had not wanted her to move in the bed in Sudbury. And she had obeyed. After all, she had wanted to please him that first time. And she had not known what it was all about. But now, oh, now she needed to move. To move him in and out even as she rubbed herself against him.

He answered himself. "I . . . guess . . . not." His voice was strained, and he took her mouth again.

She had been right all those months ago in her own bedchamber. Their heights were well matched for this vertical coupling. She only needed to bend her one supporting knee when she was taking his full length in. Which she was doing right now only every fifth or sixth swipe of her hips, instead using her rocking motion to stroke his tip into her opening as she put one hand on her pearl and the other hand in his hair.

His hands were full of her skirts as he clutched her waist and tried to seat himself more firmly within her, to control the movement between them. And he was strong, it would be easy for him to force her down over his cock, denying her the delicious arousal she had right now by just having his tip inside her.

So she broke the kiss, roughly pulling his head away by his hair. She needed a different kind of stimulation from Phineas so she could spend quickly and get away from him. She was desperate now but not insensible to their surroundings.

"Talk," she breathed in his ear as she continued to move her finger quickly over her pearl, while rocking her hips. "C-call me darling." Only one stutter. He wouldn't notice it. Not with his cock as hard as it was.

And he was willing to oblige her, his mouth finding her ear.

"Oh, my little darling, I have wanted you so badly. My cock has been aching for your beautiful quim. And you know Phin just wants to make his darling Caro feel good. You know that, right? I followed you here, trailing after you like I was a scenthound and you were a bitch in heat. I just had to be near you. To show you Phin can be bad if that's what you want, darling. Because you make me and my cock want to be very bad indeed. Because you're so good and tight and wet. Look what a good girl you are, taking all of me now. Darling."

The last *darling* was a grunt because he was using his strength, pulling her down and thrusting into her deeply. And she was very full and very stretched and her finger flew over

her pearl and his words, oh, his arousing words, and with every *darling*, she felt sure she would spend. And then she did, contracting around his cock and it was an entirely different pleasure from the one she gave herself and indeed, even from the climax he had given her five months ago. It was deep, diffuse, in her gut and in her womb.

“Oh, yes, Caro,” he was holding still now, “so beautiful. Oh, I can imagine myself doing this all the time with you, my angelic Amazon.”

These were not the words she wanted. She wanted *darling*, she wanted fucking. So as she felt the glorious waves roll through her body over and over again, she took the fingers that had been on her pearl and stuck them in his mouth.

Shut up, Phineas. Don't ruin it.

He sucked the fingers into his mouth and began to thrust into her again.

Her ecstasy, her beautiful ecstasy, had passed over her and there was only the pleasure of his penetration, his filling her.

Only. Ha. She might have another peak if he didn't stop soon.

But surely he was close to spending himself. His breathing was pressured. His thrusts were quick and forceful, just as they had been right before he had spent on top of her.

“B-be careful.” She took her fingers out of his mouth.

“Yes, darling,” he panted, “I will.” He pulled out of her, away from her and into the light and she watched him stroke himself and pulse and spill onto the floor.

Oh.

Such a lot of seed. And this was such a nice bookshop. She hoped he had a handkerchief and would clean up his spend. But she couldn't imagine him doing that.

She was astounding. Unimaginable. Unbelievable.

He had not had a clear plan in mind when he had entered the bookshop behind the two women. Or when he had grabbed Caro. He had thought a kiss or two, maybe. A quick press of bodies against each other. A tweak of a nipple. Something to relieve his lust for her temporarily. Something to entice her to let him do more at some future time, behind some closed door. He would improvise and see what she would allow. After all, hadn't she told him she didn't want him to be good? She certainly hadn't wanted his company at the exhibition with a chaperone, all proprieties being observed.

But for her to demand he take her, for her to seize his cock and balls . . . incredible. Oh, the danger of it. But the greatest danger, of course, was now, right now, with her clutching climax, her walls still wrapped around his aching phallus, her contractions trying to force him to come as well.

To be inside her as she reached her peak was everything he had imagined it would be when she had come under the rub of his finger in his bed in her father's house. Oh, why had he not brought a French letter with him today? So he could do what every bit of his most primitive nature was demanding he do and explode inside of her as she grabbed at him with her own sex.

But he had not come prepared. He had not thought there was any possibility this would happen.

And then the taste of her womanly juices as *she* penetrated *him*, his mouth, with her fingers. Oh. Hell. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. He withdrew just in time.

He didn't get any on her dress or on his trousers. That was a blessing. He grinned up at her but she was looking down at the floor, frowning. And now she was stooping and picking up the reticule she had dropped when he had grabbed her.

Wait. She was taking out a handkerchief and crouching to clean the floor.

"Oh, no, darling, don't do that." He stooped down and put his hand under her chin and kissed her lovely plum-colored lips before she started. "Let Phin get his fall buttoned up and he'll take care of that."

She stared at him, as imperturbable as ever. “You will?”

“Yes, I will, Caro. You stand up now.”

She stood with seeming reluctance and moved out of the corner. Light from a window fell on her as she replaced her handkerchief into her reticule, and he saw she was utterly unruffled. Not a drop of sweat beaded her forehead. Her hair was still arranged as it had been. Indeed, except for a few wrinkles in the front of her dress and the slightest flush to the lustrous skin of her face, there was no evidence this woman had just given him the fuck of his life.

And then she was gone, down the stairs, with not a look back. Not another word.

How perfect she was.

And how perfectly ironic it was that the Earl of Burchester found himself on his knees, his large handkerchief in his hand, wiping his own emissions from the floorboards. He wasn't really sure what ironic meant exactly, but wasn't this it? Maybe?

When he had told Caro he would take care of the mess, he hadn't really meant he would get down and clean it up himself. He had some vague idea he would arrange for someone else to do it. But, of course, that was impossible. And she had seen that right away.

He grinned. He wouldn't mind at all if his future included a great deal more kneeling, or for that matter, irony, as long as it was a future that also included Lady Caroline Haskett.

FOURTEEN

Two floors down, in the part of the bookshop which held volumes of poetry, a man with hair the color of honey stood in front of Lady Lutton. He was about Caroline's height and clearly a gentleman from his fine clothing. He broke off speaking immediately when he saw Caroline. He did not allow an introduction or make a formal bow. Instead, nodding his head in brief acknowledgement, he quickly made his way to the stairs that would take him down to the ground floor.

"Where did you go, Lady Caroline?" Lady Lutton clutched Caroline's arm. Her face was red, her voice anxious. Surely, Caroline's short absence should not cause this degree of alarm.

"T-t-top floor."

"You mustn't leave my side. I know you are used to a degree of liberty, having lived in the country for so long, but your brother would not want you to be alone in a shop."

"I w-w-won't tell him."

"I don't want to be the cause of any secrets between you and your brother. I will tell him about my dereliction of my duty. Oh, I hope he'll forgive me."

"I'll tell him I was in the wrong."

"I should not have allowed myself to be distracted by reading. After all, I am the chaperone. Oh, this is horrible." Her grip tightened on Caroline's arm.

Lady Lutton was working herself up into a state. But she could have no earthly idea what Caroline had actually been doing on the top floor. It must have been the blond man who had discomfited Lady Lutton so.

“Don’t worry, my b-b-brother will not let you go. I won’t let him.”

“He would be well within his rights to.” Lady Lutton took a deep breath. “I will hope he doesn’t.”

Caroline longed to ask her the name of the blond man, but she did not want to upset Lady Lutton further. Who could he be to her? Lady Lutton had said she had no attachments, but could the man be a hopeful suitor of some kind?

Please, no. Her brother could not compete with a handsome blond man who dressed like a dandy. Just as Caroline could not compete with a shapely blonde viscountess. And she had no intention of doing so. None whatsoever.

“Have you decided what you want to buy?” Lady Lutton’s color was starting to return to normal.

Caroline restricted herself to three purchases. A copy of *Much Ado About Nothing* since she had been surprised to find no Shakespeare in the library of the Sudbury town house. She might return tomorrow and order the complete folio. Why not? Her brother had told her to fill any gaps the library might have. She also chose Mr. Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake*; Lady Lutton had told her she would enjoy the story. And, of course, her own favorite, the Wordsworth’s *Poems* which she intended to gift to Lady Lutton. Caroline would say it was from her *and* Edmund.

There was no sign of the Earl of Burchester as Caroline selected her books. Thank goodness. She hoped he was keeping his word and cleaning up their mess. Because it was *their* mess, not just his. It was both of their doing, wasn’t it? And it was to the benefit of both them that he had not spilled inside her. But she thought he had been perilously close.

That could never happen again.

She had to end this.

But she had found no way to resist his touch, his words. If Phineas crept up behind her right now and whispered *lovely girl* in her ear, she wouldn't put it past herself to lift her skirts and offer herself to him like a harlot.

And, in fact, wasn't that what she had just done?

She looked around her at the shelves filled with books. Cervantes might have had a lisp. Perhaps Chaucer had a stammer. But no one knew because these men had *written* their words.

She would write Phineas a letter in a cool, calm, collected state, away from his full lips and his scent and his *darlings*. She would write him a letter that would keep him away from her.

As she was paying for her books on the ground floor, the shop door opened several times. She nodded at the clerk in thanks, and as she turned to leave with Lady Lutton, Caroline caught a glimpse of the back of a short but voluptuous woman, making her way up the stairs to the next floor of the bookshop. She wore a hat that must be the latest fashion, complete with sprays of tall feathers.

With my height, I could never wear a hat like that. But still, I would love to go to a milliner's. Perhaps Amanda and I can go tomorrow.

Phineas had finished cleaning the floorboards but was lingering, leaning against the wall where he had taken Lady Caroline Haskett. His arms were folded in front of his chest, his face was sore from grinning, and the now-filthy handkerchief was back in his pocket.

Surely, he could have a bit of a respite before he began worrying about Dashwood's reaction to the soiled handkerchief. Maybe he had better dispose of the handkerchief before going back to his rooms. He would tell Dashwood he had lost it.

Dashwood be damned!

Phineas deserved a moment to gloat over his incredible conquest. However, was it really *his* conquest?

His grin faded.

Caro was the one who had taken what might have been a surreptitious kiss and turned it into an absolutely astonishing bout of copulation. It was really *her* conquest.

Even better.

His grin reappeared.

Phineas Edge led the most charmed life. First, to have his friend's father loan the money for his commission in the navy. He had been a terrible sailor but a rather good officer and with a little more time, he might have been a captain of his own ship just like Jack MacNaughton. Then, to have two distant cousins he had never met die just after his own father's death and suddenly to become the Earl of Burchester, a title he had never expected to inherit. And, now, to have met Caro. To have had Caro. Twice. Both times at her demand.

He was just too lucky.

Now he needed to lay a plan to get her to marry him, not just couple with him. And he had to do it by being bad. Hmmmm. Tricky. He had always thought husbands were supposed to be good. But, damn it, if any man was up for the challenge, it was Phineas Edge.

He started down the staircase, his head full of naughty carriage rides, copulation on cold marble in moonlit follies at house parties, desperate kisses stolen on a veranda outside a ballroom. He was two treads away from where the stairs ended on the next floor down when he heard his name.

"Phineas Edge." The voice was high and breathy. He knew that voice. It belonged to Lady Starling.

She was posed in front of the atlases, some absurd feathered thing on her head, holding her lorgnette in front of her eyes in a most affected manner. She was rigged out in a gown that had to be inappropriate for the afternoon. Very low cut. Lots of cunning little bows and frills to draw the eye to her lush curves.

After Caro, Lady Starling appeared to be all artifice. Seeing her was like drinking a sickly sweet ratafia after having a cold draught of water from a deep well fed by the purest of springs.

But Phineas was always polite to those of the female sex, even those that had hurled breakables at his skull. He stepped off the staircase and made a bow.

“Lady Starling.”

She laughed as she curtsied to him. “Lord Burchester in a bookshop. And in Hatchards, no less, and descending from the top floor. The last time I checked, that floor was all philosophy and theology of the most dreadfully boring kind. The naughty books are all on the ground floor where everyone can see you picking up a badly disguised copy of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. What were you doing up there, Phin? Having an assignation with a bluestocking?” She laughed again.

Something in his face must have given him away because she stopped laughing abruptly and drew closer to him.

“Oh, yes, that *was* what you were doing. You’re wearing the smug grin you have when you are freshly fucked.”

Without warning, she grabbed him around the neck and pulled him down and he felt her tongue probing into his mouth. He pulled away from her and looked around. Thank goodness, this floor was as empty as the top one had been.

“Horatia, I must protest—”

She spit in his face and slapped his cheek. Hard. It hurt. He put his hand up to his stinging jaw. He remembered in time not to take out his seed-encrusted handkerchief to wipe off her spit.

“I can taste her on you, Phin,” Lady Starling screeched.

He remembered now, fondly, Caro’s fingers in his mouth after she had stimulated herself to climax with him inside her. So arousing those fingers had been, so wickedly coated with her own lovely honey, and yet, with Caro, it had seemed as natural as kissing and not at all perverse. But what a pity he had not yet licked her nubbin.

“Who is it? Is she still up there now?” Horatia started for the stairs but kept her eyes on his face. He couldn’t help it, his eyes looked down, as if he could see Caro on one of the lower floors.

Lady Starling stopped in her tracks. A look of dawning realization. “Oh, Phin. It’s that mast of a woman, isn’t it? The one I saw earlier this week at the theater with Edmund Haskett, the new Marquess of Sudbury. I passed her paying for her books as I came in. She was with that plump little mouse, Lady Lutton.”

How could he have been found out by Horatia so easily? Phineas cursed his inability to conceal anything.

“Ha!” Lady Starling crowed. “You always did have a thing for your friends’ women. After all, that’s how we met. Because of George Danforth. I wonder if I should tell Edmund you’ve been licking the quim of his mistress on the top floor of Hatchards?”

A wash of relief. She didn’t really know who Caro was. But he still had to shut Horatia up. Because if she did blab to Edmund, the marquess would quickly realize the woman Lady Starling was describing was his sister.

“You mustn’t tell him.”

“Mustn’t I?” She smiled. Her sly smile. How he had once swooned over that smile. Now he hated it. Give him his tall, unsmiling Caro.

“What do you want, Horatia?”

“Well, contrary to what you might think,” she tapped him with her lorgnette, “not you. But if you are occupying Edmund’s mistress with your tongue, I might set my cap for the marquess myself. Of course, I am curious about his famous phallus. And he’s a beautifully tall, big man. And all women love a tall man, Phin. Even a short woman like myself.”

“I’m average—”

“—height. Yes, I know. You remind everyone of that, often enough.”

“Lord Sudbury wouldn’t be interested in you.”

“Why not? Wouldn’t a dowager viscountess make an excellent marchioness? You know, I was never interested in marriage with you. You were for fun. And we had such a lot of fun, which was just what I needed last summer. But now I’m looking for marriage, security. A big cock and a big man with buckets of money.”

Phineas gritted his teeth. “I wish you every happiness, Lady Starling.” He bowed.

But Lady Starling blocked his way.

“Don’t be so quick, lover. If you want me to keep quiet about what you’re doing with your friend’s mistress, you’re going to help me seduce your friend.”

Caroline and Lady Lutton walked north, back toward Mayfair and the Sudbury town house. Caroline hugged her parcels to her chest, having declined delivery of her books.

“Amanda, I would like to write a l-letter to a gentleman.”

“Do you have an understanding with the gentleman?”

She looked at Lady Lutton. What did she mean by *understanding*?

“Are you engaged, Caroline?”

“No!”

“It is not considered proper to write a letter then.”

Caroline paused in her walking and Lady Lutton stopped as well. “B-b-but I want to tell him to leave me alone.”

“I think you should ask your brother to convey that message.”

“No.” She started walking again, quickly.

“Caroline.” Lady Lutton sounded out of breath. “Would you slow for a moment?”

Caroline shortened her steps. How frustrating. How was she going to get Phineas to leave her alone? She couldn't speak to him. She couldn't even be in the same room with him without dissolving into a puddle of lust. She had thought the idea of writing to him was a brilliant stroke, only to find out it was improper.

Lady Lutton had come even with Caroline and was catching her breath.

"I think an exception can be made for a letter of refusal. However, you must choose your words carefully."

"Will you read it for m-me and tell me if I have written it properly?"

Lady Lutton seemed taken aback. "Surely, it is a private matter since you don't want even your brother involved."

"I want you t-to read it and I want you to d-d-deliver it and I don't want you to tell my brother about it. If you deem the letter proper."

Lady Lutton was silent for two streets worth of walking at a slow pace.

"This is a very dangerous line you and I are both treading, Caroline."

"Please." *Pleathe*. "I have to have him leave me alone. If you d-don't help me, I will do it on my own, and it will be m-much more improper."

"Yes, Caroline. I will help you."

It was as if she were already a sister to Caroline. Again, the tears in the eyes, this time from gratitude.

"Thank you, Amanda."

To Phineas Edge, the Earl of Burchester.

My Lord—

If I have been so unfortunate as to give rise to the belief that I welcome your attentions, I reproach myself for doing so. I am sure the misunderstanding is entirely

due to my own failings and my lack of knowledge about the unwritten rules of London society.

I most humbly ask for your forgiveness and wish you to be assured there are no circumstances under which I would be in a position to accept further communication of any kind, good or bad, from you.

My chaperone and your acquaintance Lady Lutton is delivering this letter to you at my request. She has also perused the letter to ensure there might be nothing improper in my wording or in my expression of my feelings toward you. Also, at my request, she will not divulge the existence or the contents of this letter to the Marquess of Sudbury.

In the interest of maintaining your friendship with my brother, I suggest you do the same.

Sincerely,

Lady Caroline Haskett

Lady Lutton looked up from the piece of foolscap. They were sitting in the morning room. Caroline had written the letter at her mother's secretary.

"Is it improper?"

"No. But I had no idea you meant to write to the Earl of Burchester."

Caroline nodded.

"No wonder you were so upset when we came upon him at the painting exhibition."

Caroline nodded again.

"Now I understand your tears in the carriage. I wasn't sure why you were crying and our acquaintance was so new, I didn't want to pry." Lady Lutton handed the letter back to Caroline. "His lordship is a well-known lover of female beauty, but I am sure with that letter, he will leave you alone."

In fact, I'm surprised at him. He is, well . . . let me just say his reputation does not include pursuing maidens."

Caroline felt her face grow hot.

Lady Lutton tilted her head. "But, now that I think of it, I'm not surprised he would change his ways and pursue you."

Caroline was suddenly dying to question Lady Lutton further. Why was she not surprised? Why would Phineas pursue Caroline? But instead she folded the letter and sealed it. The less she knew about Phineas, the better.

"You will d-deliver the letter?"

Lady Lutton hesitated. "Are you sure you want me to, Caroline? It's just as your brother's friend and as an earl, he is a very appropriate match for you. And I am sure once he reads this letter, he will irrevocably leave you alone."

"I w-w-want that."

Lady Lutton looked sad. "Yes, I will deliver it. But I must admit I think you two would be a wonderful pair. You would be the making of him."

Caroline looked away from her first friend and toward the window out onto the back garden where she had played as a child.

"He is already made. As am I."

He ith already made. Ath am I.

FIFTEEN

Phineas wanted to spend the rest of his day thinking about his beautiful Caro. Instead, he was very busy with other concerns. Lady Starling had him in her talons and the quicker he fulfilled his obligation to her, the quicker she'd release him.

He planned an informal dinner party and sent out invitations. For the ladies, besides Lady Starling, he would have Lady Anne Cavendish, one of the many sisters of the Duke of Middlewich, as well as her elderly chaperone Lady Fitzhugh, whom Phineas had known since childhood. He would ask Lady Lutton, too. He wasn't privy to the details of her financial circumstances, but he suspected she could always do with a good dinner.

Then, for the men, there would be himself, William Dagenham, and Sir Matthew Elliot. Phineas' *coup de maître* was that at the last minute, he would impose on Edmund, get him to make up the numbers. Knowing his friend was in need, Edmund would not refuse Phineas.

Then he would have put Edmund in Horatia's path. The Goliath of Sudbury could handle Lady Starling as he saw fit. Of paramount importance now was that Edmund never know what a scoundrel Phineas had been with his sister. Phineas wanted there to be good feelings between him and his future brother-in-law, after all. Not like how things stood between Andrew Finch, the Duke of Abingdon, and George Danforth.

Dashwood was in a dither about being given such short notice for a dinner party.

Phineas shoed him away. “It doesn’t matter what I wear, Dashwood. Let me get this seating arrangement as it needs to be.”

Yes, Phineas’ clothes didn’t matter. He only wanted to impress one woman, and she would be conspicuously absent from this dinner party.

He discussed the menu with his cook, Mrs. Cull. He arranged for extra footmen to serve. He made the usual orders to the wine merchant and the florist, the same ones he had made for his dinner parties in the past.

Not that he could afford it. His visit to Burchester in October had yielded no improvement in his income. During his time there, William Dagenham had glanced through the ledgers with Albion Chambers looking over his shoulder, and in a rather deadly fashion, William had refused a loan from Phineas.

“You’re in almost as bad shape as I am, Phin. I’ll just have to hope my horses win all their races from now on. Then I can make *you* a loan.”

Yes, although Phineas had successfully rid himself of his little bit of belly roundness in anticipation of Caro coming to London, he had not fixed his financial situation. And now he wanted to marry her and to keep her well-fed and well-clothed. He wanted her to have all the comfortable luxuries of Sudbury Manor as well as a few emeralds.

Good God, he was going to have to find money quickly.

But first, he must appease Lady Starling.

At four in the afternoon on the day of the dinner, he nipped into the club and pretended to stumble upon Edmund and William playing cards.

“Ah, Edmund, good. I’ve run into a bit of trouble with my dinner party and wonder if you could be my extra man tonight? I know you don’t like to leave your sister in the evening, but I wouldn’t impose on you unless I was desperate.”

Edmund discarded. “Who are your guests besides William here?”

“Oh, Lady Lutton, Lady Anne Cavendish, Sir Matthew Elliot, some others.”

Edmund looked at Phineas suspiciously. “If I come, I count four men and two women. And you know I can’t bear Lady Anne Cavendish. She riles me and picks at me to no end.”

Phineas should have thought of that. And he *would* have thought of it if he hadn’t been still so intoxicated by his encounter with Caro. Damn. It would be unfathomably rude to withdraw Lady Anne’s invitation now.

In truth, Edmund and Lady Anne picked at each other. They were like warring stags, locking antlers and too stubborn to turn tail. But this was not the time to point out how Edmund played a part in the combustible hostility between Lady Anne and himself. Phineas would have to make some changes to his seating plan.

“Well, Lady Anne’s chaperone and Lady Starling are coming, as well.”

William snorted into his glass of whisky. Edmund grunted. “You’re back with Lady Starling.”

“No, no, no,” Phineas said hastily. “Just repaying a social obligation. There’s nothing there at all, nothing whatsoever.”

Phineas must make sure there was no misunderstanding in regards to his interest in Lady Starling. Because Edmund would never do what Phineas had done to George. Edmund would never poach a mistress from a friend. The marquess must think Lady Starling was completely available and Phineas was totally unencumbered.

Which he was. Except for Edmund’s sister. But Caro was no encumbrance. She was his gorgeous bride-to-be.

“Fine,” Edmund rumbled. “I’ll be there. Don’t like to let a friend down.”

“And you’ll explain to Lady Caroline about the numbers? I wouldn’t want your sister to think I was excluding her.”

“Don’t worry. Not even I would be able to prevail upon my sister to come to your dinner party.”

Phineas didn’t like the sound of that. Had Caro told Edmund she didn’t like Phineas?

“My dinner party, in particular?” Damn, his voice was a trifle too high.

Edmund looked at him from under his heavy, dark brows. “Any dinner party. You know she’s shy.”

I know no such thing, my friend. And after this sure-to-be-successful evening, I am going to get her to show me again how little shyness she possesses.

But the dinner party was a calamity.

He had himself at the head of the table and Edmund at the foot. He put Horatia on Edmund’s right and Lady Lutton on his left. He himself had Lady Anne on his right and Lady Fitzhugh on his left. William and Matthew were in the middle chairs on each side of the long table.

Despite putting Lady Anne as far away from Edmund as possible, the dinner conversation was dominated by a shouting match between the two of them about the Peterloo Massacre.

Phineas tried his best to lead the conversation away from divisive matters. “Now, it’s a terrible pity those people died, but sometimes these things happen, right? Did you hear Fremantle died last month? In Naples?”

Lady Anne and Edmund both turned their fury on him together.

Meanwhile, Sir Matthew Elliott with the enviably flat abdomen was droning on to a drunk William Dagenham about how the policing of Paris was far superior to that of London and the capital would benefit from a centralized system which would lead to increased safety for the populace. Well, Sir Matthew addressed William with his words, but his eyes were glued on Lady Lutton cater-corner from him.

For her part, Lady Lutton was avoiding looking at anyone at the dinner table entirely, never speaking, her eyes firmly

fixed on her plate.

Lady Fitzhugh was also very quiet throughout the dinner, and she was a natural chatterbox like Phineas. Usually, when Phineas and the much older Lady Fitzhugh got together, they could twitter away for hours. She was likely furious at Phineas for having Lady Anne and Edmund together at the same dinner. Phineas should have known better.

And, of course, Lady Starling was glaring daggers down the table at Phineas. She had had no chance to flirt with Edmund since he had been so consumed with rebutting Lady Anne. In fact, Edmund's temper had flared so high tonight, Horatia likely could have groped him under the table and the man wouldn't have noticed.

"You still owe me, Phin. I'm very close to telling the marquess everything," Lady Starling said, with absolutely no veil to her threat as she swept out of his rooms.

He sighed and closed the door, thinking she was the last guest to leave, and was surprised to find Lady Lutton still standing in the hall when he turned around.

He bowed. "Lady Lutton, I do apologize. It's late. Let me arrange for my carriage to take you home."

Lady Lutton's face was pink and she had drunk almost no wine at dinner. She fluttered one of her hands.

"Thank you, Lord Burchester, that would be most kind. I did not know, I mean to say, I was not aware, the other guests, I will know in the future . . . but I must tell you that I stayed behind because I have something to give to you. A letter from Lady Caroline Haskett. She doesn't want her brother to know about it."

She took a letter from her reticule and held it out. Phineas couldn't get a breath in. Caro had written to him.

He took the letter from Lady Lutton, trembling slightly. He glanced at her face. She had been flushed with some kind of embarrassment just a moment ago, but now she had a look of concern.

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

He put the letter in his tailcoat pocket. He made his voice as natural as he could.

“She’s jilting me, is that it?”

Lady Lutton’s tone was sympathetic but firm. “I am party to the contents of the letter. You will see the lady wishes to have no further intercourse with you and is, in fact, under the impression there is no understanding between the two of you and therefore, there is no jilting one way or another. And if there is, I do not wish to hear of it, Lord Burchester. I have already strained my sense of duty by not informing her brother of this and by giving you the letter. But Lady Caroline needs a friend, and I have to be that for her right now.”

Phineas blinked several times. *I could be her friend.*

“Yes, Lady Lutton. I’ll go tell my coachman to get the carriage ready.”

He arranged for the carriage as quickly as he could and put Lady Lutton into it, bidding her goodnight and thanking her for coming to the dinner and delivering the letter. It was on the tip of his tongue to thank her also for being a friend to his Caro, but he stopped himself.

She wasn’t *his* Caro. She had never been his. He had tricked himself into thinking she was because he had wanted it to be so.

He went to his dressing room and read the cold, impersonal letter from the woman he had hoped to make his wife.

After he had read the letter five times, he folded it carefully and put it in the cedar box which held a silk nightdress trimmed in Brussels lace.

Yes, he could have been her friend. He could have been, if he hadn’t been chasing his cock. He could have been, if he hadn’t been begging for kisses in her brother’s drawing room, grabbing her around her waist at Hatchards.

He could have gone slowly, accustomed her to the idea of his visiting the town house, dropping in to see her brother, staying for tea and a chat, coming to dinners, joining her and

her brother in her brother's box at the theater. He could have played with her dog. He could have shown her another side of himself, not just the one that lay under the fall of his breeches. He could have gotten her to talk to him. Instead, he had been thrilled to fuck her in a public place.

She had wanted him to be bad because that's all he was good for.

He held still. When Dashwood came in, Phineas sent him away, saying he would see him in the morning.

He had a lot of feelings standing in his dressing room. Feelings he had no name for, feelings he wasn't used to.

Yes, there was a bruised vanity. But he was used to that. Wasn't that why he was a clown at times? So he could make fun of himself before someone else did?

It was more than a simple rejection. Far more wounding and grim than that.

It was emptiness and yearning. It was pain and loss. How could he feel loss when she had never really been his? But in his head, all those months, she had been.

He had put the cart before the horse, his cock before his heart, and he had only himself to blame.

SIXTEEN

Phineas paced the floor of the library of the Sudbury town house as he waited for Edmund to come home. Over the last week, Lady Starling had pestered Phineas multiple times to arrange for Edmund to come back to the theater without his presumed mistress. The plan was to go to Antonio's for some fencing, take Edmund to the club afterwards, and then persuade him to go to the theater.

Lady Starling must be scheming to prance her uninvited way into the Sudbury box and seduce the marquess as a play unfolded. Knowing Horatia, that wouldn't be all that would unfold in the Sudbury box tonight.

Phineas sat down heavily in a wing chair. He was still bowing to Lady Starling's extortion even though Caro had roundly rejected him with her letter only days after their passion in the bookshop. It was just like when he had approached her in her bedchamber at Sudbury Manor all over again. To have such an impulsive and heated physical interaction and then to turn him away with a chilling frost.

But he still couldn't allow her brother to know what he had done with her. He couldn't lose Edmund along with Caro. The hole in his life would become a vast, gaping abyss.

And Edmund was his thread of connection to the woman he still wanted. And someday, somehow, Phineas might tug on that thread and pull her towards him without snapping the filament.

He had no idea how he could do it. But he couldn't help but be hopeful. The alternative—the darkness that had consumed him for so many days after his dinner party—was too bleak to consider.

Damn the man. Edmund was never late. And why had Phineas agreed to meet him here? They could have met at the club instead. That would have been preferable.

Because Phineas was acutely aware that somewhere above his head on an upper floor, Lady Caroline Haskett was breathing. Thinking. Perhaps undressing. Removing her stays, running her own hands over her chemise-covered breasts—hell, if he was going to fantasize, why make them chemise-covered? Make them bare, with her small, sweetly-sensitive nipples exposed, just as they had been when she had gotten into his bed months ago.

This was maddening. He must occupy himself and quash any thoughts of Caro and her bosom. He stood up and pulled his breeches away from his mild engorgement.

He was in a library, he would look at a book. He would have preferred a newspaper as books had never really held his attention, but he was desperate for a distraction right now.

He went to the shelves and took down the first book his hand touched. A smallish one. Those tended to be novels, didn't they? Or verse. Now, where were—?

He patted himself and pulled his spectacles out of the breast pocket of his tailcoat—Dashwood had, of course, stowed them there—and put them on. He was still a trifle embarrassed about the spectacles. Didn't feel they fit who he was. But he couldn't read a damn thing without them.

He sat and opened the book. It was filled with handwriting. Not a novel at all. Some kind of diary or journal. He got up to put it back.

Wait.

He opened the small book to the inside cover and in a careful, legible script were the words *Property of Lady Caroline Haskett*.

He was going to go to hell for this. Anybody else, he would put the diary back. But he was starved for any contact with her, no matter how tenuous. In a way, wasn't it her fault he was willing to read her diary? If she would just see him and talk to him, even write him another harrowing letter, he wouldn't be driven to this.

He settled down in the chair again and hoped Edmund would be at least an hour late.

The diary was old, he saw now. The first entry was from thirteen years ago. Many of the days had only a few words. A description of the weather. A description of a cake. A description of a poem. Some were longer.

Father was v. angry at me today because I could not tell him how old I was going to be for my seventeenth birthday next week. He does not understand how nervous I get because I know I will vex him with my esses. And then the nerves paralyze me and I cannot get a word out and then he is more than vexed. He is furious. Mother says I must try to understand Father. What I don't understand is why Father doesn't try to understand me!

Edmund had told Phineas his father and Caro got along. Apparently that was not always true. And how fascinating that Caro had been a nervous type when she was sixteen going on seventeen. He would have never guessed by her equanimity now. Well, her equanimity except when she had come to his bed, naked and beautiful. She had been nervous at first, hadn't she? Just a bit. But that had been short-lived. Because after all, *she* had tried to take *him*.

He chuckled a little in pleasure at that memory.

But he didn't understand what she meant by *esses*. He read another entry.

Mother says I am to have a Season! She has talked Father round! She says no one will expect me to say more than a few words during a dance. I am to be

measured for my ball gowns tomorrow! I am to have at least seven, Mother says. My first ball is to be Lady Huxley's ball!

Phineas strained his memory. Was that the ball where he had danced with her? He believed it was. And he found himself liking this girlish Caro with her exclamation points. Enormously. Where had she gone?

The entry went on.

Mother says a Season is not really for pretty dresses and for dancing but for meeting a husband and I should have a clear idea in my mind of what I want in a husband. And then I will know when I meet him!

I have already decided my husband should be tall since I am tall.

Phineas winced. He didn't mind his height. He wasn't really short. He was average height. Surely, he was a little taller than average. Or at least not too much shorter than average.

He liked himself as he was. And he couldn't do a damn thing about his height.

Why couldn't he have come from taller stock? Had a bit of Highlander in him like Jack MacNaughton? Or whatever giants lurked in the Haskett bloodline?

Damn.

My husband should be well-read and bookish. He might even wear spectacles!

Phineas had the spectacles, but no one could call him well-read or bookish. The last book he had touched had been that one he had pretended to read at Sudbury Manor. But the spectacles might count for something in his favor?

*My husband should have no dreaded esses in his name.
I hate esses!*

What was this about *esses* again? What were *esses*? And then he saw the answer in the next line.

*So that means no Samuels, no Stephens, no Simons.
And no esses in the middle of the name either! So no
Josephs, no Isaacs, no Christophers!*

So no *Phineases* either, he suspected. But Phin was surely a suitable substitute for Phineas? He wouldn't mind if Caro called him Phin as his friends did. As long as she called him something besides *my lord*.

He put the book down on his leg and looked up at the ceiling. Could Caro have a lisp? That would explain a hatred of *esses*. And he could not recall a single *ess* in the few words she had ever given him.

He would say something to her brother tonight—hint at it gently—and see what Edmund said.

The entry about Caro's speculative future husband went on, but Phineas was anxious to get to where he came into her life. He flipped ahead to see what, if anything, she had written about him after Lady Huxley's ball.

There were a series of entries he managed to skim quickly. Dress fittings. Fabrics. Trims. Shoes and gloves and hose.

Edmund might come home any minute now. He finally found the entry the day after the ball.

I had a v. nice time at Lady Huxley's ball. There were a great many people there and it was v. crowded and hot. I did not have many partners and that made me sad and glad. Sad because I would have liked to dance more. I do love dancing. Someday I will dance every dance at a ball! But I was glad not to have too many partners because the dances I did have made me v. nervous. Except my first dance.

Phineas's heart thudded. This was him.

Edmund's friend Phineas Edge, the Earl of Burchester, was my first dance partner. He is Edmund's age so I know he is three and twenty, but he is already an earl and he has lovely silver hair at his temples. Oh, oh, he is so handsome!

She had thought him handsome. And had been inclined to use an exclamation point about the fact. Phineas was flooded with a warmth the likes of which he had never felt before. Suddenly, her letter of rejection didn't matter. The letter was a sham. Here were her real feelings about him.

I am sure he knows he is handsome, though. He is quite arrogant in the most delicious way.

Arrogant wasn't too damning of a description, was it? And he wasn't arrogant now. Not after her letter. Surely, she would forgive his youthful bravado when he had thought he was every girl's dream come true? And *delicious* must be considered all to the good.

We are exactly the same height!

Caro must have grown since then. Now she was several inches taller than he was.

But the best thing was that he talked the whole time we were dancing. I did not have to say a thing! He didn't say anything particularly clever. I just think he likes to talk. And then I thought, what if he is nervous and that is why he is talking so much? And then I felt so calm. I was taking care of him by letting him talk. He was taking care of me by letting me not talk!

That was my favorite dance. I thought he might ask me again, but he did not. Apparently that is not something that is done. You can only dance once with a

partner at a ball unless you are engaged or madly in love and willing to defy propriety! I hope I have the opportunity to dance two dances with the same partner someday!

But I would be happy just to dance every dance with a different partner at my next ball. I would be nervous to have to speak to so many men, but I think the dancing would make me happy! I don't want to be a wallflower. Mother says a wallflower is a girl who stands by the wall because she doesn't have a partner for a dance.

But I will be sure to see Phineas at future balls because he is Edmund's friend. So I will certainly get to dance with him again!

That was the last entry. He turned pages, but they were all blank, going forward.

She had never danced with him again because the Marchioness of Sudbury had fallen down the stairs and died the day after this entry was written. And the old marquess had taken Caro to the country shortly afterwards, and the two of them had never returned to London. Likely, Caro's diary had been abandoned here, moved onto a library shelf, and, besides a dusting by a maid, had never been touched again until now. By him.

And although he knew he should feel wretched to have spied on a young girl's most tender feelings, he could not bring himself to feel that way. He felt only wretched for her. That she had not had more dances and more balls.

Oh, Caro.

He heard someone come into the library, and he shoved the small volume into his tailcoat pocket where it just fit. Yes, he was pilfering, but he needed to read again the part where he was handsome and his dance had been her favorite one.

The door clicked shut, and he stayed seated, waiting for Edmund to apologize because the butler would have told him Phineas had been waiting for over half an hour, but there was

only a soft rustling and then the person who had come into the library moved into his field of vision.

It was Caro.

A lavender dress of half-mourning. Her dark hair in a pinned swirl at the back of her head, a green ribbon tied around the bun. He had no eye for color, but he would bet a hundred guineas he didn't possess that the ribbon matched her eyes.

She went to the shelves behind the table and replaced a volume and then ran her fingers over the spines as if looking for another book.

He felt he must warn her.

“Don't be startled, Lady Caroline.” He stood. “I'm just waiting for your brother. I didn't want to take you by surprise.”

She stood still, keeping her back to him. It was much the same view of her he had seen when he had come into her bedchamber at Sudbury Manor.

Those upright shoulders. After reading her diary, he knew a bit of the strength it must take to stand so tall all the time.

That silence. Maybe he understood it more now. The dreaded *esses*. But he would not force her to talk. He would do the talking. He wanted to do that. As always, it soothed him.

“I'm extremely happy to see you and have a chance to speak to you. I hope you might give some thought to allowing me to renew my attentions to you.”

Her back stiffened even further.

“Oh, no, I apologize.” He foolishly bowed even though she was facing away from him. “I didn't mean bedchamber attentions. I meant perhaps I could call on you. Or we could take a stroll. I am sure Lady Luton would be willing to chaperone since Edmund might have a rather, how should I say this, stifling effect on me. Not that there would be anything that needed stifling, but I would want to feel I might express some affection without fearing your chaperone was

going to slit my throat. Although perhaps Edmund might feel a good deal more comfortable with my calling on you if he did chaperone us at first, since he is aware, perhaps a good deal too aware, that I may not have always been a gentleman with some females.”

He chuckled nervously. “But, darling, I know you know that already because of how we met last year when I did not know who you were, and I hope it doesn’t make you hate me because I want you to know I feel entirely differently about you. I mean, not entirely differently, you know that, I feel the same, but I mean I would want to treat you quite as you should be treated, as Lady Caroline and as the sister of my friend. I would want to,” he gulped, “court you. Unless you really did mean you wanted me to be bad, but I would much prefer to court you and be bad at the same time, if that makes sense. Or whatever you want.”

She kept her face averted from him and moved toward the door of the library.

He caught her long, slender arm, and held her in place easily as she pulled against him, her head down.

“Perhaps, you might look at me once, darling, and just give me a nod or a shake of your head so Phin might know if he stands any chance with you.”

From her profile, he could tell she was furious. She raised her head and he prepared himself for a vehement tug of her arm, a slap, a river of venomous words. But perhaps a river of venom adorned with a lisp?

Instead, she gasped.

The rage on her face melted and he saw the same look in her eyes he had seen when he had first nuzzled her tidbit with his cock in Sudbury. What was that look? Some kind of wonderment, he supposed. Perhaps a thrill? He could only hope.

But what had made her abruptly change course? Could it be his looks? She had thought him handsome when she was seventeen. And she had liked his silver at his temples and it

had only spread since then. He himself loathed the gray, thinking it made him look fifty from a distance when he was still a strapping youngish man of thirty-five. But she had written she liked it.

But she had seen it already. That and more.

What had made her melt?

She reached out with her free hand and he was so prepared for a slap that he flinched. Her hand went to his face and touched his spectacles.

Damn it. He had forgotten he still had the spectacles on, pushed down to the end of his nose, and he had been looking at her over them this whole time, quite like some harassed and underpaid clerk.

He reached up to take them off, but she pushed his hand roughly away and stepped toward him, her eyes on his.

“You . . . w-wear thspectacleth,” she choked out.

Her pink tongue flashed to the front of her mouth, behind her teeth, as she said *spectacles*. His cock turned to iron in his breeches.

He didn't know how it happened, but suddenly she was on him. He could swear he had made no move toward her. It was all Caro. Her hands were in his hair and she used the base of her palms to force his face up to hers and her tongue was in his mouth and she was groaning into him so loudly he felt his uvula vibrate.

The spectacles she had mentioned in her diary thirteen years ago. She had a very strong response to them. A very positive, very strong response.

He was glad he had the diary safe in his pocket. He would have to make a study of what else she wanted in a husband. If the spectacles did this, just think if he learned to become bookish and told her to call him Phin instead of Phineas.

It was too bad he couldn't manage to grow a few more inches.

Oh, her extraordinary excitement and her pink tongue in his mouth, licking him up. He had never had a woman attack him this way. Exhibit her unbridled desire first, with no care for his own reaction or his feelings.

He was about to show his appreciation, to move his arms from his sides and pull her even closer if possible, to squeeze her bottom, to grab at one of her haunches and lift her leg and curl it around his waist so she might rub herself through her skirt against his throbbing cock in his breeches.

He was about to do all that—and more—when the door to the library opened.

“What the hell is going on?” thundered his friend and her brother as Caro’s tongue continued to maraud Phineas’ mouth.

SEVENTEEN

No. No.

The appalling shame that all she wanted to do was to keep kissing Phineas but also have his cock inside her as her brother shouted at her. She knew it was all over now. She would be sent back to Sudbury Manor in disgrace. These were her last kisses ever and she was going to take them. So she was still kissing Phineas as her brother pulled her away.

“What are you doing, Caro?”

Edmund’s eyebrows were fierce like Father’s. He turned to Phineas and raised a fist. “You viper—”

Caroline grabbed her brother’s arm. He tried to throw her off, but she clung to him.

“Me!” she screamed.

She got between him and Phineas.

“Me!” she screamed again.

Edmund looked at her and lowered his arm.

“Me. I k-k-k-k—” She took a deep breath. Would the floor swallow her up and deliver her to hell so she didn’t have to go through this? “I k-k-kissed him!” *Kithed him*. “He . . . n-n-n-nothing.”

“You’re saying the Earl of Burchester, whom I personally know to be a debauched libertine of the highest order, didn’t touch you?”

“Edmund—” This was from Phineas, behind her.

“Shut up, Burchester.” Edmund did not even spare Phineas a look.

“I . . . I . . .” She had no breath to say anything.

Edmund folded his arms and waited. He was very angry and she could tell he was getting impatient, and her father’s impatience had always made things worse for her.

“He-didn’t-touch-me-I-kissed-him-so-leave-him-alone-Edmund.” She had got it all out in one breath.

“What were you doing alone with him, Caro?”

“I . . .”

Phineas spoke up again, “If I might interject here—”

“Shut up, Burchester.”

“I . . . d-d-didn’t kn-kn-kn—”

“You didn’t know he was in the library?”

She nodded.

“Why didn’t you leave immediately when you found him here?”

“Lady Caroline was on her way out of the libr—”

“Shut up, Phineas.” *Phineath*. That was her.

Edmund guffawed. “Caro, Caro. You—” He could barely speak through his chortling. “You told him to shut up. Ha! I never thought I would ever hear *shut up* from you.”

Caroline turned around and Phineas was not laughing, but he was smiling. How could he smile? Didn’t he know how dreadful this was?

She turned back to her brother who was still snorting.

“I suppose if a kiss gave you the pluck to tell him to shut up, it’s not a bad trade.”

“P-p-p-p-p—” She gulped. “P-p-p-p-p—” She would have to give up.

“I think Lady Caroline is trying to say she has plenty of pluck, just maybe it isn’t easy to say all the right words all the

time?”

Well, actually, she had been trying to say *please leave him alone*. But she liked what Phineas had imagined she was going to say. Quite a bit. Damn him.

Edmund’s brows suddenly beetled with anger and he pushed Caroline out of the way and stood over Phineas who kept his arms at his sides, relaxed, still smiling.

“Are you presuming to tell me what my sister is saying, Burchester?”

Phineas held his hands up and shrugged.

Edmund whirled. “And you! You called him Phineas! What is that about?”

She gritted her teeth and looked at him stonily. Edmund didn’t have a right to her secrets. No one did. She had only told him as much as she had in order to keep him from killing Phineas.

She felt a pang as she saw Phineas finally taking off his spectacles and putting them away inside his tailcoat. She should hate those spectacles. They were what had gotten her into such trouble. But instead, she felt an enormous affection for them. Such dear things. And they had made Phineas so irresistible. He was pretty irresistible without the spectacles—the lips, the hair, the grins, the *darlings*. The *darlings* that made her so wet. But all that, along with the incongruity of the spectacles—quite simply, they had put her over the top and she had lost control.

“Damn.” Edmund was looking past her, over her shoulder. She turned around. The library door was open. Edmund took two enormous strides to the door and closed it.

“We are in very deep trouble,” he announced, his hand resting flat on the door before clenching into a fist.

“Why is that?” Phineas asked, sounding easy, unafraid. How comforting his voice was.

“I had forgotten the bloody door was open.” Edmund threw himself into a chair.

She held herself very still.

“And that is important for what reason?” Phineas asked.

Edmund leaned forward and spoke in a low voice. “I am late because I ran into Lady Huxley, the biggest gossip in the whole *ton*, out in the street with her daughter Mrs. Winthrop, and we chatted awhile and I asked them both to come back here. I thought we would have some tea and Lady Caroline would come down and Lady Huxley would become reacquainted with her and ask her to come to her ball, which we all know is one of the most important events of the Season. So Lady Huxley and her daughter are just across the hall there in the drawing room and have heard everything that has passed in this room. Except this bit. Because the door is closed.”

“But there is no difficulty, Sudbury,” Phineas said, just as smooth and untroubled as before.

Oh, no. No. No. Not this. Please don't.

“I would like your permission to ask for Lady Caroline Haskett's hand in marriage.”

No. No. No.

She stumbled to the door and tugged on the knob and finally got it open. She heard her name being called out behind her by Phineas. She ran up the stairs to her bedchamber where she locked the door behind her and threw herself on the bed. Lavinia came over to her and whined.

No. No. No.

This wasn't supposed to happen. She was supposed to enjoy her one night with him and never see him again. She wasn't supposed to marry him. He wasn't her husband. No one was.

She punched her pillow. She wasn't suitable. She would never be suitable. She had accepted that long ago. Completely accepted it based on facts, on logic, on her peculiar circumstances.

Damn it, why couldn't she have also accepted she would never experience physical pleasure with a man?

But, no. She had wanted, she had craved, she had longed. She had even prayed, knowing what she wanted was a sin. And in the end, she had thought she might safely have her kisses and her touches from him. From Phineas.

He was a notoriously indiscriminate lover of the fair sex. She would be just one drop of water in an ocean of women for him. She could slip into his bed and be able to slip out again just as easily.

She could have her one night of passion with no worry of attachment.

That was the plan.

But she hadn't followed it. Instead, she had done foolish thing after foolish thing, starting with kissing him in her bedchamber. Then coming to London where she might see him around any corner. Kissing him in the drawing room. Fornicating with him in the bookseller's. Kissing him again here in the library where they were sure to be caught by her brother.

She didn't want to marry Phineas. And she wouldn't. And it wasn't because she didn't love him. She didn't, absolutely not. But not loving him had nothing to do with not wanting to marry him. After all, she had known from a young age that love and marriage had nothing to do with each other. Witness her parents. Her father, a man incapable of love. Her mother who had found her love in a bottle. Marriage for love was a fairy story and entirely irrelevant to her refusal to marry Phineas.

She didn't want to marry him because . . . because he was a silly, irresponsible man who lay with serving girls and coupled with a woman he barely knew, standing up in a shop.

And she didn't want to marry him because . . . because she didn't want to spend any more time around him.

And she didn't want to spend any more more time around him . . . damn damn damn damn . . . she didn't want to spend any more time around him because she *would* fall in love with him.

She was sobbing now and wasn't sure when she had started.

Every person she had ever loved had hurt her. Her father. Her mother. Even her brother had hurt her, leaving her alone in Sudbury with her father all those years.

And Phineas? An inveterate rake, he couldn't help but hurt her. By his very nature, he would break the heart of a wife who loved him.

He would never be able to keep his fall buttoned up. He would never want to.

If she became his wife, she would fall in love with him and he would destroy what remained of her by coupling with every Mary, Susan, and Nancy.

Much better not to marry Phineas Edge. It was her only chance of staying sane. Strong. Invulnerable. Unbreakable. All the things she had become over the last thirteen years.

All the things she had to be in order to stay safe.

“Caro!” Phineas took four steps toward the library door but Edmund got there before him and closed the door and stood in front of it.

“No, Phin. Let her go.”

Caro was Edmund's sister. This was Edmund's house. Edmund would have no difficulty pounding Phineas into the carpet despite Phineas' boxing lessons. There was no getting past him.

Phineas held up both his hands and backed away. But, damn, why was this woman always showing him such fervent physical affection and then fleeing him?

“You and I must talk.” Edmund's posture, expression, and voice were full of menace.

“Yes.”

“So talk. Was your proposal sincere?”

“Yes.” For the first time in his life, Phineas felt a short answer was best.

“You want to marry my sister?”

“Yes.”

Edmund took a step toward him. “One kiss in a library and you want to get married?”

Phineas laughed nervously. “As her brother, you may not have noticed, but Lady Caroline is very beautiful.”

“You’ve only met her, what? Twice?” Edmund’s glare was so intense Phineas had to force himself to keep meeting his eyes.

“You forget I met her thirteen years ago.”

“You’ve harbored an interest in her for thirteen years?”

Stay as close the truth as you can, imbecile.

“I met her briefly again in Sudbury. The morning of the shoot? Uh, when I stayed back to read? I was very taken with her then.”

Edmund grunted. “So that’s why you were after me to bring her to London.”

“Yes. I admit it. Yes. I hoped you’d bring her here and I would have a chance to further my acquaintance with her.”
And bed her again. “And court her.”

“Court her?” Edmund’s eyes narrowed. “We’ve been friends a long time. You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe you. You’ve never courted a woman in your life. Seduced, yes. Courted, never.”

“Your sister is exceptional.”

Edmund shook his head.

“You think so little of your sister, Edmund?”

Edmund’s eyebrows came together and his hands turned into fists at his side.

Stupid. That was a stupid thing to say.

“No. I think so little of you, Burchester.”

Phineas was seconds away from a black eye or a broken jaw. Thank goodness he had no difficulty coming up with words quickly. “You know a lot about me. Too much, I’m sure, for me to be your first choice for your sister. But I hope you can believe I’ve changed my ways. I shed all my mistresses in September after meeting Lady Caroline again. I didn’t really know why I did it at the time, but now I do.” He took a deep breath. “I really think she’s the woman for me, Edmund. I don’t know if I’m the man for her, but my deepest wish is to make your sister happy. And I will put all my energies toward that end. And you know I’m very energetic.”

Edmund’s fists relaxed. But his face was still twisted in a suspicious scowl. “I was under the impression you weren’t ready to get married.”

“Caro changed my mind.”

Edmund shook his head.

Phineas went on. “And although I wouldn’t have wanted it this way, would never have designed it so your sister’s reputation was compromised, it’s a bit out of all of our hands now, isn’t it? With Lady Huxley now privy to the fact that Lady Caroline kissed me?”

Edmund walked to a chair and collapsed into it. Phineas held his breath, thinking the chair might also collapse, but it didn’t.

“Yes,” Edmund said, finally.

“Let me court her.”

Edmund looked up at him. “My sister is . . . complicated. And you are not.”

Complicated? Of course, there must be hidden depths to Caro. But on the simplest, most primitive level, they had connected, hadn’t they? Yes, Phineas knew there was more to marriage than unchecked and endless acts of fornication. There would be breakfasts and dinners and sitting in front of a fire and quiet talks and brief touches and affectionate looks. He wanted all of that with her. In fact, he was at the point

where he thought he wanted all of that more than he wanted the fornication.

And Phineas Edge was used to getting what he wanted.

“Couldn’t the fact that I’m not complicated make me a good choice for her, Edmund? Maybe more complication is exactly what she doesn’t need.”

Oh, no. The fists tightened again in Edmund’s lap as he leaned forward.

“Don’t have the effrontery to tell me what my sister needs.”

“No, no, no,” Phineas said as soothingly as possible. “I just think we have to let it be her decision, don’t we?”

“I think the fact that she ran out of here shows she’s made her decision.”

Phineas bridled. “That’s not fair. You scared her.”

Suddenly, Edmund had a look of worry, something Phineas had never seen on his face before. “I did?”

“Yes, you did. And my guess is Caro, after living with your father so long, has had enough of feeling frightened in her life. At the very least, can’t you admit I’m the least likely man in London to frighten your sister?”

Edmund sat back in his chair. He stared at Phineas, considering. Phineas took this time to sit in a chair opposite Edmund’s.

“I could be good for her, Edmund. Draw her out of herself. You know I could do that. She’s been too alone for too long.”

Another long silence. Phineas waited. At last, Edmund cleared his throat. “Yes.”

“Yes, what? Yes, I can court her? I have your permission to try to get her to marry me?”

“Yes, she’s been alone too long.”

“Let me see her again. Talk to her.”

“Talk her into marrying you?”

“Well, yes. As you’ve pointed out, we’ve only had a few minutes together.” What Edmund didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him. Or lead him to hurt Phineas with his fists or a sword or a duelling pistol. “Let me have a chance to prove I could be a good husband. Let me befriend her. You have to admit, up until a quarter of an hour ago, *you* would have counted me as one of your friends. You know I’m not a bad sort. Would it be so terrible to have me as a brother?”

Edmund rubbed his face with his hands and groaned. “This is a mess. I wish I knew what was best. Yes. I’ll let you see her tomorrow. But first,” he stood, “first, we have to have tea with Lady Huxley and her daughter. Try to smooth this over as much as we can.”

Phineas grinned. He stood and dared to clap Edmund on the back.

“You know I’m the perfect fellow for smoothing things over, Edmund. Leave this to me.”

A knock on her door.

“Caro.” It was her brother. “Caroline, may I come in?”

The room was gloomy. It must be evening now.

Slowly and stiffly, she got off the bed and went to the door and unlocked it.

Edmund stood there. Was he angry? No, he was concerned.

She stepped back from the door.

“Oh, Caro,” he said as he came in and held out his arms as if to embrace her. When she did not come to him, he dropped his arms and closed the door instead.

“Why did you leave the library? Phineas thought I might have frightened you. Did I?”

She shook her head.

“You should have stayed. We need to talk, the three of us. You, me, Burchester.”

She shrugged and went to sit in a chair by the fire.

“I don’t know what to make of this. I really don’t. Phin says he very much wants to marry you.”

She snorted. Phineas Edge was capable of saying anything.

Her brother went on. “Burchester and I suffered through tea with Lady Huxley and her daughter. Phineas did a good job, acting like everything was fine. Even flirted with the daughter. Of course, neither of us think that means Lady Huxley won’t reveal everything. The gossip is too good.”

Edmund crossed and sat in the chair opposite hers. “Do you think you might consider marrying him?”

She shook her head.

“It will probably be impossible for you to make another match once it is known you kissed Burchester.”

She wanted to laugh. *Kissed? Kissed? So much more than kissed, dear brother.*

“I d-d-don’t plan to m-marry.”

Edmund shook his head. “I wish I could convince you that your speech is not the blemish you think it is.”

“Do you think Lady Huxley will t-t-tell p-p-p-people how I talk?”

Edmund looked down at his hands. “Yes. But I think it will not be much remarked upon. Not when it is also reported you shouted that you had kissed Phineas.”

“I didn’t shout!”

“You did, Caro.”

She shook her head. How could she have been so wild? In the moment, she had only been able to think of Phineas being injured by Edmund. How strange she had not even considered the other possibility. That Edmund could be injured by Phineas. Because she knew Phineas wouldn’t raise a hand to Edmund. Phineas knew he was in the wrong.

“But don’t you think you like Phineas a little bit?” her brother asked.

Like him? The man should pay rent for the space he has taken up in the intimate recesses of my brain for thirteen goddamn years. I don’t like him. I’m obsessed with him. But obsessed has far too many esses.

“He told me he has broken off with all his mistresses. He says he’s fond of you. And why would you kiss him if you didn’t like him?”

She glared at her brother.

Edmund quirked a brow and he almost smiled. “Come now, Caro. You have to admit kissing someone usually means you like them.”

How could she explain her madness to her brother? “He wore—” She gestured at her eyes.

“Spectacles? He wears them for reading newspapers, but I’m sure he would be willing to wear them more often if you married him.”

Being in bed with Phineas when he was wearing nothing but his spectacles. Ungh. She felt her breath start to get short, a throb between her legs. Not now. Please, *not now*, not while she was talking to her brother.

“He doesn’t really want to marry me, Edmund.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because now he knows.”

“What does he know?”

“How I talk!”

Her brother stood up and exhaled heavily. “Besides that shrew Lady Anne Cavendish, you are the single most stubborn person in England now that Father is dead. I won’t force you to marry Phin because I know I can’t, and I’m not even sure you should marry him. But I can insist you meet him tomorrow. In the drawing room at one o’clock. Without the dog. And you *will* talk to him, Caro.”

EIGHTEEN

Phineas spent his evening and night studying Caro's diary, memorizing her description of an ideal husband.

I have already decided my husband should be tall since I am tall.

My husband should be well-read and bookish. He might even wear spectacles!

My husband should have no dreaded esses in his name. I hate esses!

This was the section he had already read in the library before he had skipped ahead to the part where she had called him handsome.

He was not tall, not bookish, and he had an *ess* in his name. Three marks against him. But he had spectacles. And those spectacles had unlocked a tempest of passion. One moment Caro had been seething in fury and the next she had been kissing him with a wildness unmatched in his experience.

He hoped the rest of the diary might give him another husband requirement he could fulfill, above and beyond the spectacles.

My husband should be moderate in drink.

My husband should have a good temper and never raise his voice or be angry. He will be gentle.

He will love paintings and animals, like me. We will have a house filled with pictures and dogs and, someday, children!

He will be diligent and thrifty.

He will never pay attention to another girl. He will be true. He will be mine!

He won't mind how I talk. He will never interrupt me or fill in my words. He will be a patient friend.

He will let me have my own mind, my own thoughts, but he will want to know them.

He will court me, like in a novel, with roses and sweet letters and poetry.

And he will love me!

I will recognize my husband when I see him, I feel sure. And it will be easy to talk to him. Oh, I am so nervous just thinking about meeting him and my first ball is still over a month away!

All right. Start at the top. Moderate in drink? He wasn't, but he could be, couldn't he? He knew how to limit himself. Hadn't he trimmed his belly down for Caro with sparring and denying himself pudding? Anyway, he wasn't sure how much more credit his wine merchant would extend him in the future. This was an excellent opportunity to cut back on claret and brandy.

Good temper, yes. Yes! This was where he might shine. It was universally acknowledged that Phineas Edge was the most amiable gentleman in London, always charming and congenial.

And gentle. He could be gentle. He *was* gentle.

Love paintings, yes. Love animals? He had never really thought about animals, never had a favorite horse, never made a pet of a dog. But he didn't dislike animals. He wouldn't mind a house filled with dogs if it meant Caro was in the house, too. And children? Yes, of course. Wouldn't it be fun to

have babies to dandle, a sweet girl who wanted to show her Papa her dollies, a mischievous boy who howled with laughter at his Papa's jokes? As long as the children didn't distract Caro too much from her husband.

Diligent and thrifty. No and no. Very much no. But he wouldn't think about that right now.

He will never pay attention to another girl. The wording here was key. She had not written *he will never have paid*, but *he will never pay*. Caro must mean going forward. There was no difficulty with that condition. Hadn't that been his life for four months now? He couldn't conceive of paying attention to another woman. And *he will be mine*? He was hers, all hers, if she would only have him.

He won't mind how I talk. In truth, he wasn't sure he really knew how she talked, she had spoken so little in front of him. But the few words he had heard from her . . . that lovely pink tongue thrusting forward . . . mmmmm. He got aroused just thinking about it.

How stupid he had been to think she was just naturally reticent. He had blathered on in front of her as he was wont to do, loving his own talk, thinking she must, too.

He must get more words from her.

And he mustn't speak for her as he had done in the library today. He must listen, for once. He knew so little about her, still.

The kind of courting Caro wanted? The easiest thing on the list. He had accounts with several of the best florists. He was capable of writing in a fair hand; he had written dozens of letters for Jack MacNaughton last summer. And he could dig up some poetry from somewhere.

And he will love me! Love. Well. Love. Last on the list, surely the least important. He knew he craved her and wanted to please her and that must suffice for now. Love was for other

His mind suddenly jerked, as if it were leashed and that leash was held by a strong grip covered in a lady's kid glove.

Was love really for other men?

He certainly met the description of a man in love. Unhappy, uncomfortable, uninterested in any quim that wasn't Caro's.

He had become one of those other men he had so pitied in the past.

Phineas Edge, at last, had fallen in love.

He presented himself at the Sudbury town house at one o'clock precisely. He was shown into an empty drawing room.

He had prepared and made a plan. He wouldn't kiss or caress her, he had decided. Her list held no wishes for a husband who was a skilled lover.

He had had no time to read any books or learn any poetry, but today he would talk to her about paintings and her dog. He would show her how gentle he could be. He would draw her out and be patient with her words.

He would be a friend to her.

The door opened and she came in. She closed the door behind her. She kept her head down.

"Now, darling, you have to be fair. Look at Phin."

She lifted her head and looked at him. He swallowed. Those green eyes. That mass of dark hair. That square jaw.

Suddenly, his plan evaporated. He had to get his hands on her. He didn't care about the wishes of a seventeen-year-old-girl anymore. He had a woman in front of him, a woman who would give way as soon as he touched her.

He took a step toward her.

"Your brother said you would talk to me. You will talk to me, won't you?"

She nodded.

"Now, Caro, I want to know why you don't want to marry me."

She raised her eyebrows.

“I know there’s probably a long list of reasons why you wouldn’t choose me, but just start with one. It doesn’t have to be the most important one. Just one.”

“Your other w-w-women.”

“There are no other women. Not anymore. I tried to tell you the day after you went to the theater.” His breath strangled in his chest for a second as he remembered the kisses they had shared that day, how she had told him she didn’t want him to be good and stroked his cock through his breeches. “I promise I gave them all up last year after I made love to you.”

Strange sounds were coming from her. Could it be? It was laughter. She was laughing. She was the only person he had ever seen laugh without smiling.

“Oh, oh, oh, Ph-Ph-Phineath. W-we didn’t make l-l-love. We f-f-f-f-fucked.”

“Caro!”

She quieted.

“I’m hurt you would say that.”

“N-n-n-no, you’re not.”

“How do you know that?”

“You didn’t even do that th-th-thing with your eyeth. That thad thing.”

He took another step toward her.

“What sad thing?”

“You know.”

“No, I don’t. What sad thing?”

She made a dramatically pathetic face, with her mouth turned down and her eyes wide.

“I don’t look like that.”

She nodded and rolled her eyes. “Yeth. You do. You pretend to be thad to get your way.”

Another few inches. “If I pretended to be sad right now, would you marry me?”

“No.”

“Well, I would like to make love to you.”

She reddened and looked down.

“Would you like that?”

“N-n-n-no.”

Now he actually *was* a little bit hurt. But he would try his best not to show it. “Why do you say that, Caro?”

She raised her head and looked at him. “B-b-b-becauthe we d-d-d-d-don’t l-l-l-l-l-l—” She stamped one foot in frustration.

He had promised himself he would not interrupt her or complete her sentences. But he knew what she was trying to say. And it gave him the strangest sensation in his chest. The same wrench after he had read in her diary about Lady Huxley’s ball and realized she had never had the dances she wanted all those years ago.

She took a deep breath. “L-l-l-l-love each other.” Oh, the flash of that pink tongue.

Too soon. Too much. She won’t believe you. She’ll run away again. Say something else.

Another step closer. “But maybe once we got to know one another, we could love each other.”

And then he was astounded. Two tears rolled down her face. His brave Amazon. She of the few words and the daring sexual virtuosity. He had seen her angry. But to see her cry?

He couldn’t hold back any longer. He lunged toward her, but she put out her arms, holding him off.

“N-n-n-no.”

“Oh, darling, I’m longing to touch you. Let Phin hold you.”

She put her arms down and let him get close to her. As he put his hands on her waist and pulled her to him, he wondered at the mystery of it. Why was she sometimes so compliant and sometimes so resistant?

Oh, her body felt so good against his. Warm and firm. And look, how perfect, he could nestle his face right into her neck.

“Now, darling, this is nice, isn’t it?”

He began to stroke her back. He could feel her body relax incrementally into his.

“Tell me, darling, why you won’t marry me?”

“I t-t-t-told you.”

“That’s all? My other women? Which don’t exist anymore.”

“F-f-f-for n-n-n-now, Phineath. What h-h-h-happens wh-wh-wh—”

She was tensing once more, and he could tell she was about to pull away.

“Now, now, now, now, darling, we don’t have to talk about that right now. Just let Phin hold you.”

And again, her body softened and molded into his.

“That’s right, darling. Don’t worry about a thing. Just let Phin be close to you. It makes him feel so good to touch you. Even this way. With all our clothes on. Standing up. In your brother’s drawing room.”

She sighed.

“And, yes, I will admit it would be infinitely better if we were naked and horizontal and in a cozy bed, but I’ll take what I can get when it comes to you, sweet Caro.”

She put her head down and rested it on his shoulder.

“That’s right,” he raised his hand to stroke her hair, “such lovely hair you have, darling.” He turned his head and dared to bring his lips to hers.

She did not kiss him back, but she allowed it. So he kissed her again. And this time, her lips twitched. She had responded. Taking encouragement from that, he continued to kiss her while moving one of his hands off her back and to her side. His kisses were gaining in urgency even as his hand went up and down her flank, his thumb brushing over her breast. She was kissing him back now, opening her mouth, and his tongue found hers.

Oh, the miracle of this woman opening up to him, giving herself to him.

With a few steps, he edged the back of her legs up against a sofa and with his weight pushing on her, they were down on the cushions and he was on top of her.

“I thought you might like to be more comfortable, Caro.” His hand was firmly kneading her breast and her breathing had gone from even and relaxed to erratic and pressured. He was grinding his cock into her cleft and she was pushing her pelvis into him, grinding back.

“I hope you won’t mind if I do something to make you feel good. It’s something I’ve been dreaming of doing ever since I touched you in that bed in Sudbury. You don’t mind, do you, lovely girl?”

Her green eyes were hazed.

“The thing is, darling, Phin can’t talk while he does it. And I do get nervous when I can’t talk. So you have to promise me you’ll keep me from getting anxious. You’ll just have to stay very still and very quiet. Will you do that for me?”

He remembered how full-throated her groans had been in Sudbury until he had put his hand over her mouth, and he wanted no brother bursting into the drawing room until he had gotten a promise from her.

She nodded.

He shifted himself off of her, and as his body separated from hers, she whimpered and reached toward him to pull him back onto her, but then she sighed and let her arms fall to her sides, as if she were already exhausted.

He got on his knees and began drawing up her dress and her petticoat.

“I promise you’ll like this, you sweet girl, but I’m not sure you’ll like it as much as Phin will.”

Her hands were now on his head, her fingers laced into his hair.

There. He had her skirts up, her long thighs parted, and he was faced with the loveliest quim he had ever seen. Wet, pink, swollen, framed by dark curls. He didn’t remember it being this lovely back in September but, of course, the lamp had been at the head of the bed and he had been primarily interested in using his hand on her and then his cock. But now he was going to have his face in this lush flower.

“So beautiful, darling, you’re so beautiful.” He kissed the delicate skin of her inner thighs. “Phin is going to kiss you everywhere now, you understand, darling? And he is going to make your nubbin sing, he promises. He does.”

And now Phin is going to shut up, he told himself and began to apply his lips, only his lips to her sweet flesh. He breathed through his nose, trying to suck up every bit of her wonderful, most intimate scent.

He heard nothing.

He looked up. Her eyes were on him. She was biting her lip.

“Are you all right, darling?”

She nodded.

“Do you like what I’m doing so far?”

She nodded.

“You have to give Phin a little encouragement.”

She took her hands off his hair. She frowned. “You t-t-t-told me to be b-b-b-be quiet.”

Very gently, making his tongue soft, he licked her from her opening up to her nubbin. Mmmmm. Her taste was as heady as her scent.

Her head went back and she groaned. All he could see now was her neck, the underside of her chin and jaw. He licked her again, taking the same path. She groaned again.

Still keeping his tongue soft, he lapped at her nubbin, feeling it harden. He would lap at it five or six times and then move off it, taking his tongue down to her entrance or to her inner lips. Then he would come back to her nubbin and worry it again.

Her groans had a new timbre and roughness to them. Could it be frustration? Her nubbin was very hard now, completely out of the hood.

He took it in his mouth and sucked on it, while flicking his tongue over it. She spasmed and her head snapped up and she looked at him.

Oh, no. Had he gone too far? Was she going to climax right now? No, he had stopped in time.

He made his tongue soft and started licking and teasing other parts of her pink tenderness. He moved down to her entrance and felt around the edges and then put his tongue inside her. His cock twitched, wanting to be where his tongue was. Time enough for that once he had gotten what he really wanted from her.

He moved his tongue back up to the top of her cleft. But he didn't touch the nubbin, he touched everywhere but the nubbin. His tongue danced around it.

Caro's noises were continuous, low and reverberating. Quite how he imagined a bear might sound. Her hands were gripping and twisting the damask covering the sofa. He was sure she was seconds away from ripping the upholstery from the frame.

“Darling?”

She raised her head. Her eyes looked crazed to him.

He kept his eyes locked on hers and made his tongue very thick and wide and again licked her everywhere except her nubbin.

“P-p-p-pleathe,” she begged him.

“Darling, do you want to spend for Phin?”

“Yeth,” she yelped.

He gave one quick lick to her nubbin. She made a face that indicated she felt either agony or exquisite pleasure. Or both, simultaneously.

“Are you a woman of your word, Caro?”

Her head fell back, driven into the sofa by her body arching upward.

“Yeth.”

He licked in a circle around the nubbin.

“How about I make you spend?”

“Yeth.” She practically howled.

“And you promise to marry me, darling.”

There was silence except her breath coming in little pants and his tongue moving again over her flower.

“Yeth.” It was quiet but it was definitely a *yes*. “Pleathe.”

“You won’t regret it, darling. I promise you won’t.”

Silence.

He moved to her nubbin and very softly began to pay it attention.

She sighed. He moved his tongue more quickly. He made a firm point and gave her the pulsing attention he was sure would give him the result he wanted. And then suddenly she was convulsing and contracting. He tried to keep his tongue on her, to move with her, but he could not and just had to accept she did not need further stimulation. With her thrashing, he was not able to catch her sweet little ejaculation when it happened. Also, he had wanted to have his finger inside her when she came, but he had forgotten. No matter. He would have plenty of opportunities in the future to do those things in their marriage bed.

And as before, her climax went on for a long time.

He was a little frightened when she finally stilled. Would she hate him for what he had done to her? Trapped her with his tongue? Seduced her into promising to marry him?

He kissed each inner thigh and pulled her dress down, covering her loveliness. He stood. Her brows were relaxed. That was a good sign. Her eyes were closed. He didn't know what that meant.

“Are you all right, Caro?”

She nodded but kept her eyes closed.

“Will you open your eyes and look at Phin?”

She shook her head.

He knelt down again next to her head, leaning on his elbows on the sofa. “Why not, darling?”

She bit her lip.

“Oh, you sweet thing.” He leaned further in and kissed her mouth. She released her own lip. “It won't be so bad being married to me, I promise.”

She opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. She cleared her throat.

“Will you w-w-wear your thpectacleth?”

He shuddered. His very hard cock throbbed at the sight of her tongue. He fumbled in his tailcoat pocket. “Whenever you like, darling.” He put them on.

Finally, she shifted her eyes to his. Was that a twitch at the corners of her lips?

“You might have begun your propothal with them on, Phineath.”

“Would you have said yes just because I was wearing spectacles?”

She shrugged and sat up. He stayed kneeling.

“But you won't go back on your word now, will you?”

She stood. “I recommend you get a thpethial lithenthe.”

His mouth dropped open and he stared up at her, a goddess, and he, a mere mortal, worshiping at her feet.

“What did you say, darling?”

“I recommend you get a thpethial lithenthe right away. B-b-b-before I forget what you did to me with your tongue.”

NINETEEN

Caroline closed the drawing room door behind her. She never should have agreed to her brother's stipulation that she meet and talk with Phineas Edge. Predictably, her resistance had been eroded by *darling*. Then, his scent. And his kisses. Then any remaining shards of opposition had been utterly vanquished with the touch of his mouth to her most private place. She was a slave to her desire for him.

But, she comforted herself, if she were to be enslaved, there could be worse men to be in thrall to.

She wanted him. Wanted his touch, his body, and the ecstasy he could bring her. Not just on the sofa in her brother's drawing room but also for some limited period of time in the future, in their marital bed. She wouldn't have chosen lust as the foundation of her marriage, but surely it was preferable that he arouse her rather than disgust her. After all, as her husband, he would be her only bed partner for the rest of her life, even if she would not be his.

And her brother liked him. She knew there were a good many people her brother did not like.

She climbed the stairs to her bedchamber. And Phineas seemed a happy man, didn't he? She didn't know any other happy people. Maybe she would learn the secret to happiness from him.

In the nine times she had been in his presence—why did she know that number exactly?—he had never mocked her.

Never belittled her. He had never lost his temper. All the most important *nevers*.

But she didn't feel the security she had expected she might feel with a husband. How could she, when she had so little control over herself in Phineas' presence? And when she knew his interest in her would be fleeting.

And when she would have to guard herself every moment to keep her heart safe.

But she was used to feeling unsafe from living with her father's moods for so many years, never knowing when he would rage at her or ignore her. And she knew the world could change in the blink of an eye. Just look at her own life. One day, a hopeful girl in her first Season. The next day, a prisoner in mourning for her mother.

And now, her life had changed again in another blink. With a wicked tongue and a *yes* and a *please*. Now she was to be a wife, and maybe, a mother herself. Destinies she had given up long ago as impossible. Destinies that could keep her out of an asylum forever.

Oh, please God, let her do everything right going forward. Let her not love her husband. Let her prove to herself she was not weak, not hateful, not a villain. Let her have sons for Phineas, or at least one. An heir who would keep his mother safe. Even though she had not been able to do that for her own mother.

The next day was her birthday. January twenty-sixth. She was thirty years of age. She had gotten engaged before she turned thirty.

A large bouquet arrived for her in the morning. Her first gift of flowers, ever, in her life. Thirty red roses with a card.

Caro.

Thank you for saying yes, darling. And happy birthday.

Phineas.

How had he known it was her birthday?

She arranged the long, thorned stems in a vase herself and put them on her dressing table.

She looked at them for a long time, as if they were a painting. She didn't like that the roses made her feel as if he were in the room with her, calling her *darling*. Several times, the urge came to her to defenestrate the roses, vase and all. But she didn't.

In the afternoon, he paid a call. She hesitated. Could she ask the butler to tell Phineas she was not at home? She didn't feel up to seeing him, not after how his flowers had made her feel so unsettled. But one couldn't really refuse a call from one's betrothed, could one?

She took Lavinia downstairs with her and was pleased to see Edmund was in the drawing room along with Phineas. She and the earl would not be alone. She would not find herself panting and sprawled over the sofa today.

Maybe *pleased* wasn't the right word. Maybe, in fact, it was the opposite of the right word.

Because her future husband's hazel eyes were sparkling, and as soon as he grinned at her, she was already undressing him in her mind.

He hadn't even said *darling*. Or put on his spectacles.

"Lady Caroline." Phineas bowed. Lavinia loped over to him as if she knew she would be welcome, and Phineas stroked her head and rubbed her ears. Lavinia turned to have Phineas scratch her hind end and her wagging tail thwapped against a brown paper-wrapped parcel leaning on Phineas' leg. The parcel began to fall over.

"Whoops." Phineas bent over quickly and caught it. "It wouldn't do for Miss Lavinia to ruin your birthday present before you even saw it."

“Birthday.” Edmund grimaced. “I forgot. Happy birthday, Caro.”

“Th-thank you, Edmund.”

Phineas came forward, full of anticipation of some kind, holding the rectangular package in both hands. “Will you unwrap it in front of me?”

She nodded and took it from him. She could tell it was a painting in a frame. She tore the paper off.

It was the shipwreck from the Pall Mall exhibition.

Phineas shifted back and forth on his feet and clasped his hands together.

“Not the most romantic gift or picture. But, I don’t know, I thought you might like it.”

Her brother must have told him how long she had gazed at it.

“Thank you, my l-l-lord.”

“Do you like it?”

“I do.”

Phineas grinned again.

Her brother cleared his throat. “I think we should discuss the details of the nuptials.”

“Yes, yes,” Phineas said. “Lady Caroline, I know you asked yesterday that I get a special license. But you’re in mourning until the end of March. And I’d like to have banns read and a real wedding with all the fuss. It’s what you deserve.” He chuckled. “I know ladies attach importance to things like that.”

Suddenly, his grin faded. “And . . . and I’d like to give you a chance to reconsider and change your mind. Of course, I hope you won’t, but I want you to have a bit of time.” He swallowed. “I pressured you, and I’ve decided I don’t want you to marry me under duress.”

She looked at her brother.

Edmund answered her unspoken question. "It's fine, Caro. No one will think much about a kiss once the engagement is announced. The wedding doesn't need to be rushed."

"F-fine." She still held the picture, the bottom of the frame pressing into her waist, her two hands at the top, and she looked down at it. She felt like the flotsam and jetsam being tossed on those dark waves. She clutched the picture as if it could rescue her, keep her from being sucked under.

"And I'd like us to become friends, Lady Caroline," Phineas said. "Real ones. Before we marry. Do you think that's possible?"

She raised her head and stared at him. Friends?

Edmund spoke. "So, April, maybe? We'll be done with Lent? Perhaps a few days after Lady Huxley's ball?"

She nodded, still staring at Phineas.

"Good," her brother said. "I'm off to the club. You coming, Phin?"

Phineas blushed. "Since we are engaged now, I wondered if Lady Caroline might like to come out for a drive in my phaeton."

Edmund scowled. "Just don't drive that thing too fast."

"Lady Caroline? Would you like to go for a drive?"

Would she like to go for a drive? She had no idea. But if she said no, she would feel obliged to explain herself and she didn't think she could. She nodded.

"I would love to take you to Gunter's for a treat," Phineas said.

"Only the d-d-drive, please." She might have to talk to someone other than Phineas if they visited a shop.

"Lovely." Phineas beamed. "Whatever you like. Shall we go now?"

After she got her bonnet and coat and gloves, Edmund handed her up into the high-perch phaeton next to Phineas as one of the Sudbury footmen held the horses' bridles.

“Mind what I said, Phin. Not too fast,” her brother rumbled.

“I never go fast in London. The traffic is abominable.”

“You’re carrying precious cargo.”

“Yes.” Phineas snapped the reins and the carriage started moving.

As soon as they were halfway down the street from the town house, Phineas said in an undertone, “I’m carrying the most precious cargo of all. My wife-to-be. On this wintry afternoon, shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”

Phineas was quoting Shakespeare? And not a play, which he might have seen in his box at the theater, but a sonnet? Phineas read poetry?

She darted a look at him. He turned his face to her for a moment, as if he had asked a real question and expected an answer from her.

“N-no.”

“Good, because I can’t remember the rest. Thou art something, something. But I’m sure you know it?”

“M-m-more lovely.”

“Of course! Of course! How could I forget, when I am with the loveliest of lovelies, my darling Caro.”

The horses took a corner at rather a good clip and the phaeton tipped a little bit and she slid into Phineas.

“T-t-too quick!” She scrambled away from him on the seat. She might be engaged to Phineas, but that didn’t mean she could sit in his lap in public.

“Yes, yes,” Phineas pulled back on the reins. “I’m so sorry, Caro, that was entirely my fault. I wasn’t paying attention.” He slowed the horses to a walk. “Are you all right? Are you hurt? Are you frightened?”

“N-no.”

“I should have brought my coachman and my regular carriage. But I thought it would be rather fun to drive you around in the phaeton. What do you think of it?”

Caroline looked down the side of the phaeton at the cobblestones far below her. She had been so flustered getting into the vehicle that she hadn't realized the seat must be at least eight feet off the ground and there was nothing to keep one from falling out.

“I th-think . . .”

Phineas waited.

“I think you like tall things.” *Thingth.*

There was a pause. Then Phineas burst out laughing. “Oh, Caro. Oh, yes. Yes, I do, darling.”

She almost smiled to hear him laugh so hard at her joke.

His laugh lessened her disappointment in herself for agreeing to marry a man because she desired him. She would have that laugh in her life. She had never thought to hope for laughter. For joy. It was so alien to her.

He reached over and lightly brushed her knee with his hand. “I'm so glad you're funny, darling, and have such a good sense of humor. Maybe even someday I'll make you smile, eh? But now I very much regret not having brought the closed carriage. Because we could have had a bit more privacy.”

Caroline had not known she could desire him more than she already did. But that light touch of her knee. His laughing at her joke and not at her. The thought of being in a private place with him. She burned for Phineas, sitting atop this ridiculous carriage with its gargantuan wheels.

“But I will restrain myself, won't I? I must show you I can be a friend. And that I can be good. But after the drive, maybe one kiss in the drawing room? And maybe,” he whispered and she could barely hear him over the noises of the street, “I'll even put on my spectacles.”

TWENTY

Three days later, the long-suffering king died. The prince regent was a prince no longer. Lady Huxley's ball was moved to the end of April when the country would be out of mourning. Phineas and Caro's wedding was also moved accordingly.

But despite returning to the black of full mourning, Caro found herself experiencing the courtship she had dreamed of when she was a girl. Roses came every day. Little notes that praised her beauty, her hair, her eyes. Phineas would recall some small adornment he had seen her wear the day before and write that it was his new favorite.

Drives. Strolls with Lavinia leashed at her side and Lady Lutton walking six paces behind. Calls where she and Phineas sat in the drawing room and he looked at her constantly and asked questions and waited patiently for her answers and seemed delighted with the words she said, no matter how few and ugly and stuttering they were.

And the words became less stuttering in time, proving to her that the stutter was largely a function of her nerves. The lisp, of course, was unchanged. Her tongue still thrust. Her *esses* were still *etheth*. But he understood the few words she gave him.

Of course, he didn't understand *her*. He couldn't. He was so far apart from her in so many ways.

So at ease. So content.

So . . . shallow.

But that judgment didn't affect her lust for him. Not one whit. Alone in her bed at night, he was still the man who came to her and touched her and called her *darling* and *good girl* and told her that her quim was sweet and wet and ready for him. He was still the man on top of her in her mind, thrusting into her and telling her she was lovely and he had to have her.

In the daytime, however, in the world outside her head, there were no more intimacies that could lead to a bed. He still kissed her when they were alone in the drawing room. Sometimes sweet, affectionate kisses. Sometimes long, hard kisses that took away her breath and that he would end abruptly with apologies. And then he would take his leave immediately after that.

She grew not to like the passionate kisses because they meant he would go away. But yet she still craved them and couldn't stop herself from putting her tongue in his mouth.

But he did not touch the intimate places on her body. And she did not reach for his cock even when she felt it hard against her when they kissed.

Because she knew whatever happened when she was naked with him again, it wouldn't be a fuck. It would be something else. And she wasn't sure she was ready for something else.

So, yes, it was the courtship she had wanted as a girl. But she was a woman now and her womanly needs were not being met by this rogue, acting as if he were a somewhat of a gentleman.

He took her to all the art exhibitions, all the museums, with Lady Lutton again nearby, but not too near.

He threw sticks for Lavinia and constantly petted the hound, even rolling on the carpet with her in the drawing room, and Caroline could see what a doting father he would be. Phineas would get down on the floor in the future nursery and tumble and tickle. Did he indulge in this horseplay with Lavinia to demonstrate just that to Caroline? But he never seemed miffed when he got covered in dog hair, even though he was unfailingly garbed in the most impeccable fashion.

“Dashwood says I need to buy stock in a brush company now,” he said, grinning, as Caroline clucked and tried to get the fur off the back of his superfine tailcoat with her fingers.

He even got in the habit of coming by just after dinner and taking Lavinia out alone one last time on her leash when it was dark and it wouldn't do for Caroline to be walking the streets of London.

But not everything Phineas did was perfect. In the first few weeks of their engagement, he would quote Wyatt or Sidney or Burns or Donne. The quotations were often paraphrased and when she ventured to ask him more about the work the quote had come from, it was obvious he had not read the poem, only memorized the little bit he had spewed back to her.

She was relieved when he stopped speaking verse to her. Obviously, he was doing it to impress her, but Phineas had enough words of his own. Better to be *lovely* and *darling* than to be the object of his *vegetable love* or *a dish for the gods*, as she was when he was still quoting Marvell and Shakespeare.

But she was not relieved about the reason he stopped quoting poetry. She had inadvertently put an end to his pretense herself when he had greeted her with a line from *Two Gentleman of Verona*. He had grinned as he said, “*To be slow in words is a woman's only virtue.*”

Obviously he did not mean to be cruel and he thought it was a compliment for her. But she knew the context of the line and recognized it as an aspersion against well-spoken women everywhere. And couldn't he sense how much she hated her own stumbling speech?

She came back with her own quote from the play: *That man that has a tongue, I say, is no man, if with his tongue he cannot win a woman.*

It had been the perfect riposte on her part. A sharp piece of wit she felt sure she would never come near again.

Her quote was from the same play. He had referred to a woman. She had replied with a quote about a man. And of course, there was a double meaning. She was punning on the

two ways he had induced her to marry him—his words and his tongue on her quim.

But it had been lost on him. He smiled uncertainly. She repeated it, sure her lisp and her stammer had been the problem. Still no recognition. Then she explained it to him, clumsily.

“Oh, Caro,” he said and laughed and laughed. Perhaps too hard and for too long. “You are so clever.”

He never quoted poetry to her again.

He would never understand her.

She was marrying a man who would never understand her.

Perhaps that was for the best.

TWENTY-ONE

During the three months of his engagement to Lady Caroline Haskett, there were times when Phineas looked at Caro and his breath was taken away by the fact that this beautiful woman had both agreed to marry him and allowed him to know her in the biblical sense. And then there were times when all he could see was a distant and unknowable stranger.

He often thought of bedding her again before the wedding. Of dismissing his servants for an afternoon and sneaking her into his rooms. Of taking her for a long ride out into the country and finding an inn.

He knew if he were to undress her, be inside her again, make her climax again, the distance between them would be erased, and she would be his darling Caro once more.

He did not sense she would refuse him. When he snatched a few kisses from her when they were alone, she was always willing, even eager. But she followed his lead and whether his kisses were soft and brief and brushing or deep and toe-curling, she answered in kind. He touched her nowhere but on her face, her neck, her back.

Usually, she didn't touch him at all but kept her arms at her side, as if she were afraid of doing something wrong. But sometimes, when they kissed, she would put her hands under the lapels of his tailcoat and rest them on his waistcoat-covered chest and he would remember how she had done the same in Sudbury when she had said she wanted him. Specifically him.

It was at those moments when Phineas had a very difficult time keeping himself from grabbing her and pulling her down onto the sofa.

“Oh, darling,” he would say to her instead. “So sweet, so lovely.” And then he would step away from her, reminding himself to be a friend to her.

Yes, he kept the regret he had felt after reading her letter firmly in the front of his mind and tucked away his licentious urges. Or at least he kept them tucked away until he was alone. After all, he was investing in a future that would have Caro in his bed every night for the rest of his life. A future he wanted more than anything.

Even though Phineas Edge had never been a man who thought much about the future.

And he still didn't like to think *too* much about the future. He knew he did not have the money to get married, but in the extremely rare moments when he was plagued by doubt, he told himself if he delayed the wedding long enough to build up some funds or if he confessed his penury, Caro would be even more likely to break the engagement. Then some other gentleman, one who had more to offer than the Earl of Burchester, would swoop in and she would be lost to him, forever.

Yes, Phineas Edge grappled briefly with the notion that he was a selfish man. But only briefly. Because all men were selfish, weren't they?

Thank goodness Edmund was less concerned with Phineas' finances than he was with Phineas' history as a libidinous rake. Phineas felt he could honestly assure his friend that his past was behind him and Lady Caroline Haskett would be the only woman in his life. Edmund had not asked any questions about Phineas' means, and Phineas hoped to keep him in the dark as long as possible.

When Phineas saw Caro as a stranger rather than as his future wife, he would try to break through her remoteness by teasing her, making jokes and funny observations about their surroundings or what he had read in the newspapers that

morning. She wouldn't smile—he knew that was a lofty goal—but her shoulders would relax and she would turn toward him and he would see glimpses of the girl who had come into his bed in Sudbury.

He persisted in asking her questions that would not permit a simple nod or a shake of her head in answer. He bent all of his vast social skills toward getting her to talk. But sometimes, after an hour or two with him, he would sense some fatigue and he would realize he needed to let her be. So, he would ramble on, filling the space between them with his own chatter.

After one such episode during a stroll in Hyde Park, he offered to take Lady Lutton home in his carriage and he tried to question her about Caro.

“Am I overwhelming her, do you think?” he asked, hoping for some assurance as the carriage lurched over the rough cobblestones back to Lady Lutton's humble rooms.

Lady Lutton shook her head. “No, Lord Burchester. I don't think it's fair to Lady Caroline for me to tell you my opinion of what passes between you or what I think she is feeling.”

“Oh. Yes. Of course.”

Lady Lutton leaned forward. “However, if you wanted me to tell her something of your concerns, I will.”

That gave Phineas pause. Was there something that would be better coming from Lady Lutton rather than from him?

“I suppose,” he said slowly, “you could tell her I was worried I talk too much.”

But Lady Lutton did not come back to him with an answer. Caro did, the next day.

They were alone in the drawing room, sitting next to each other on the sofa. She reached and took his hand, the first time she had ever done so.

“No,” she said.

He looked at her long, tapering fingers interlaced with his and then looked up at her questioningly.

“N-no, you don’t t-talk too much, Phineath.”

He suddenly found he had moved over the foot of upholstery that separated them and he was pressed against her, his tongue in her mouth, his cock already aching. Just before he brought his hands to her breasts, he came to his senses and pulled away. He stood abruptly and crossed the room to the window.

“Good,” he said between deep breaths. “That’s good.”

“Y-yeth.” She sat up and straightened her skirts.

“I was worried you might tire of me.”

“N-no.”

“I wouldn’t want to wear you out before the wedding.”

“Y-y-you won’t.”

“That’s wonderful to hear, darling.”

Once a week he permitted himself to ask her, “Do you still want to marry me, Caro?” and held his breath waiting for her answer. The day she took his hand and told him he didn’t talk too much and he came within a whisker of ravishing her in her brother’s drawing room, he let himself ask that question, even though he had asked her only yesterday.

She nodded, and he couldn’t believe how much joy that nod gave him.

So for three months, his days were taken up by Caro and planning outings, thinking of conversational gambits and stories and jokes, and writing the sweet notes she wanted.

His nights were taken up by dreams of being married to her.

He spared no thought for the damn money.

TWENTY-TWO

The night of Lady Huxley's ball arrived. Caroline still had time to change her mind about marrying Phineas. But ending the engagement would be a devastating scandal with the *ton* likely still whispering about her declaration that she had kissed the Earl of Burchester. And to break it off so close to the wedding? She would never make another match if she did so.

It was this wedding or no wedding. This husband or no husband.

Did that matter? For so long, she had been sure she would never marry.

But now she wanted to be married.

With Phineas' courtship, all of her crushed girlhood desires for a spouse had come flooding back to her. She longed to have a companion with her on the ocean of life, someone to grip when the waves were rocky, someone to float with peacefully.

A friend.

And she wanted the bodily pleasure of having this man with her. On her. In her. Even if she would have to share him. Even if he didn't love her, couldn't possibly love her, and she would have to make sure she never fell in love with him.

Jones helped Caroline into a pale green silk gown with matching green satin slippers with only a whisper of a heel to them. Caroline put on her mother's pearl choker and her mother's pearl ear bobs. Jones dressed her straight hair into an

elaborate knot at the back where it would not add to Caroline's height, and she allowed Jones to use curling tongs to create a few curls to frame her face.

She looked at herself in the mirror. She looked nothing like the creature her father had demanded she be in her hated portrait with the frilled dress and the fussy wig and the false smile.

"She's famous for her roses, but I think it will be too dark to see them," Edmund commented in the carriage during the short ride to Lady Huxley's house in Westminster.

Caroline was too nervous to answer him.

Phineas was waiting where the carriages stopped to let the noble guests out. He caught her eye and winked and bowed and for a moment, she was seventeen again, looking at this gorgeous man with silver hair and satin breeches.

"You're beautiful tonight, Lady Caroline. But then, you're always beautiful."

He took her arm to guide her up the front steps and before surrendering her to Edmund, he put his mouth next to her ear and whispered, "My bride."

She shivered.

She and Edmund were announced. There was a craning of necks in the ballroom. Not for Edmund, but for her. She had never been seen by most of the people here, and they knew only three things about her. She was the daughter of a marquess. Because of Lady Huxley and her daughter, they also knew she had kissed the Earl of Burchester before their engagement was announced. And likely, from the same sources, they knew she mutilated words.

She did not know if she failed, met, or exceeded their expectations, but she kept her head high. *Yes, I'm this tall.*

Phineas was announced, and all three of them went to greet the hostess whom Caroline did not remember meeting thirteen years ago. Lady Huxley was frightening, her beady eyes scrutinizing Caroline, her judgment apparent on her face, her words polite as her tone and gestures were disdainful.

But Caroline was between her two men right now. Her brother, so big and hulking, so intimidating himself. And Phineas, so pleasant, so quick with a quip and a compliment and a smile, so well able to diffuse any and all tension. She was safe with the two of them.

The Hasketts had come as late as they dared without the risk of being thought rude because Caroline wanted to speak to as few people as possible. So within minutes of saying, “Th-th-thank you, my lady” to Lady Huxley while curtsying, Caroline found herself being escorted by Phineas to the center of the ballroom where other couples were also gathering.

“I hope you don’t mind I’m your partner for the first dance, Caro. Just as I was thirteen years ago.”

“N-no.”

“It feels right, doesn’t it, darling? To come full circle this way?”

It wasn’t a circle. Thirteen years ago, she had a mother. She had an idea of what kind of husband she wanted. She had some notion that once she escaped her father’s household and her father’s criticism, she would be different.

None of those things were true now. Motherless, engaged to a rogue, and well-aware she was doomed to be herself, forever, no matter how dead her father was.

And she was glad time was not a circle. It was good it was a swerving and dipping line that had taken her to some distant place, far from where she had started. She was suddenly relieved to be thirty years of age. To have at her side a betrothed who was far more playful than her girlish notion of a husband. To know she had escaped some parts of her past even if she would never rid herself of the parts of herself she loathed.

The first dance was a country dance and she quickly discovered she didn’t have to speak to the other men with whom she did the figures. She need only meet their eyes and bob her head and pretend she needed to concentrate. And every time Phineas came around to her again, his eyes

sparkled, and she thought she could smell him despite the perfumes of the women around her, and he would tell her what a lovely dancer she was and to watch out for Lord So-and-So who had two left feet.

The dance left her flushed and lightheaded.

Phineas escorted her back to her brother. She would get a dance tonight with Edmund. And maybe a second one from Phineas, since they were engaged? That was three dances, almost as many as she had had at her first ball.

“Lady Huxley is gesturing for you to go over to her, Caro,” Edmund said.

She glanced across the ballroom and saw Lady Huxley making a beckoning motion with her fan and a cluster of gentlemen standing around her.

“She wants to introduce you so you can have other partners, I expect,” her brother added.

“D-d-do I have t-t-to?”

“No.” Phineas shook his head and bowed toward Lady Huxley. He reached into a pocket in his embroidered waistcoat and drew out a small folded card with a ribbon attached to it. “With your permission?”

She nodded and he tied it to her left wrist, over her glove.

“Your dance card, Lady Caroline.” He grinned. “You’ll find it’s full.”

She opened it. Next to every dance was written *PE, E of B*.

“I’ve taken them all,” Phineas said.

Edmund’s voice. “One of those better be for me, Phin.”

“You can have one. But not a waltz. And no one else can have any.”

“B-but this is not d-d-done.”

Phineas took both her hands. “Tonight it is. Tonight you will dance every dance and you need not say a word to anyone you don’t know. You’ll just dance. I’ll take you out to the

veranda between dances. No one will bother us there.” Phineas suddenly looked worried. “The veranda is not perhaps the, uh, ideal place. I guess I didn’t think this through.”

Edmund snorted. “You’re already breaking all the rules with your monopoly on Caro.”

She was going to dance every dance.

She wasn’t going to have to speak to strange men she didn’t know. Men who might laugh at her or ask her to repeat herself.

Phineas had arranged this. For her. And it was time for the next dance, a waltz.

“It’s all right, isn’t it, Caro?” Phineas asked, his eyes anxious as he settled his hand on her waist and took her other hand. “You don’t mind, do you? Not partnering another man? Breaking the rules?”

“No.”

The broadest of Phineas’ grins, accompanied by a very subtle wink. “Good.”

She leaned forward and dared to put her mouth to his ear. “Thank you.”

It was the most wonderful night of her life.

Her handsome husband-to-be only had eyes for her. Even when Edmund took her arm for a Scottish reel, Phineas did not dance with anyone else but stood on the side and watched her attentively.

The music. The hum of laughter, chat, greetings, and she need not speak herself. She hadn’t known how starved she was to be around people. *This is why people go to dinners and balls. To be surrounded by humanity and feel a part of it.*

And the dancing. All night.

She and Phineas stole out to the veranda between dances and even during the midnight supper. She didn’t want to eat. She was full on dancing.

The last time they went out onto the veranda, the sky was beginning to turn gray. The breakfast would be served soon. She thought she could see the outlines of some of Lady Huxley's famed rose bushes in the garden. They passed a couple who were kissing against the balustrade, all caution tossed away.

She pulled on Phineas' arm and took him behind a column. She put her back against it and ever-so slightly bent her knees and slid down a few inches.

"Can I kiss you, Caro? Do you want kissing?" His voice was quiet after the clamor of the ballroom. He took off his gloves and stroked her lips with his thumb.

"Please." *Pleathe.*

He gave her a kiss. A kiss that was everything. It was a fuck and it was making love and it was tenderness and it was heat and it was longing and it was understanding.

He understood her. She had been wrong about him. He did understand her, even to the point of knowing her secret girlhood dreams.

He had created this beautiful evening for her. Just for her. He had cocked a snook at propriety. For her.

And now he was kissing her, his mouth taking hers, his tongue sweeping into her with a taste of urgency, but his lips so soft. He held her face so she could not move and she didn't want to. She wanted to stay here, her cheeks in his clasp, her mouth on his, forever.

When he broke the kiss, he kept holding her face, and he gazed at her and spoke in a hoarse voice. "I'm so happy our wedding is tomorrow."

Yes, tomorrow was now today. And the day after that, they would be married.

"I am, t-too, Phineas." *Phineath.*

"Oh, Caro. Are you really happy? Because to hear you say that makes me even happier than the prospect of the wedding."

She realized how little reassurance she had given him.

“I’m happy to m-marry you.”

He blinked and stepped away. “I better get you back into the ballroom or I’ll be tempted to have our wedding night here against this stone pillar. You have taught me the meaning of temptation, lovely girl, and I have found it very difficult to grapple with.”

“M-m-may I tempt you t-tomorrow?”

He grinned. “Yes, darling. I’m counting on it. Although it won’t really be temptation, will it? We’ll have been legitimized in a church, and I intend to be entirely unreserved and whole-hearted when I next find myself in a bed with you.”

He offered her his arm and they went back inside the ballroom. She asked her brother if they could go home now and miss the breakfast, and Edmund nodded.

Caroline said good-bye to Phineas. The next time she would see him would be at an altar where they would pledge themselves to each other.

Forever.

As Edmund dozed in the carriage seat across from her, she felt full of wonder that she had come to London to find a wife for her brother, and instead, she had found a husband of her own.

And despite her misgivings, she thought she might have a chance at knowing happiness.

If I’m careful.

TWENTY-THREE

Caroline slept all morning but had an unexpected caller in the afternoon. She went downstairs and found her daily bouquet from Phineas on the table in the hall, already arranged in a vase. She went into the drawing room.

“Amanda?”

Lady Lutton rose from the sofa.

“Caroline.”

They both curtsied.

“T-tea?”

“That would be lovely.”

Tea was brought. Caroline poured a cup for Lady Lutton and thought of how she had once hoped they might be sisters one day. Caroline had failed there. But she could see that Edmund and Amanda did not belong together. But who could possibly be the right woman for her brother? Someone forceful and outspoken. Someone who didn't need sweetness. Someone who wouldn't mind never being called *darling* by her husband.

Caroline already knew she was very much going to mind when Phineas stopped calling her *darling*.

“May I close the drawing room door?”

Caroline nodded, and Lady Lutton glided to the door and pulled it shut.

“Your brother asked me to speak to you on a matter.” Lady Lutton crossed back to the sofa, resumed her seat, and smoothed her skirts.

“My b-brother?”

“Because your mother is no longer with us, I think Lord Sudbury hoped I might be able to answer any questions you might have.”

Caroline shook her head, not understanding.

Lady Lutton took in a deep breath. “About the wedding night.”

Caroline looked down into her teacup. Amanda was here to tell her about copulation. Should she explain she understood and, in fact, she had already experienced it with her soon-to-be-husband? No. Amanda’s job was to make sure her charges observed propriety. She had said she herself would never be a mistress. She wouldn’t understand about Caroline going into Phineas’ bed in Sudbury. Or about the bookshop. Or about what had happened three months ago on the very sofa Amanda was sitting on now.

“Is there anything you would like to ask, Caroline? You are much older than I was when my mother talked to me before my wedding.”

Caroline did have questions, but they had nothing to do with the act itself. They were all about how she and Phineas were going to fit together, going forward. She shook her head.

“Well, shall I tell you my thoughts about the marriage bed?”

Caroline nodded.

“It is quite common, I believe, in these types of talks, for there to be a great deal of discussion about the man’s needs. Indeed, that’s all I heard from my own mother. But a woman has needs, too. They might be very similar to the man’s needs or very different. And your husband might sense your needs or he might not. What I want you to do, Caroline, is to talk to your husband in bed.” Amanda’s face pinkened. “I’ve been

with you and Lord Burchester a great many hours over the last several months. You don't talk to him."

"I d-do talk to him."

"I'm sure you think you talk to him. Certainly, you say words to him, occasionally. But there will be a chance for you, in an intimate place with the doors shut, for you to talk to him, really, whether it is with words or . . . not-words. You have had a very lonely life, dear Caroline, and I would like you not to be lonely in your marriage. And the earl—well, he wouldn't take well to loneliness, at all."

Caroline now wished she had pretended ignorance to Amanda and asked for an explanation of coitus and then there would have been a lecture about a man's organ and his seed and a woman's blood and pain and starting a child.

Better that than this. She didn't want to hear about exposing herself in a way that was more than being unclothed. She didn't want to know that her husband would expect to learn her secrets. And she certainly didn't want to think about Phineas being lonely and seeking to end his loneliness with someone else. She had prepared herself for that, but she didn't want to think about it.

"I can tell Lord Burchester wants to be a companion to you."

She met Lady Lutton's eyes. "He will be my husband."
Huthband.

"Oh, Caroline. I wish I were wiser. In truth, I am fumbling here and pretending to know more than I do." Her chaperone smiled sadly and set her teacup down in its saucer. "Despite my efforts, I still found myself discussing the man's needs, didn't I? Forgive me. I meant merely to encourage you to open your heart to your husband. And that is really for both of your benefits."

"Did y-y-you open your heart to your husband?"

Amanda's face changed. "My husband was much older than I was. It was not a love match."

“My marriage is like your marriage. N-n-not a love match.”

A chill filled the room. Lady Lutton’s mouth turned down at the corners. She stood and her body trembled as did her voice.

“I long to shake you and put some sense into you. You have no idea what you’re saying.”

It was true Caroline had no idea what she had said that could have caused this reaction in her friend. She had made a simple statement of fact. Her marriage was *not* a love match. It was a lust match.

And Amanda was wrong. Caroline need not open her heart to Phineas. He would be satisfied with her opening her legs until he wasn’t anymore and he sought out new mistresses.

But Caroline wanted to keep Amanda as a friend. Her only female friend. She should apologize even though she did not know what offense she had caused.

“I am very apologetic for upsetting you.”

“Yes.” Lady Lutton bit her lip. “But I think I really upset myself. I was not the right woman to have this talk with you, even though I wanted to be. I wish you every happiness, Caroline, and I will be delighted to see you tomorrow at your wedding. You really will be the most beautiful bride.”

Phineas:

Please meet me right away at the place where you throw sticks for La.

Caro.

She could have written him a letter detailing why they should not marry. But that would have been cowardly. And if nothing else, she felt stronger and bolder than she had in January.

He had done that for her with his patience, his unflagging interest. He had bolstered her.

So she had to see him. She owed it to him. She had been so selfish all this time, only wondering if *she* could be happy in their marriage. She had not thought of his feelings. Only hers.

But what Amanda had said nagged at her now. Caroline didn't want Phineas to be unhappy. And he would be, wouldn't he? Burdened with a secretive, icy, serious wife when he might have an open, affectionate, and fun-loving lady. One that matched him.

He was waiting for her in Hyde Park at the bend in the gravel path.

"Darling." He took her hand and bowed over it. "I want to kiss you so badly right now." He studied her face. "What's wrong?"

"I need to talk to you."

He laughed uncertainly. "Have you changed your mind?"

"N-n-no."

He took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "Thank God. Well, shall we stroll? And we can chat as we stroll." He looked behind her. "Lady Lutton isn't here?"

"No."

"Nor Miss Lavinia. This must be serious." He offered her his arm. "I want you to talk to me, Caro."

They began to walk, her arm tucked under his. He said nothing further. Abnormally silent. He was waiting for her, and since they were walking side-by-side, she didn't have to look at him. He had given her a chance to hide.

How thoughtful he was.

She cleared her throat. "I think you shouldn't m-m-marry me."

"I see." A silence. "So you have changed your mind."

"No. I want you—"

“I want you, too, Caro.”

“Phineas, please.”

“Yes, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I won’t interrupt again.”

“I am trying to tell you I want you to be happy. I don’t think I will make you happy.”

He didn’t say anything.

“We could still be friends.” *Friendth.*

There was a long silence.

“Well,” Phineas said. He continued to walk at the same pace. He reached out with his free arm and snapped off a twig from a shrub next to the gravel path. “I think you’re a very intelligent woman, darling. Far more intelligent than I am. I deeply respect your thinking. And what you say. And I want you to say more things to me. A great deal more. I want to hear everything you think. So it is with great regret that I, as your friend, have to tell you what you just said is a cartload of rubbish. Complete and utter rubbish.”

He crushed the twig in his hand, threw it away, and stopped walking and turned to her, taking both her gloved hands in his. “I know a great deal about what will make me happy, Caro. My own happiness is really the only thing I know anything about. And I have arrived at the conclusion that what will make me most happy is you. And making you happy. Will you marry me tomorrow?”

She did not know what to say. He was so sure. How could he be so sure?

He leaned toward her, looking down at their joined hands, and without thinking, she bent her neck and put her forehead against his in the middle of a path in Hyde Park.

He sighed and spoke softly. “Darling, if you don’t say yes, I am going to take you to the nearest inn, lay you down on a bed, and make my next argument more convincing with the strength of my tongue. Friendship be damned.”

She felt the corners of her mouth turn up but with their foreheads together she knew he couldn’t see. “Only your t-t-

tongue?”

“After our shared chastity over the last three months, I think it will be highly likely my cock will be involved, too, once I get you to say yes.”

“I’ll marry you,” she whispered.

“Damn,” he said and took his forehead from hers and gazed up into her eyes and grinned. “I was looking forward to the convincing.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Yes. Tomorrow, my sweet. I’m filled with the most wonderfully frustrating anticipation. And I’m sure the wedding will be a lovely occasion as well.”

TWENTY-FOUR

The wedding *was* a lovely occasion. And afterward, there was a lovely wedding breakfast at the town house of the Marquess of Sudbury. Everything had been flawlessly arranged by the new Countess of Burchester.

After the breakfast, the Earl of Burchester took his wife to his rooms and showed her the bedchamber next to his that had been prepared for her.

“I’ll see about renting a proper town house next Season, Caro. But will this do for now?”

She nodded.

The shipwreck painting hung next to the dressing table. Jones must have brought it over during the wedding breakfast. Caroline crossed to it and gazed at the foam on the churning waves, the threatening sky.

In a way, she was more nervous than she had been when she had gone into Phineas’ bedchamber in her father’s house and taken off her nightdress. That had been about one night with a man she would never see again. Now she was trying to lay a pattern she hoped would keep her husband in her bed for as long as possible.

She felt Phineas come up behind her. His arms wrapped around her middle, his warm body pressed against her back, a kiss was placed on the nape of her neck.

“Darling.”

His hands ran down her hips to her legs. She shuddered as he brought them back up the front of her body to her breasts.

“Are you as hungry as Phin is?”

She swallowed. “H-h-how h-h-h-hungry are y-y-y-you?” Every word a stammer. She hadn’t stuttered so much around him in a long time.

“Ravenous,” he purred into the skin of her neck as he pinched her nipples. “Phin is starving for his Caro.”

She leaned back into him. “G-g-good.”

“I’m going to undress you now, darling. For the first time. And then I want to take my wife to bed.”

She pulled away from him and went to the door of the room and made sure it was locked. She turned back around and caught a furrow of fear on Phineas’ forehead before he recovered his normal grin. He ran his hand through his hair.

“I, uh, . . . I thought you were leaving.” His laugh at himself was uncertain, almost choked.

Her devil-may-care, smooth-as-silk husband, who had surely bedded dozens, if not hundreds, of women in his lifetime, had been worried she was going to walk out of the bedchamber and leave him alone on their wedding day.

“N-no.” She crossed to him and pulled at one end of his cravat. The elaborate knot collapsed.

His grin widened. “Are you going to undress me?”

“Yes.” *Yeth.*

As she got to work on his waistcoat buttons and he took off his tailcoat, she realized he was wearing his spectacles. He had joked many times during their betrothal about putting them on for her, but he had never done so, not since the day she had agreed to marry him.

But now he had put them on. He must have done it while she had her back to him, looking at the painting.

“Spectacles.” *Thpectacleth.* She pushed his waistcoat over his shoulders.

“For you, darling.”

And then she couldn't believe herself, she was clawing at him, moaning into his mouth just as she had in the library when she had first seen him in his spectacles.

She was aroused, yes, she was aroused, she had a throb between her legs that had started as soon as he had come up behind her and touched her. But it wasn't just her throb driving her.

He had put on spectacles for her. He had given her a painting for her birthday. He had sent her roses every day for three months. He had given her the courtship and the ball and the dancing she had always wanted.

And he had been scared she was going to abandon him on their wedding day.

She must give him something back, and there was only one thing she could give him. She wanted him in no doubt about the fact that she wanted him. Because she did. And blessedly she could show him that without saying a single word.

She tugged at his fall and a button came loose from its moorings and fell to the floor.

“Shall I rip your clothes, too, darling?” he panted.

She grunted. She didn't care what he did to her dress. She had a hand on his beautiful cock and was rubbing him into full hardness, pulling up her skirts with her other hand.

“Let me take your lovely dress off, Caro,” he said soothingly. “We have all the time we want. We're married. And Phin wants to see you.”

“B-b-be quick.”

“Yes, darling. Turn around for me now.” His strong arms spinning her, his sure fingers on her buttons. “I want to see all of you and touch all of you. All of your beautiful skin.”

She pulled her arms out of her sleeves as he untied the knot of the lace of her stays.

“I'm going to have you as many times as you let me.”

Her stays were off, her dress pushed down. She lifted her chemise over her head and turned back to him at the same time. His hands were at her waist, untying her petticoat.

“So lovely, Caro, you’re so lovely.”

He put his face to her breasts and sucked a nipple into his mouth. She moaned and sank her fingers into his hair. Then her petticoat was on the floor and he was backing away from her. She took a step toward him, but he held up his hand.

“Can I look at you? Let me look at you.”

She stood in just her silk stockings and garters and her slippers. He turned his head on its side and his eyes peered over the top of his spectacles and ran from her head down to her feet and back up again. He made a low whistling sound.

“You are the most exquisite woman I’ve ever seen.”

She felt very warm.

“There’s only one thing I would change about how you’re dressed right now. Your shoes. I don’t want you to wear those kind of slippers anymore. I want you to wear the highest heels you can wear without toppling over.”

She had worn completely flat slippers for her wedding because she hadn’t wanted to tower over her husband more than she already did.

“You know I love tall things, Caro. And I don’t want my tall girl to hide how tall she is. You won’t anymore, will you, darling?”

She shook her head.

“But kick off those shoes, and Phin will finish getting undressed.”

“My . . . ?” She gestured at the tops of her stockings.

He growled. “Leave the stockings on. I’ll take them off. In the bed.”

He came toward her, naked now, his eyes dark and predatory, and she had a moment of his scent rushing over her and then she found herself, off the floor, in his arms.

It was not nearly as awkward as she had imagined it would be.

“Caro. My Caro.”

He claimed her first with her name and then with a forceful kiss, and he took her to the bed. Once he had laid her down, he ran his hands up and down her body as he used his soft lips and his rough tongue on her mouth, her neck, her breasts. Her throb grew more insistent and her moans more full-throated. His hand stroked over her abdomen and dropped lower to touch her maidenhair, and she moved her legs apart.

His hand went to just above her knee and he toyed with the ribbons of her garters.

“Oh, these little pink ribbons, darling. Do you know they make me think of somewhere else on your body that’s pink? Maybe I should leave these on. So naughty, you in your stockings.”

She flattened her hands on his chest, squeezing her fingers together and capturing his chest hair and pulling on it. She wanted something in her cleft, her pink place he was teasing her about.

“Oh, ho. My bride is impatient.” He got on top of her. “No need to get testy, my sweet countess. Phin is here to satisfy all your demands.” He took his shaft in his hand and nudged at the apex of her slit with the head of his cock, just as he had over six months ago. And as before, her whole body clutched in pleasure and need.

“You must tell Phin what you want.”

“Y-y-you.”

Something passed over his face and his teasing tone suddenly became tender.

“Oh, Caro.” He leaned down and kissed her, bumping his spectacles against her cheeks, filling her mouth with his tongue as his cock slid into her, its passage made easy by the wetness of her arousal.

Yes. Oh, yes. How had she done without this for so long? Him inside her. Why had they wasted all those months of their engagement when this was simply the way they were meant to be together?

She pushed up against him, wanting to get closer. She wrapped her legs around him, letting her silk stockings glide against him.

“Darling, you feel so wonderful. So perfect.”

She grabbed his buttocks, pulling him into her.

“Does it feel good to you, too, Caro?”

She nodded.

“Tell me how it feels, darling.”

“B-b-better than good, Phineas.” *Phineath.*

When she said his name, his head ducked down and he sucked her tongue into his mouth for a brief moment.

“I want to lick and suck and kiss you all over. Tell me what you want.”

“D-d-deeper.”

“Deeper?” He reached above her head and grasped a pillow. “Lift your beautiful bottom for me, Lady Burchester.”

She unwrapped her legs and pushed down on the mattress with her feet and raised her pelvis, and he tucked the pillow under her. Then he reached behind him and lifted one of her legs to his shoulder.

He came down on his hands on either side of her body and thrust.

“Is that deeper?”

“Ungh.”

Oh, yes, it was deeper, it was closer. His strokes rocked the core of her body. She nudged his arm with her other leg and he lifted his arm so she could bring the leg up. She cradled his neck between her stocking-covered calves, her hands on the

hard, chiseled muscles of his upper arms which held him above her as he stroked in and out of her.

She gasped, swept away by the intense sensation of his member touching someplace deep inside her that had not been touched in Sudbury or in the bookshop. He turned his head and kissed her calf through her stocking. He closed his eyes.

“Oh, darling. Phin is very, very eager. But I want you to come first. Can you do that for me?”

She brought one hand to her cleft and one hand to her chest and held her own small breast and brushed the stiff point there at the same time she rubbed her pearl, causing a sharp excitement in both places that joined the thrill in her womb.

He turned his head back from her calf and opened his eyes and ogled her over the top of his spectacles.

“That’s right, darling. Touch yourself for Phin while he can’t. Oh, my God.”

She felt herself climbing, climbing, climbing, a hair’s breadth away.

“I’m so close.” He shook his head. “I have to . . . I have to slow down.”

“No!” And then it was on her, starting in her deepest belly and coursing through her body. Wave upon wave upon wave of the most heightened pleasure. “I-I’m c-c-oming, Phineas. D-d-don’t stop.”

His mouth went slack, his eyes darkened again as he sank into her over and over.

She was still clenching around his member when his neck arched, taking his head back, and he made several erratic thrusts into her and then stilled. She could feel him pulsing inside her as he groaned, “Caro,” toward the canopy of the bed.

A moment of quiet, just the shared rasp of their breathing in the room.

He straightened his neck, bringing his face toward hers, his spectacles completely fogged over. He slowly slid her legs off

his shoulders and put them down and as he did so, his cock came out of her.

He moved on his knees from between her legs and twisted and collapsed next to her, flat on his back. She took the pillow out from under her hips and curled on her side, facing him, feeling his seed come out of her and pool between her legs.

His face was sweating. She touched his silver hair at his temple. She took off his misted spectacles and rolled away from him and found a table next to the bed and put them there. Then she rolled back next to him.

He was still breathing heavily. He grabbed her hand and put it on his chest. She could feel his heart thumping.

“You came back.”

“Yes.” *Yeth.*

“But you took off my spectacles. I said I wanted to have you as many times as you’ll let me. Does that mean we’re done?”

“No. You don’t have to w-wear them every time.”

He turned on his side to face her, still clutching her hand.

“I don’t, darling?”

“No.”

“I guess I didn’t wear them in Sudbury, did I? Or Hatchards.”

She slid down on the bed and rubbed her face into his chest, smelling him, feeling the softness of his hair and traces of his sweat on her lips and nose.

“Maybe they’ll only be for special occasions.”

“Unh.” She kissed his nipples.

“Maybe I’ll only wear them when I need to be in your good graces . . . or you’ve been a particularly good girl and want a treat . . . and then I’ll put the spectacles on . . . and you’ll know . . . how much Phin wants his Caro . . . and wants her to be happy . . . and then . . .”

She looked at his face to see why he wasn't telling her what would happen next. His eyes were closed, his face relaxed, his full lips slightly parted.

She stayed still for several minutes before getting out of the bed and taking her stockings off and cleaning herself between her legs. Then she got back into the bed. She would need to get some books in this room, to put on the table here. And a lamp she could bring close to the bed for reading at night.

Phineas didn't sleep long. After about half an hour, his arm belted her waist.

"I'm sorry, darling. Did I drift off?"

She nodded.

"You aren't angry at Phin, are you?"

She shook her head.

"Come here and give me a kiss."

She put her head on the pillow next to him and kissed his lips. Then she ran her fingertips over his forehead, his jaw. He smiled and it was an uncertain smile, not his usual ebullient grin.

"Maybe I waited too long to get married. I should have married you when I was twenty-three and you were seventeen. Then you wouldn't have had to wait for me to wake up from a nap on our wedding day."

"No."

"No, what, darling?"

"If I had been that young, I wouldn't have—" She bit her lip.

"You wouldn't have what? You wouldn't have married me?"

Yes, that was true. She wouldn't have. Back then, she had pictured someone so different from Phineas. But that wasn't what she had intended to tell him just now. And she would never say something so cruel to her husband.

She whispered what she had been thinking. “When I was seventeen, I wouldn’t have liked the b-bed so much.”

“Oh, darling.” He stroked her from her shoulder blade down to her bottom, where he cupped one cheek. “Does that mean you like it now?”

She thumped on his chest.

“What does that mean?”

“It means you know the answer.” *Anther.*

He gathered her into his arms. “Oh, Caro, I’m so lucky you picked me.”

I didn’t pick you. But I’m married to you anyway. I’m the lucky one.

“And if you would be willing to give my cock a little attention, I think I could be ready for you again. Soon.”

She grasped his flaccid member.

“Oh, yes, Caro.” He held her breasts. “See how excited you make me already?”

He was hardening in her hand as she stroked him gently, afraid of hurting him when he was still somewhat pliable.

“And if you used your mouth, I would get harder even faster.”

Her mouth? Her husband wanted her to use her mouth?

“Your beautiful pink tongue.”

Her thrusting, ugly tongue. It was one thing to put her tongue in his mouth when they kissed, where he couldn’t see it, but he would see it if she put it on his member.

And . . . and . . . and it wasn’t clean down there, was it?

She had to refuse her husband. She couldn’t do what he wanted. She would never do that. But she didn’t have the words, she couldn’t say the words.

She moved her hand faster and cupped his scrotum with her other hand. She kissed him feverishly, covering his mouth so he couldn’t ask her to do that again.

She had to arouse him this way and get him inside her and he would forget about wanting her mouth on his member.

She succeeded. He moaned into her ardent, messy kisses and his cock swelled in her hand and when she bent her knee and put his shaft against her wet cleft, he rolled and got on top of her and thrust into her.

His torso rubbing against hers, his chest gliding over her breasts, his mouth on hers. Their bodies touched everywhere with him inside her. She ran her fingers through his silver hair. She gripped his broad shoulders, felt every muscle in his back, stroked and kneaded his perfect, flexing, round buttocks.

“Can I take my time, Caro?”

“Yes.” *Yeth.*

“You’ll tell me if you’re too sore, darling? I don’t want to hurt you.”

She locked her legs around his, digging her heels into the backs of his knees, keeping him close. There was no need for him to withdraw. They were married. She assumed he wanted an heir. He would stay in her quim until he had spent and she would not have to put her mouth on his cock.

His movements were unhurried. His kisses were lingering, almost languid. Perhaps because he had spent so recently. Or because he had tired himself out the first time. Or because he wanted her to have a different experience from the other times they had coupled, when they had both rushed to release.

She did not think she would spend this way. She was so full of jangling nerves after his suggestion she use her tongue on him. And he was not touching her pearl directly, although a bony place on his pelvis pushed over her maidenhair and rubbed her as he slowly and sensually stroked in and out of her.

He was inside her and moving against her for so long. A sensation deep inside grew and grew.

He kissed her and he spoke to her and his wash of words coated her and soothed her and relaxed her. It was a stream of

nonsense, of *darling* and *sweetness* and *good girl* and *so wet* and *how lovely* whispered against her mouth.

And when he said *my wife*, she exploded with a cry and shook and clutched and, yes, she wept.

“Oh, Caro.” He held her head in his hands and used his thumbs to wipe her tears away. “You should know I would never make you do something you didn’t want to do.”

He had known. He had known she didn’t want to put her tongue on his cock.

“You can tell me anything. I want you to tell me everything.”

She couldn’t tell him everything. She had been silent for too many years. She had too much locked up inside of her.

But she could kiss him.

She put her ugly tongue in his mouth and tried to tell him with her licks and nips how beautiful he was. How grateful she was to be married to such a generous man.

He did spend inside her, long after she had spent. So long afterward that she felt herself climbing to another peak. But she did not hold him back when his eyes and his groans and his quickening thrusts told her he was near.

He stayed lying on top of her afterwards and she luxuriated in having his weight on her, pressing her into the mattress as she ran her fingers up and down his back. He was so still, she thought he might have fallen asleep again, but if he did sleep, it was only for seconds.

She heard his purr. “What does my Caro want now? Shall I make you spend with my tongue, darling?”

An offer to pay her that kind of attention again. Even though they were legally bound and he no longer needed to persuade her to marry him. And he knew she did not want to reciprocate.

He raised his head from her chest and looked at her.

“And I don’t want you to worry about anything. Phin wants to pleasure you and he doesn’t expect anything back from you, do you understand?”

What she understood was that he had read her mind and this was one more piece of his generosity, so she nodded. But she grabbed at him as he began to move down her body.

“Phineas.”

“Yes, Caro?”

“It’s dirty. Your seed.”

“Does that make you anxious, darling? It doesn’t bother Phin, but I can get a cloth and clean you first, if you’d prefer. I want you to enjoy yourself.”

“I’d r-r-rather you stay up here. With me. Use your h-h-hand.”

If her husband was disappointed in her request, he did not show it. He immediately slid off her, to her side and put his fingers on her mound and began to brush her pearl very lightly.

“Is this what you want, darling?”

“Unh.”

“Say yes or no, Caro.”

“Yes.” *Yeth.*

He put his mouth on her breast and suckled. A lightning bolt ran from the nipple under his tongue to her pearl.

“My little plums,” he crooned as he moved from one breast to the other. “All for Phin.” His finger flicked more quickly.

“Ungh. Phineas.”

“Yes?”

“T-t-talk to me.”

“About how you’re such a good girl and you’re going to come for Phin again?”

Oh, my God.

“Or about how my naughty Caro wants to be bedded in the middle of her wedding day? Such a needy girl, didn’t want to wait, had to have her husband, had to spend. And now you’re going to come for me again, aren’t you? Yes, you are, I can tell you are, you bad girl. Your sweet little naughty cunt is going to come for Phin over and over again. For his hand, his tongue, his cock. That’s right. That’s what Phin wants. I’m going to play with my lovely darling whenever she wants. Because she’s such a bad girl who needs to spend.”

A sound escaped from her. A sound she didn’t recognize. Her body tightened in physical pleasure even as her soul filled with darkness, and she shook against her husband.

“That’s so good, Caro, that’s my darling girl, spend for Phin, I just want you to feel good.”

He put his arms around her and kissed her forehead and her nose and her cheeks. Small, tender kisses as she lay and sweated and panted in his arms, like an animal.

He chuckled softly as his lips swept over her ear. “I know your secret, Caro.”

She went rigid under his caresses, but he did not seem to notice.

“You pretend to be a good girl, but you’re not. You’re bad, bad, bad. Just like Phin.”

She closed her eyes and pulled away from him.

“No, Caro. Don’t do that.” It was a stern voice that brooked no opposition. She had never heard that voice from him.

She opened her eyes. He was sitting up, leaning on his arm toward her, and there was a gravity in his face that did not match her picture of her husband.

“No closing yourself off. Not in bed. I won’t have you doing that after we make love.”

Make love? He had brought her to climax with his words as much as his finger. Words which had mixed her loveliness and her naughtiness into such a jumble that she did not know

if her arousal was from humiliation or praise. How was that making love? It was horrible.

“If you don’t like something, you have to tell me.” He waited. “Tell me what I did or said that you didn’t like, darling.”

It was too difficult. It was too much. She didn’t have the words let alone the wherewithal to explain that his playfulness had cut into her heart like a threat. How could she tell her husband not to call her a bad girl when she was one?

She shook her head.

“Maybe you’ll tell me later?”

She held still.

“I have a guess, but I’d rather you tell me.” He sighed. “Well, whatever I did, you have to forgive your silly husband if it takes him a little time to puzzle you out.”

He would never puzzle her out. Please God, let him never puzzle her out.

He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm. “Do you forgive me?”

There was nothing to forgive. It was all to do with her and nothing to do with him. He was the sweet one, the lovely one, the one who should be showered with *darlings*. She brushed his jaw lightly with her fingers to tell him that.

A rumble. It was his stomach.

“And now your husband has a different kind of appetite. I’m sure Mrs. Cull has made us a delightful dinner. I hate to lose sight of my wife’s beautiful body in the service of my digestion, but shall I dress you now?”

TWENTY-FIVE

Over the breakfast table, Phineas watched his wife eat. That beautiful pink tongue just barely escaping her darker lips as the spoon deposited the porridge into her mouth. He found his own mouth hanging open slightly while he first envied the spoon and then the porridge. When she looked up at him, he had to close his mouth quickly with an almost audible snap of his jaw.

Of course, it had not escaped his notice that she hadn't wanted to take him in her mouth yesterday. He didn't know why she didn't, but how like his sweet Caro not to want to refuse him openly. Instead, she had diverted him to something else that had given him a great deal of pleasure. She had paid attention to him, made love to him, been with him. Well, until the very end. And then he had said something that had made her into the woman who pushed him away.

He had courted her as the girl had wanted to be courted. But now he must try harder to appreciate the woman who was his wife. He still knew so little about her, but the bed might be the place where he had the best chance of understanding her.

Good girl, naughty girl. They were just words, weren't they? And she liked his talk. But she hadn't liked that he had made her spend that way.

What had he been thinking? She was barely deflowered. That had been only her second time in bed with a man, if you didn't count the bookshop and he did count it, so third time. Fourth time if you counted his tonguing her to a climax in the drawing room.

He had only been inside her a total of four times—five times now, since she had woken him at midnight last night by lightly skimming her fingers over his flank—Only four times before he had spoken to her as if she were a trollop.

Could it be he had shamed his daring wife?

He knew her silence had nothing to do with shyness. It was her lisp and her stutter. Someone had made her hate her own speech. Probably her father.

Phineas' time in the company of the late marquess had been brief, but he knew Caro's father had not been a man who had a heart of gold hidden under a layer of gruffness. He had been rigid and disapproving, through and through. And likely cruel. Edmund had always been open about his distaste for his father, making visits home very rarely, only arranging the shooting trip after months of nagging from Phineas.

His darling Caro must have lived with shame for a long time in her father's house. Phineas was never going to be party to bringing more of that into her life. And he wanted his desirous wife to stay just that. He'd have to watch his words.

So, no more *naughty*. No more *bad girl*. No more shame.

Not that he really understood shame. Shamelessness was his calling card.

But Caro had taught him about temptation during their engagement as he had held his lust back, wanting to be a friend to her.

And she was teaching him about love, too. And patience.

But he'd rather not learn about shame.

“What are we going to do today, Caro? Our first full day as husband and wife?”

“C-c-can we go get La? From my brother?”

“Yes. And after that?”

His wife was arrested in her answer to him by his butler coming into the dining room and informing Phineas he had a caller.

“Surely it’s too early, Markham.”

Phineas didn’t bother to pull out his watch. He couldn’t read it without also taking out his spectacles and it seemed like too much bother.

But it would please his wife.

He chuckled and put his hand inside his tailcoat, reaching for the spectacles.

Markham bent over and whispered in his ear. “It’s Mr. Denby, sir, from Denby and Sons. He said he’s here because of your wedding yesterday.”

Why would the wine merchant come because of Phineas’ wedding? Edmund had paid for the wedding breakfast and the wine that had been served.

Oh, Caro’s dowry. And his unpaid bill, his credit stretched again and again. Denby was here to get payment before the dowry money got spent.

“I’ll see the caller in my study.”

The butler left the room. Phineas took another sip of his coffee and then stood. “Please excuse me, darling.”

Phineas felt Caro’s eyes on him. And as he left the dining room and went into the hall and then his study, he heard another knock on the front door. Likely, another merchant. They were vultures, all of them, and as the indebted groom, he was their carcass to gnaw on and pick over. Phineas closed the study door.

“Lord Burchester.” Mr. Denby bowed.

“Mr. Denby, you have granted me very little grace. I am not yet twenty-four hours married. By all rights, I should still be in bed with my wife.”

Phineas raised his eyebrows in what he hoped was an approximation of an uxorious leer. He should probably hate himself for using Caro this way, but Mr. Denby had always expressed a vicarious interest in Phineas’ sexual exploits in the past, and he hoped to distract the fellow.

But Mr. Denby had no curiosity about the sanctified activities of a married man. His voice was curt, his expression stern. "I must have your bill paid, my lord. You have the largest outstanding balance of any of my customers."

"The largest? A questionable accomplishment on my part. I promise you, Mr. Denby, as soon as the dowry is settled, you'll get your money."

"When will that be?"

"I'll see my brother-in-law today, and we'll arrange the transfer of funds. Maybe next week?"

"I want to be the first creditor you pay, my lord."

"I give you my word," Phineas vowed.

He ushered Mr. Denby to the study door, anxious to get him out. But when the two men came into the hall, Phineas was astounded to see four merchants lining the walls and his beautiful wife standing in the doorway to the dining room.

Mr. Denby surveyed the other men and turned back to Phineas. "I'm first. I have your word."

"Yes."

Caro was coming toward him, her brows knit together. She walked past him and into the study.

Phineas nodded his head to the other men who bowed and murmured, "Lord Burchester."

"Mr. Knatchbull, Mr. Cure, Mr. Egerton, Mr. Seymour. I'll be with you shortly."

He walked into the study and closed the door behind him. Caro was staring at him. Suddenly, he realized he might become personally acquainted with shame a good deal sooner than he had hoped.

"You wanted to speak to me, darling?"

"Who are those men, Phineas?"

"They're merchants."

"Do you owe them all m-money?"

“Yes.”

“Why are they h-h-h-ere now?”

Phineas cleared his throat. “Because of your dowry.”

“My . . . ?”

“I think they all think they’re going to get paid now.”

“What did you tell the m-man who jutht left?”

“The man who just left?”

“The man you talked to before I came in here.”

“I promised Mr. Denby he would be the first to be paid once Edmund settles the money on me. I do have a rather large bill with him.”

Caro marched to the door and flung it open. “I’m thorry. Lord B-b-burchethter is retheiving no more c-c-c-allerth today. M-m-markham, pleathe thow everyone out.”

Phineas heard some muffled protests before Caro closed the door and leaned against it, her hands behind her.

“Who doth your bookth?”

“What do you mean, darling?”

“Your accountth.”

“Well, I have a banker and a man of business here in town, and my steward keeps my accounts on the estate.”

“We’ll go to the banker and the man of bithneth right now.”

“My wife wants to know the value of my account, Sir Josiah.”

They were in Sir Josiah Bastable’s office in the Lovelock Bank. Sir Josiah shifted in his seat.

“Ah, yes, the marquess wants to know your assets.” Sir Josiah nodded at Edmund who was standing in the corner, his arms folded in front of his chest, looking almost as troubled as Phineas felt.

“No, Lady Burchester wants to know.” Phineas put his hand on the back of Caro’s chair. “Please tell her.”

“I don’t think, I mean . . .” Sir Josiah pushed himself to his feet with a sigh. “May I speak to you alone, Lord Burchester?”

“I know it’s a scandal, Sir Josiah. I’ve warned my wife. Still, she wants to hear it from you.”

Sir Josiah fixed his eyes on the ceiling. “At this moment, Lord Burchester has five pounds and four shillings in this bank.”

A growl from Edmund in the corner.

Caro reached out. “May I thee the balanthe theet?”

It didn’t take her long to scan the figures.

She stood. “Thank you, Thir Jothiah.” Her face was stony. Phineas’ heart sank.

Once the three of them were seated in the carriage, Phineas worked up the courage to utter one word.

“Well?”

Caro looked out the window as Phineas and Edmund both watched her.

“Let me talk to the man of bithneth.”

In the next office they visited, Phineas passed one of the most painful hours of his life, watching Caro’s dark head bent over a stack of bills and receipts, her long fingers running down columns in ledgers.

Finally, she raised her head.

“M-may Lord B-B-Burchethter and Lord Thudbury and I have thith room to t-t-talk privately?”

The man of business and the clerk who had assisted in bringing ledgers to Caro filed out of the room.

Caro stood from the table and looked at Phineas for the first time since they had left the bank. “You have no r-r-right hiring a chambermaid, let alone t-t-taking a wife.”

He had no reply ready. He wanted to take her in his arms and smooth her upset away with kisses but he knew she would not permit that. Not at this moment. Not in front of her brother.

“I’m that poor, am I?”

“Yeth.”

“And you’re very angry at me, aren’t you?”

“Yeth.”

There was a silence. She turned to her brother. “And I’m angry at you, Edmund. For not athking. For truthing your friend and that he could take care of me. You told him not to go too fatht in the phaeton but you didn’t think to athk how much that carriage cotht. You didn’t find out it hadn’t been paid for. Nor the team pulling it.”

Edmund coughed. “I’m sorry, Caro—”

She held her hand up. “But mothtly, I’m angry at mythelf.”

Phineas couldn’t have his bride blame herself for his foolishness, his extravagance.

“No, don’t be angry at yourself. This is entirely my fault ___”

“I’m angry at mythelf becauthe I know b-b-better. I thould have athked about money before I thaid yeth. Inthtead, I mooned over rotheth. Thirty rotheth everyday for twelve weekth! Do you know how much that c-cotht?”

He didn’t know how much it had cost. He hadn’t cared. He had put off paying the pipers again and again. But he had had no idea what to do, so he had instead done what he wanted to do. Which was to court his wife.

“Is it hopeless, Caro?”

She looked down at the floorboards stained with drops of ink from the pens of countless clerks. “My dowry can’t fickth thith.”

“I don’t want your dowry to fix this. I need to fix this.”

She raised her head. Tears were streaming down her face. “At leath I know now why you wanted to m-m-marry m-m-me.”

He kept his eyes on her face. “Edmund, please leave us.”

Phineas waited until he heard the door shut.

“I did not marry you for your dowry, Caroline Mary Josephine Haskett Edge. Absolutely not.”

She took in a deep, shuddering gulp of air. Still the tears poured out of her eyes.

“I don’t even know how much your dowry is, darling.”

She laughed. Again that strange laugh that came with no smile.

“You think thaying that m-maketh me feel better? That you didn’t read the marriage thettlement paperth before you thigned them? You should know how much my dowry ith. I know. To the p-penny. You have no thenthe.”

“That’s true. But you do.”

“Tho you married m-m-me for that?”

I married you because I love you, Caro. But you’re not ready to hear that, are you?

Phineas raised his chin and held out his hand to her. He thought this might the most daring act of his life, waiting for her to take his hand. But she reached out and when he felt her clasp, he wanted to cry in relief. Instead, he spoke from his heart.

“Let me be clear, Lady Burchester. I am absolutely besotted with you. Infatuated with you. Your smell, your skin, your hair, your body, your face. Your beauty, darling. And your kisses, your touch, and how you let me kiss and touch you. Even now, in this horrible situation and with you so upset, I can only think about how quickly I can get you back into bed. Yes, it’s terrible and base and entirely true.”

She swallowed.

“But I also married you because I know, if I could just get you to talk to me, even if you’re angry with me like you are now, I’m going to find out I married the wisest woman in the world who is going to be the most wonderful mother to our babies.”

“We can’t afford babieth. We can’t even afford La.”

“We have to afford Miss Lavinia.”

“Yeth.”

“So, now you know the whole truth. I married you for your dog, Caro.”

A twitch of her lips. Had she almost smiled? She dropped his hand, ducked her head, and went into her reticule and found a handkerchief and began to wipe her eyes and her nose.

“I hate this, Caro. I hate that I’ve already let you down so badly. And I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you how poor I was before you married me. But I was so afraid you wouldn’t have married me if you knew.”

She folded her handkerchief. “I want to be in charge of the money in thith marriage.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea, darling.”

“You mutht remember you thaid that. You might not be th-tho happy later.”

“Will you give Phin a kiss now?”

She closed her eyes. She took a deep breath. “You mutht let me conthentrated, Phineath.”

“Yes, Caro.”

They took Edmund home. The marquess looked rather hangdog in the carriage. However, Phineas was sure he himself looked even more hangdog.

Lavinia replaced Edmund in the carriage once they got to the Sudbury town house. Phineas gazed at the droopy face of the hound and felt like the whole world must be unhappy because Caro was unhappy.

However, Caro did not cry or frown as the carriage took them back to the rooms. She stared out the window, her face holding no expression whatsoever, a pile of ledgers and bills next to her on the seat, barricading her away from Phineas, her hand on Lavinia at all times, taking comfort from her dog instead of her husband.

Without turning her head, she battered Phineas with questions. How much did his rooms cost? How long was the lease? Who were the merchants who had come this morning? What other businesses did he owe money to? What were his other expenses? What about the cost of stabling his horses and coal and bills from tailors and shoemakers? How many servants did he have? What did each of them do for him?

He had never heard so many words from her before, and it grieved him that it had taken his own dereliction to make her speak to him at such length.

“We will have to let most of the London servants go.”

“We can’t. I mean, I can’t.” He almost flinched when she finally turned her head to look at him.

“I thought you agreed I was going to be in charge of the money.”

“I owe them all back wages.”

“You owe money to the people who feed you and dress you and wait on you?”

“Yes.”

“Then that money will be paid right away from my dowry.”

“But I promised Mr. Denby—”

“*You* promised Mr. Denby. I didn’t. A wine merchant need never let anyone run up a bill that large. I didn’t know you drank that much, Phineas.” Her eyes narrowed.

My husband should be moderate in drink.

He was relieved he could tell her the truth. “I don’t anymore.”

“Well, the bill is very high. A right-thinking man would have cut you off, long ago. But I take it you jollied him along.”

“I did. Don’t I jolly everybody along?”

She turned back to the window. “Don’t even think about it.”

“About what?”

“Trying to jolly me.”

His wife was an Amazon indeed. A brutal warrior who wielded a quill and a ledger instead of a sword and shield. He sat in a chair in the corner of the study, keeping his mouth shut unless she asked him a question.

She sat behind his desk and called the servants in one at a time and interviewed them and discussed their futures and whether they might be happy if she found them a position somewhere else. She gave Markham a list of merchants and told him messages should be sent to all of them that Lord and Lady Burchester would be available tomorrow to discuss a partial settling of accounts.

She ate no luncheon, and Phineas did not really feel he could, either.

At four o’clock, she stood from the desk.

“We must go.”

He stood, too. His legs were stiff. “Where, darling?”

“Pall Mall.”

She went to her bedchamber. To get a hat and a coat, he thought. When she came back, dressed for going out, she was carrying the painting he had given her for her birthday. He had asked Jones to bring it to the rooms with Caro’s other things during the wedding breakfast yesterday.

Yesterday, when they had been so happy.

“Oh, Caro.”

“I’m thorry, Phineath.”

“No, Caro. Not the painting. Not your gift.”

“We have to have the money to pay a bit on every bill tomorrow.”

“But not that. My watch, instead. My ring.”

She looked down at the picture. “All right. We’ll go to a jeweler’th. But we’ll take the painting, too, if the watch and the ring are not enough.”

Phineas held his breath until the jeweler named a sum Caro said was sufficient.

In the carriage on the way home, his purse heavy with coins from the sale of his watch and ring, Phineas looked at the painting leaning on the seat next to Caro.

“I’m sorry you don’t like the painting. It was rather stupid of me to pick a shipwreck, but I liked it so much, I thought you would like it, too. But I can see it’s rather gloomy and not at all something you would want. You can sell it if you’d rather not keep it.”

She blinked. “I l-love it. My brother told you.”

“No. No, he didn’t.”

“You jutht thought I would like it?”

“Yes. Because it was the best painting in the exhibition.”

“Yeth. It wath.”

“Do you really love it?” *And is there still a chance you might love me, the man who can’t afford you and has caused you all this trouble?*

“Yeth.”

“Then I’m glad you’re keeping it.”

“I am, too. But I’m thorry for your watch and ring.”

“I’m not,” he said and smiled to show how much he meant it. “I never look at my watch and the ring was a nuisance.”

Caro yawned and only covered her mouth right at the end. “I’m hungry.”

“Yes, you must be,” he agreed, getting a glimpse of her tongue. “And are you tired, darling?”

“I am. The morning seemth like it wath a decade ago.”

“But you still look like you’re a girl of twenty.”

She held a finger up and wagged it. “No jolly.”

“Jolly? No. Truth.”

She looked at him and although her lips did not move, he thought maybe for the first time he understood the idea of smiling eyes.

“All right, I’m done conthentrating for today, Phineath. I’m ready to kith you.”

He carefully moved the painting from the seat next to her and sat down beside his wife. She turned to him. He cupped her square jaw with his hand and lightly stroked the skin in front of her ear with a fingertip. He looked in her eyes, her beautiful green eyes, still hiding so much from him. He kissed her and her lips were soft, yielding to him, in every way the opposite of the practical, driven woman she’d been today. He pressed his forehead to hers.

“Thank you, darling.”

“For the kith?”

“For the kiss and for everything you’ve done for me today.”

“For uth.”

“Yes. For us.”

They would weather this together. Despite her vulnerability to his touch and his talk, Caro was strong. Much stronger and braver than he. Much more willing to face unpleasantness and make sacrifices.

He really was going to have to muster up something if he was not going to turn into a leech, sucking sustenance from his

wife, only taking and never giving.

But what could Phineas Edge muster except the forbidden jollying?

Then Caro leaned into him and initiated her own kiss.

This. I can give her this. I can make sure she knows with every bit of her being that I married her for her.

And someday, when I feel brave and I know she's ready and she won't push me away, I'll tell her I love her.

Because I do.

PART THREE

TWENTY-SIX

It took over a week for them to make it out to Burchester. In that time, Caroline rearranged the London household, paid back wages, and found other positions for most of the servants. She made small deposits on the staggeringly large outstanding bills. She sold the phaeton, the piece of land in Cornwall that was part of her dowry, her mother's pearls.

She did not tell Phineas about her mother's pearls.

And through it all, she chastised herself. She had been a fool. How could she have forgotten that marriage was a business transaction? She had known from her parents that marriage wasn't about love but she had ignored that it also wasn't about waltzes and roses and tongues on quims in drawing rooms and *darlings*.

Marriage was a bargain between two parties.

And she had made a very bad bargain.

She tried very hard not to take it out on her husband, and she felt, for the most part, she succeeded. After all, she was mostly angry at herself, and not at the silver-haired boy she had married. And when she came to bed late, her eyes blurry from looking at numbers, she went into his bedchamber instead of her own and took consolation in the arms of her husband.

After their wedding night, however, she made Phineas spend outside her.

"No babies yet," she said.

A wounded look crossed his face. Not the one he used to garner sympathy, but real pain. And then she saw him make it disappear with a grin and a kiss on her nose and a “Whatever my woman of business says.”

He was an actor, her husband, and not a very good one. But at that moment, she did feel his generosity. He was acting for her.

She and Phineas and Lavinia and Jones and Dashwood all went out to Burchester in a single carriage together. An extra carriage for the servants was an unnecessary expense. It was an awkward journey, her husband’s valet holding himself in a disapprovingly rigid posture, Jones looking worried, and even her talkative husband silent for most of the trip.

It was dark and raining when they arrived. The house was cold, dirty, damp. The late supper was a means to end hunger and nothing else.

She was glad her husband knew she never smiled so she was not obliged to make herself smile here.

She told Jones there was no need to unpack tonight, her maid should get some rest. Jones undressed Caroline and found a nightdress at the top of one of the trunks and bade her mistress goodnight and left the chilly bedchamber.

Caroline unpinned and brushed her own hair and told Lavinia to lie on the carpet and to stay.

She knocked on the door connecting her bedchamber to her husband’s. There was no answer.

She opened the door. “Phineas?”

Her husband was sitting on his bed, still dressed, his head down.

She had never thought of him as a small man—not with that chest, those shoulders—but he suddenly looked small. And seeing him that way filled her with foreboding. And regret. She had spent the first week of their marriage handling the money, not her husband’s feelings.

A brush against her thigh. Lavinia had contravened Caroline's command and was coming into Phineas' room. The dog went up to him and put her head in his lap. Phineas stroked Lavinia's ears but kept his neck bent, his eyes on the dog's head.

"La is a b-better wife than m-me."

Phineas didn't say anything.

She was scared now. She had known what to do in London. There, she had some idea about how to repair things and herself. But how was she going to buttress her husband?

She crossed to the bed and sat next to him. She took his hand.

"You were n-never supposed to be an earl."

Silence.

"You weren't raised to it. You w-were in the navy."

When he finally spoke, his jaw was clenched and his voice was steely and sharp. "I've been the bloody earl for fourteen years, Caroline. I should have learned something by now about the job. Anyone else would have."

He had never used that voice before. He had never called her Caroline when they were alone. She was more frightened than ever. Lavinia let out a short whine, sensing her people were unhappy.

"T-t-t-to-m-m-morrow, you'll take me around the estate?"

He grunted, a noise that might be a yes or a no.

"Can we go to b-b-bed now, Phineas?"

He said nothing.

She stood and shoed Lavinia back into her own bedchamber and closed the door. She took her nightdress off over her head, walked around the bed, and got into it.

Phineas still sat, his head down.

"Come to b-b-bed."

Agonizingly long seconds.

“I don’t feel like it.”

So soon. She was losing him so soon.

“M-m-maybe I can make you f-feel like it.”

His shoulders hunched in a shrug. She pushed down the counterpane and moved across the bed so she was sitting behind him, her long legs on either side of him. She put her hands on his shoulders. He didn’t move. She leaned forward, pressing into him, letting her nipples be abraded by the fabric of his coat. She inhaled the scent of him, sliding her hands off his shoulders to his chest. She found the lapels of his tailcoat and lifted them and pulled them back toward her and began to undress him from behind.

He let her take off his tailcoat, unbutton and remove his waistcoat, untie his cravat. Then he stood up and removed the rest of his clothing himself, still facing away from her.

She scooted to the edge of the bed, shivering with cold, but not wanting to cover the only thing she had that she knew made her husband happy.

Finally, he turned around, and she saw his face for the first time since she had come into the room. She didn’t recognize him.

“I’m very sorry this is the home I’m bringing you to. You deserve better.”

“I only w-w-want to d-deserve you.”

He stepped toward her.

Thank God. She strained upwards, grabbing his hands and pulling him down, and found his mouth with hers.

As she had on their wedding day, she tried to communicate with her kiss. *I’m here with you. I’m your wife. I’m your darling.* She seated his hands on her waist and wrapped her arms around his neck and twined her legs over his. *Let me comfort you this way.*

His hands slid around to her back and he leaned into her and the kiss. She pulled on him and began to tilt herself down to the mattress. A gradual movement until the tipping point

and he came down with her all the way and was on top of her in the bed.

She clasped him as if he were the piece of wreckage that would save her life in the dark water they found themselves in.

She had thought to ease his trouble with touch, with release, but this was selfish. His body, his warmth, his weight were the greatest solace she had ever known. Even greater than Lavinia.

He lay on her, unmoving, letting her kiss him, accepting her tongue. She could not feel his hardness between them and she was used to her husband being aroused and ready for her. At least for the first coupling of the night.

She would seduce him the way he seduced her.

“Caro w-w-wants her Phin.” She released her grip on his back and trailed her hands up and down his flanks. “Caro needs Phin.” She began to move underneath him, a slight undulation driven by her very real wish to rub her most sensitive place against him.

Up and down her fingers stroked his sides, back and forth her pelvis rocked. His breathing was getting harsher and she could feel his growing length.

“Y-y-y-you’re the only man I’ve ever desired.”

He had a right to know at least that. Well, maybe *right* was not the word to use. He was worthy of knowing that. And maybe he needed to know that singular fact about her.

His head moved a little, pulling back, and he looked at her carefully.

“Is that true, Caro? You’re not just saying that to make me feel better?”

It was both things. It was true *and* she was saying it to make him feel better. Make him feel more of a man. A man capable of taking his wife.

“It’s true.”

“You fell in love with me when you were seventeen, my sweet girl?”

She was used to being misunderstood. Why then did she feel such a clutching loneliness because he had taken what she had said and twisted it?

But he was moving with her now, rubbing himself against her.

She countered with the truth. “I t-touched myself and only thought of you.”

He raised himself off her and his cock was hard, jabbing into her maidenhair.

“Did you imagine this, darling?” He used his hand to feel her wetness and then to position himself at her entrance and plunge into her.

No, she hadn’t. She had only thought of hands and lips and touches of her breasts and her pearl. She hadn’t understood about hard things being inside soft places. About having a space inside where someone else fit. Where he fit.

But she understood it now. And she never wanted to do without it again.

After their mutual releases and Phineas had carefully cleaned his seed from the skin of her abdomen, refusing to let her get up and do it herself, he wrapped his arms around her.

“I’m glad you need me for something, Caro.”

There might have been a touch of bitterness in his voice. She wasn’t sure.

But her husband seemed himself the next morning. Full of energy, full of teasing, full of words.

They spent the morning out-of-doors, walking over the part of the estate that was not farmed and not rented, Lavinia loping along, nose down, sniffing out rabbits. This part was not large, but it was pretty with some meadows and a forest, a few streams. The gardens, however, were unkempt and had not been maintained properly.

“I want to take you to see the tenant-farmers and their families as soon as possible, darling. I know they’ll want to meet their new countess.”

Yes, she was responsible for a whole host of folk now, just as she had been in Sudbury. She did not welcome the prospect of having to meet dozens and dozens of new people who might not hide their distaste for her, who would whisper behind their hands about her. Her father’s tenants had known her since she was born and were used to her speech. But here she was an outsider and would be scrutinized and judged as one.

It was different with servants. As in Sudbury, if she sensed mockery or disrespect, she would let them go. Immediately and ruthlessly. But one did not let tenants go. Not when there were leases signed. Not when her husband needed their rents so desperately.

But she would put off meeting the tenants for a few more days. Get her bearings. Learn the house, look at the books.

A man was waiting in the front hall when she and Phineas returned.

“Lady Burchester, this is my steward, Mr. Albion Chambers,” Phineas said. “He’s one of the sons of Lord Chambers, the baron who resides—ooh, about thirty miles away, would you say, Albion? We grew up together.”

Mr. Chambers looked about Phineas’ age. He was Caroline’s height, with curling light-brown hair. He bowed to her and she curtsied in return.

“Yes, Albion makes sure everything ticks over nicely here while I’m in London.”

“Welcome to Burchester, my lady.”

The man’s eyes were thoughtful, calm, considering.

“Th-thank y-y-y-you, Mr. Chambers.”

She saw the slight raise of the eyebrows, a pressing together of the lips. A reaction to her stammer and to *Chamberth*.

“We’ve been out for a walk on the estate, Albion. My wife spotted a broken stile in the meadow in the southeast corner. We should get that fixed, eh? But we’re going in to luncheon now. Will you join us?”

To Caroline’s relief, Mr. Chambers declined, saying he had some business to attend to and certainly, he would see to the stile repair.

“I’m awfully lucky to have him, darling,” Phineas said as he took her into the dining room on his arm. “His father is very wealthy, and I know Albion learned a great deal about management from him. He’s a good friend and a very clever man, Albion. But he’s a fourth son so he needed a profession and how fortunate for me that he chose to become my steward.”

Caroline spent the afternoon going through the house. She told Phineas she didn’t need him, he should go out riding, take advantage of the break in the rain.

She started in the cellars and worked her way to the attics. The house was sound. There was no bad smell, no sign of rot. The dampness she had felt last night was just because it had been raining and so few fires had been lit to warm the house. She made her way through every room with Lavinia at her side. She opened doors, felt drapes, examined furniture, looked at ceilings.

This is a good house. It’s just been neglected.

She met with the housekeeper and the cook. She would have to give them a chance, she supposed, to see if they would come up to her standards before she found new ones.

“The drawing r-r-room needs to be cleaned this afternoon, Mrs. F-F-Fox. The earl would like to sit there after dinner and the walls need the soot scrubbed off of them.”

To the cook: “I will approve all m-m-menus, Mrs. Beckford. What had you planned for tonight?”

“A roast and potatoes, my lady.”

“Please have some lettuces or watercress and some white soup, as well. And a cake for pudding.”

“His lordship never asked for pudding before, my lady.”

“I’m asking for it. And please salt the roast. And no more wine is to be bought.”

The dinner that night was improved over the three other meals Caroline had eaten in Burchester. She and Phineas sat in the drawing room after dinner, and she realized she would need to get in a chimney sweep. And tomorrow, she must meet the gardeners.

“How was your afternoon, darling?”

“F-fine.”

“I hope you’re not working too hard. You’ve taken on so much.”

“It’s not t-too much. I like this house. And the grounds.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

She could have given no better gift to her husband than her true feelings and these words, she felt. He beamed at her and leaned forward and took her hand.

“Are you tired now, Caro? Do you want to go to bed?”

“No and yes.”

“No and yes?”

“No, to tired. Yes, to bed.”

His beam turned into a hungry look, and her husband stood and drew her out of her chair and took her up the stairs.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The next day, Caroline sent Phineas off by himself in the morning to see his tenants.

“Will you come, Caro?”

She did not feel brave enough yet. “Another time.”

Disappointment creased his forehead for a fraction of a second but he did not protest.

“I know you want to get the house in order.”

“Yes.”

“And I must work as hard as you do, darling. Not spend my days riding.” He took Lavinia with him. “I have to show someone off today, Caro. Miss Lavinia can be your proxy. She’s not as beautiful as you, but close.”

Caroline first met with the head gardener and discussed pruning, weeding, and expanding the kitchen plots for the summer. The vegetables they ate would need to come from the garden. The man nodded but did not seem to be listening. As she took her leave from him, Caroline thought he would not be in the employ of the house for long. She would have to find a new head gardener, one who would take her direction.

She was down in the bowels of the house, going through the larder with the cook, when the butler came and found her. A caller, he said, for Lord Burchester.

“He went out.”

“I know, my lady. I informed Lady Starling and she said she would wait. She’s in the drawing room.”

Lady Starling. Caroline swallowed. At least, the drawing room looked slightly more presentable now. But did Caroline look all right? She ran her hands over her hair. She patted at the skirts of her dress where some wayward flour had collected.

How she wished she had La with her right now.

She went into the drawing room. She curtsied. “My lady.”

Lady Starling curtsied back, the smallest possible bob. “Lady Burchester.”

Caroline had been wrong in her assessment of Lady Starling from a distance in the theater. She wasn’t just pretty, she was positively alluring. A cupid bow mouth, a pert nose, long lashes around limpid blue eyes. The beautiful breasts, the tops of which threatened to overflow the neckline of her pale pink silk dress.

Caroline looked down at her own long, flat body, her green muslin dress with a flour smudge.

“I’m here to see Lord Burchester.”

Caroline raised her head. “Ah.”

“He owes me something.”

Another debt. One her husband had hidden from her.

“How m-m-m-much?”

Lady Starling seemed startled. “Pardon?”

“How m-much does he owe you?”

Lady Starling let out a little laugh. “Oh, no. I have to discuss that with him.”

“I am handling the m-m-money so you can t-t-tell me.”

“It’s not money your husband owes me.” Lady Starling looked furious, just as she had in the Burchester box all those months ago. “You see, I know all about Phineas’ various adventures. And I agreed not to tell your brother about what

happened between you and the earl in the bookseller's, and, in exchange, Lord Burchester agreed to . . . something else. And dear Phineas has not met his end of the bargain."

Phineas had told this woman about their coupling in Hatchards? How had that happened? Under what intimate circumstances would he have told her such a thing?

And he owed Lady Starling something that was not money. Nausea and fear roiled Caroline's stomach.

"You can tell my b-b-b-brother. Phineas and I are married n-n-now."

"Are you sure you want me to do that, Lady Burchester? I think your brother would still not be pleased."

What would Edmund do? He wouldn't turn his sister into a widow over this. Of course, she would rather her brother not know that she and Phineas fornicated long before the wedding and even their engagement. But more than that, she didn't want her husband to have anything to do with this woman any longer.

"You can t-t-t-tell the m-m-marquess."

"He already knows how wanton his sister is, is that it? Shall I tell everyone in the *ton* as well?"

"If I have been wanton, it h-h-has only been with my spouse."

"It's too bad your husband can't say the same. Phineas does like to spread his favors around."

Caroline was silent.

"You talk funny." The opinion burst out of Lady Starling, as if she had been thinking it all along and suddenly, she couldn't hold back from expressing it any longer.

"Yes." *Yeth.*

The alluring woman laughed. "The irony that Phineas with all his talk would wind up with you. How does he put up with your halting baby speech? And you're so big, like your brother. Height is so attractive in a man but so coarse in a

woman. Phineas must hate your size. He has such a sensitivity about his own stature. Thank goodness, his cock doesn't have that problem, as we both are privileged to know."

Caroline said nothing, not knowing if she could say anything. Her face burned.

"And despite sounding like you're stupid, you must be intelligent, Lady Burchester. Or at least conniving. You got your husband away from town and out into the country. Far fewer tempting female distractions for him out here. But I do hope you'll be understanding when he wanders, because of course he will, eventually. You mustn't glower as you are doing now, but be kind and understanding to our sweet Phineas. Because he really is so very sweet, isn't he?"

Caroline stayed silent.

"Far too sweet, in a way, for either one of us. We are bitter women of sense and he is all spun-sugar nonsense. He needs a strong hand, and I hope you have that."

Lady Starling looked around the room and sighed. "It's so tatty here. I don't envy you your responsibilities. To have the burden of both restoring this place to make it tolerable and keeping a leash on Phineas. And," her eyes narrowed and she got closer to Caroline, "where are your jewels? You're not wearing any. Phineas loves to give gifts to his women. See my pretty diamond here?"

Her small hand fluttered around her bosom and indeed, there was a diamond pendant hanging between her breasts like a turgid, glistening raindrop.

"A gift only a week after he first bedded me. But I would have thought with you being his wife, he would have covered you in gems. But maybe that's just a romantic idea I have that men dote on their wives."

Caroline had seen the jeweler's bill and stuffed it away in her mind as just one more foolish debt, but faced with the diamond itself and the woman who had received it, the money spent felt like a betrayal.

But it isn't. Yes, you didn't know what a spendthrift Phineas was before you married him. But don't go trying to pretend you didn't know your husband was willing to swive any woman who showed an interest. You always knew it. You married him, knowing it.

She had no idea how she might exit this room with any semblance of dignity, any scrap of power.

She was rescued, however, by Lavinia colliding with Caroline's leg and Lady Starling's shriek.

"Good God, what is that horrid creature?"

Caroline stooped down and hugged Lavinia around the neck.

"Sorry we're so late, Caro. I got into a chat with Willoughby and you know he says we're going to get rain again this—"

Her husband had come into the room at a jaunty pace, Lavinia's leash coiled in his hand, but now he stopped and stared at Lady Starling.

"Lady Starling." He bowed.

Lady Starling was still looking at Lavinia with terror. "What a monster that thing is. I've never seen such a large dog inside a house before. It belongs outside. In a kennel."

"To what do we owe this questionable pleasure, Horatia?"

"Oh." Lady Starling went into her reticule and pulled out a small handkerchief. "You must let me recover from my fright, Phineas."

Caroline stood and made to leave the room, keeping a hand on Lavinia.

"Caro?" Her husband grabbed her arm as she went past to him toward the door.

"I-I-I n-n-n-need t-t-t-o a-a-a-attend t-t-t-to someth-th-thing."

She could tell he did not believe her lie, but he released her. Reluctantly.

She took the stairs on trembling legs with Lavinia padding beside her. On the landing, Phineas' voice drifted up to her.

“Darling, what is this—” was all she heard before the drawing room door closed.

She climbed the rest of the way to her bedchamber, and once she and Lavinia were safely inside, she leaned against the door. She felt even more ill than before. Lightheaded, dizzy, on the verge of casting up her accounts. The degrading insults Lady Starling had lightly tossed her way were nothing compared to the thought that her husband was in the drawing room right now with that seductive woman and he was calling her *darling*.

She had thought she would be able to bear it. She was wrong. But she must learn to, mustn't she? She must learn to accept her husband and everything about him. Even this.

She needed to escape before she screamed.

She quietly opened the bedchamber door she had just closed. She and Lavinia went down the servants' staircase. She burst out of the back of the house, lifting her skirts, almost running. Through the stable yards, not into the lane where anyone might see her and her dog, but this meadow here. Across two stiles, there were woods and she could lose herself in the trees as she used to do in Sudbury after one of her father's rages about her mother's death.

Rain began to fall as she crossed the meadow.

Before her mother died, Caroline had wanted the fairy story of a husband who loved her. That was before she realized how childish her dream was. And how unlikely it was that any man would either love her or marry her.

And it didn't bother her now that Phineas didn't love her, couldn't possibly love her. Because it didn't matter if her husband loved her. What was important was not to love him back. Because someone who loved you could easily hurt you, but you wouldn't be damaged unless you loved him back.

The only thing keeping her in her right mind at this moment was her certainty that she didn't love her husband.

She didn't love his comforting voice, his smell, his touch, the tender look in his hazel eyes when he called her *darling*. She didn't love his silver hair on his head and his chest. His strength, his muscles, the way he filled his breeches.

She didn't love his mischievous playfulness in bed that quickly turned into mutual heated need and want and urgency.

She didn't love his kindness. His sweetness. She didn't love his smile, his laugh, his affection.

She didn't love how much he loved to talk. How much he loved to live.

She didn't love Phineas Edge. And she must make sure she never did.

“Lady Starling, what is this visit about?”

Phineas turned from the drawing room door. Every animal instinct in his body told him to go after Caro, but he needed to send Horatia on her way in a final and definitive manner. And he needed to find out what this bitch had said to his wife to make her so shaky, so stammering, so hesitant to meet his eyes. Because he didn't believe Caro would tell him herself.

Lady Starling sniffed. “A nice way to greet an old friend, Phineas.”

“What did you say to my wife?”

“We were discussing what you owe me. Although the poor woman thought I meant money. She didn't realize I meant her brother.”

“I thought you had forgotten all about that. Given up the idea.”

“First, how wrong of you to let me persist in believing the marquess' sister was his mistress. I admit when I realized your dalliance had been with Lady Caroline Haskett, I had second thoughts about our little agreement. After all, the pair of you had not just been caught by me, but also by Lady Huxley. Everyone knew you were entangled. And then your engagement was announced. I thought I had nothing to hold

over you. But I came to realize your wife still likely wouldn't want her brother to know about your licentious behavior in the bookseller's. So I thought to pay a little visit to you on my way to see my dead husband's brother, the current Viscount Starling."

"You told my wife you knew about . . ."

"Your tryst on the top floor of Hatchards? Oh, yes. And I tell you, Phineas, she did not welcome that news. You'll have a lot of work to do, soothing your giantess once I leave."

Yes, he needed to get to Caro. "I think it's best you leave now."

"You don't want me to go to Sudbury and tell Edmund all about this, do you?"

"He's in town as you damn well know."

"Yes, I suppose that gives you a little more time to figure out how you are going to get the marquess to fall under my spell."

"I will do what my wife wants. Not you, Horatia."

"Oh, Phineas. You really are in her power, aren't you? Tamed by that horribly protruding and lispng tongue she has. Oh, I'm sorry, I meant to say *that lithping tongue she hath*."

Phineas opened the door. "Good day, Lady Starling."

He went in search of his wife. She was not in her bedchamber. She was not in the morning room. None of the servants, including Jones, knew where she was. And there was no sign of Lavinia.

Damn it, she must have gone out of the house and taken the dog with her. Was he going to have to get his own bloodhound so he could track his wife in the future? And now it was raining and his Caro was getting wet.

He went out to the stables and had his horse saddled.

He went all over the estate, stopping at times and calling her name. He kept his eyes peeled for a tall figure in a green dress, but there was no one out and about. The rain fell straight

down, soaking him. Muddy puddles were forming in the dirt of the lanes. Finally, he rode to the edge of the trees, tied his horse to one, and plunged into the Burchester holt on foot.

“Caro!”

He felt like he had been walking for days but it was likely only a quarter of an hour before he heard Lavinia answering him with a series of barks.

He didn’t know enough about Lavinia’s barking to know if this was a sign of distress so he began running toward the sound, pushing branches out of his way, tripping over roots.

But when he came upon Caro, she was standing under a tree, unhurt, her dog at her side.

Thank God.

TWENTY-EIGHT

“Caro, you’re all wet.” Her husband came up to her, out of breath.

“Yes.”

Phineas stood in front of her and took both her hands. “You have to know I never told Lady Starling anything about us. She was in Hatchards that day and saw you and guessed that I had been up to something, and I’ve never been a very good liar, darling.”

Hatchards. The woman with the lush body and the feathers in her hat going up the stairs. Yes, she could have been Lady Starling.

Caroline shook her head.

“What does that mean?”

“D-d-d-don’t call m-me darling.”

“Why not?”

Because you call her darling. “Wh-wh-what do you owe her?”

Phineas sighed. “She wants me to matchmake. Her and Edmund. I told her I would do what *you* wanted, but, darl—” He pulled himself up short. “Caro, besides Lady Anne Cavendish, I can’t imagine a worse wife for your brother.”

“I alr-r-ready told her to t-t-tell Edmund.”

“You did? Good. It’s not like your brother is such an innocent, as I’m sure you’re aware. But I’m so sorry you had

to meet Lady Starling alone. She's horribly petty."

"Indeed."

"Did she say anything hurtful to you?"

She didn't want to answer that question. She had heard all of Lady Starling's insults before from someone closer to her and far more brutal in his language. But Lady Starling had scratched at an open wound, one that had to do with Caroline's husband.

"Caro, let's go back to the house and get you dry and we'll talk."

She shook her head.

Her husband persisted. "I want you to talk to me."

She pulled her hands away and walked deeper into the forest, ducking under branches, winding between trees. She felt Lavinia at her side, heard Phineas behind her, breaking twigs underfoot with his boots. She came to a stream. Too wide for her to leap over. No stepping stones. And the banks all slippery mud. No way forward.

Suddenly, a tight grip on her arm, spinning her around.

"Talk to me, Caro. I've been waiting for months for you to talk to me."

She shook her head.

He released her arm and held her head between his hands. His powerful hands.

"Say my name."

She tried to turn her head away, to shake her head no. He wouldn't let her.

"Say my name."

She was crying, sobbing. Lavinia was whining.

"Just say my name."

"Ph-ph-Phineas Ed—"

He kissed her then, caught her trembling lips in his and sucked on her tongue for just a second. He released her mouth.

“Say my name.”

She started again. “Phineas—” He stopped her mouth even more quickly this time, again kissing her and sucking on her tongue. The kiss went on longer this time. She closed her eyes.

She heard him chuckle. “I have a confession, Caro. When you say a word with the letter *ess* and I see your tongue, I just want to kiss you. I want your tongue in my mouth.”

She opened her eyes. He was grinning. She knew she was a horrible mess. Tears down her face, nose running, hair and clothes wet. And now he was teasing her about her tongue. She knew how ugly it was when she tried to say *ess*. He was mocking her. She tried to shake him off, but she couldn’t.

His voice became very gentle as his grip on her skull became stronger. “Say my name again.”

“N-no!”

“Yes.”

Suddenly, she was howling. It didn’t matter anymore. She couldn’t possibly be uglier. She couldn’t possibly be more at sea.

He released her head and his arms were around her, holding her tightly, lifting her, and somehow, her tall frame was sprawled across his arms and he was laying her down in the mud. He pressed her down, kissing her face and her neck. Everywhere except her mouth.

“Go ahead,” he murmured. “Go ahead. Phin has you.”

Why had she wished for her dog when meeting Lady Starling? She should have wished for her husband.

As Phineas kissed her forehead, her chin, the hollow at the base of her neck, she became much more interested in the kissing than in crying. She hiccupped, and waited for him to come to her mouth, to touch her lips with his.

But he didn't. He kept nuzzling her neck and dotting her face with kisses. And he was humming. Eventually, she turned her head and captured his mouth with hers. She could feel him grinning under her kiss.

"Now say my name."

She was silent. Lavinia lay down in the mud next to her. She could hear the rain on the leaves of the trees, the burble of the stream. Phineas lay partially on her, solid, warm. He waited. He did not resume the kissing.

"We're not getting up from here until you say my whole name."

She licked her lips. "Phineas Edge, Earl... of B-B-Burchester." *Phineath. Burchethter.*

There, she had done it. She expected a grin from him. There was none. She went to get up and he put his leg over hers and clamped her down.

"Not yet. Now with the middle names. And the other titles."

"I d-d-don't r-r-remember..."

"Phineas St. John Augustus Edge, Earl of Burchester, Viscount Romsey, Baron Telscombe."

She stared at him. He was surely joking. Or he had gone mad.

He touched her lips with his fingers.

"Come on, there's a good little darling."

"Don't call me d-d-darling."

"Do you not like that, dar—Caro?"

"I hate it because I love it." She was sobbing again. "I love it and I know you call all the others darling, too."

"Now, Caro—"

"You get me wet with how you talk to me, but I know it's all the same talk you give to all the other girls. You are just saying the same thing to them. It's nothing to do with m-me!"

She wept.

He slid off her.

“How do you know that?” His voice was very soft as if he were talking to a child. “How do you know how I talk to other women?”

She continued to sob. He laid his hand flat on her stomach.

“How do you know?”

“I know!”

“There’s only one other girl I’ve ever called darling. Just one. Her name was also Caro. She was a serving girl at another lord’s manor and she came into my bedchamber and she was so brave and so beautiful and made me feel . . . well, she made me feel quite special that I had been singled out by her, for her affection. And that she wanted me to be her first.”

“I d-don’t believe you.”

“Why?”

“Because I heard you c-c-all *her* d-d-d-darling.”

“You’re wrong. I called her Lady Starling and Horatia and was sorely tempted to call her a vengeful bitch with nothing better to do than to chase after men who don’t want her. But I restrained myself.”

Starling. Darling. Had she really heard darling? Maybe she had been mistaken.

“B-but I’m not little. You say *little* d-d-darling.”

“I say little because, for whatever reason, dar—Caro, you make me feel very protective.”

“I don’t n-n-need you to protect me.”

He gave her the sad eyes he had given her in her bedchamber when she had told him *no* to future meetings, to marriage. When she had said *no* to going to the exhibition with him. But there was also a trace of the look she had seen when she had accused him of marrying her for her dowry, when she had said they couldn’t have children yet.

“No?”

“No,” she whispered.

He took his hand off her stomach. She felt a lurch in her chest.

“Of course, you don’t need it. You’re very capable. Far more capable than I am. I just hoped you wouldn’t mind if I felt that way.”

Why did she have to hurt this man? She had to stop it or her marriage would turn into her parents’ marriage, with her acting the part of her father.

“Phineas St. John . . .” *Phineath Thinjin*. Could there be a worse name in her mouth than Augustus? “Aug-g-g-g-gustus.” *Auguthtuth*.

He looked at her impassively.

“Edge.” That was the easiest part. “Earl of B-Burchester . . .”

“Go on.”

“I d-d-don’t remember.”

“Viscount Romsey, Baron Telscombe.”

Thank goodness the *ess* in viscount was silent. “Viscount Romsey, Baron T-T-T-T—”

She hiccupped.

“T-T-T—”

He waited.

“Telscombe.”

“Now say the following—”

“That’s not fair. I did what you said. I said your name.”

“Just this last little bit.”

“Then can I get out of the mud?”

“Maybe. Say Phineas Edge.”

“I did this already.”

“Please, Caro, please.”

“Phineas Edge.”

“Will you marry me?”

“I’m already m-married to you.”

“Say it.”

She licked her lips. “Will you marry me?” she whispered. “Phineas Edge, Earl of Burchester, Viscount Romsey, Baron Telscombe?”

“Yes.” He lay back and put his elbows behind his head and turned his face toward the gray sky and the overhanging dripping branches. “I know you don’t mean it, Caro, but I wanted to hear you say it.”

She got up on her elbow. “How do you know I d-d-don’t mean it?”

“You didn’t want to marry me. You had to. Our indiscretion. Your compromise. And then I tricked you with my tongue. I know I’m not what you want.”

Not what she wanted? She wanted him too much. “Phineas.”

He turned his head and looked at her.

“Did you really mean it about my tongue? That it makes you want to kiss me?” She could see his gaze was on her mouth and that his lips fell open slightly when she said *makth* and *kith*.

“Yes, darling.”

“So, if I were to say something like *Surely the slumbering shepherd has sweet sleep*, you would like that?”

He took her hand and put it on the fall of his breeches. She felt a hardness there. He was aroused. For her. For her *esses*.

“Can I kiss you now, Caro?”

“Yes.”

He got up on his own elbow and kissed her so tenderly that she parted her lips and allowed her tongue to roam over his

briefly.

She swallowed. “How about if I qu-qu-quoted Shakespeare? *Sweet are the uses of adversity which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in his head.*”

Her hand was still on his cock. She could feel it twitch.

“What does it mean?” Phineas’ hazel eyes were still on her mouth and he seemed to be panting slightly.

“It means sometimes bad things happen but there can be good things that also come from adversity.” *Adverthity.*

“Adversity, like,” he shuddered as she drew her hand up his length and back down again, “having no money?”

“Yes.”

“Or like having a lisp, darling?”

She took her hand off of him and rolled away, toward Lavinia who was looking at her mournfully.

“N-nothing good ever c-c-came from having a lisp.”

From behind, Phineas pressed into her back and put his arm over her body and pulled her into his chest.

“Nothing, darling? Not even a husband?” He was crooning softly and nibbling on the shell of her ear. “A husband who can’t get enough of you? Who hangs on every word you say, waiting for a delicious *eth* when there should be an *ess*? Just so he can see your tongue and think of it in his mouth, on his body, on his cock?”

There it was. He was telling her the way she could keep his attention for a while longer. How she could keep him out of the beds of the Lady Starlings of the world. She might as well get it over with.

She abruptly sat up and turned toward him.

“Lie back, Phineas.”

He had a startled look on his face, but he did as she said. She unbuttoned his fall. His member sprang upwards. What a

strange, ugly beauty it had. She felt an ache in her cleft. She wanted it inside her. Down there. But that wasn't what he wanted.

She got up on her knees beside him and put her head down. She had had the advantage of watching him use his own hand before she had used her hand on him. But now she didn't know what to do.

She held his cock and licked the top of it.

He groaned.

A little salty. From his sweat maybe. Musky like his chest after he had exerted himself on top of her. It was a stronger version of a taste she already craved.

She put the whole tip in her mouth and lapped at it with her tongue.

He groaned louder.

But surely, he would need something more vigorous than that? She took his tip out of her mouth and leaned lower and ran her tongue up the side of his shaft, a long, hard, swipe, followed by a rub of her muddy hand. His cock might not have been dirty before, but it was now.

“Oh, Caro, my sweet girl,” and his hands were under her arms and he was pulling his cock out of her mouth and bringing her up to lie next to him.

He hadn't liked it. It was too bad. She had been starting to like it. She had started to see how much power she might have over him this way. Even more than when she used her hand. After all, he could use his own hand but he would never be able to use his own mouth. And when he was inside her, she was always so swept up in her desire, she would never feel mastery then.

But this might have been something she could do fairly dispassionately. And control him the way he controlled her when he had his mouth on her.

But he hadn't liked it.

He was kissing her face. “Oh, Caro, aren’t you lovely, darling, to do that for me, but that wasn’t what I meant at all —”

She pulled away from him. “What do you mean it isn’t what you meant? It’s what you said. My t-t-tongue on your cock.”

He blushed a deep dark red. “Yes, I said it because I do think about it, but I didn’t mean right now. Not when there’s so much unsettled between us. I would rather have you talk to me.”

She stared at him. He would rather have her talk to him than have her mouth on his cock.

“Darling, I long to hear what you have to say. Oh, no, please don’t go silent on me, Caro.”

“Was I doing it wrong?”

“What, Caro?” He seemed to realize then what she meant and shuddered just a bit. “Oh, no, no, not at all, what you were doing was extremely arousing, I mean feel me, feel how hard I am.”

She put her hand back on his cock and it was indeed a shaft of stone. She moved her hand up and down and he groaned, but he took her hand off him again. He began to attempt to button up his fall.

“I am quite serious about this, Caro, I want you to talk to me.”

“I want to get out of the m-m-mud and go back to the house and take a bath.”

“I know you do, darling, but I am so afraid if I let you get up, you’re going to stop talking to me. Let’s stay in the mud and talk.”

“I promise I won’t stop talking to you. Please, Phineas, let me up.”

“So, if I let you get up, you promise to keep talking?”

“Yes.”

“And,” a mischievous smile, a twinkle in his eyes, “we should bathe together.”

“Together?” She had never heard of such a thing. What would Jones think?

“I would like to sponge the mud off you, darling. After all, it’s my fault you’re such a mess.”

“All right.” She went to get up and he pushed her down.

His voice was stern. “I’m going to need to hear longer answers than that, Caro, to be sure you’re going to do what you say.”

She sighed. “Fine. Yes, we will bathe together and scandalize my poor lady’s maid. And I will talk in long sentences even though I can make myself perfectly clear to you in short ones.”

“Say *sentences* again.”

“*Thententheth.*”

He kissed her then. A hard, deep, devouring kiss. One that left her gasping as he stood and reached his hand down to help her up.

Lavinia yelped and got to her feet on her own.

TWENTY-NINE

His wife kept her word. He heard her say to her lady's maid, "My huthband wantth to bathe with me, Joneth."

She shut the door on Jones and faced Phineas. He grinned. They were in her bathroom. Her choice. It was fine with him. After all, he wanted her to be comfortable.

He started taking off his muddy tailcoat.

"Thtop," she said.

"People usually take their clothes off when they bathe, darling."

"After the water cometh. Tho you don't get cold. And tho Joneth dothn't thee you."

He raised his eyebrows. The coldness was an excuse. The bathroom was warm. And she didn't want her lady's maid to see him unclothed? Was this more of her sweet jealousy akin to thinking he had called another woman *darling*?

"Jones sees you naked all the time, am I right?"

"Yeth, of courthe."

"So you could get undressed now."

"Too cold."

"Darling, I'll keep you warm."

A knock and chambermaids and footmen filed in, all carrying buckets of steaming water. Dashwood probably had

gotten the heating started when he saw Phineas heading outside in the rain.

I told you, she mouthed and stuck her tongue out at him for just a moment. Oh, oh, oh, that tongue. But if he crossed the bathroom floor to her and kissed her in front of the servants, she could get angry. And anger could lead to silence, and he couldn't bear her silence any longer.

Half of the steaming buckets were emptied into the tub and the other buckets were left in an orderly row. Jones bustled in with a jar of soap and a stack of towels.

"The cold water is coming now, my lady." And indeed a gaggle of chambermaids came in with buckets of water. "Just put those here and give me one of those buckets," Jones instructed them.

Jones poured half of one bucket of cold water into the bath and then felt the water. She then poured the rest of the bucket in.

"My lord, my lady, it may still be too hot."

"That's fine, Jones. I'll get the bath water to the right temperature." Phineas wanted Jones out. Now.

"My lady doesn't like it too hot, my lord."

"My wife will tell me if it's too hot." He nodded toward the door, curtly.

The door closed behind Jones. He took off his tailcoat. Caro folded her arms and looked at him.

"Aren't you going to get undressed?" he said, his fingers working at untying his cravat.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

He threw his cravat on the floor. "Caro, this isn't what I agreed to. I let you up out of the mud on the condition that you talk to me and we bathe together. And that means you will be naked when we bathe."

“I will be naked.”

He grinned. He couldn't help himself. “You will be?”

“Yeth. But you firtht.”

He cocked his head at her. “This isn't some kind of trick, is it?”

“No. I want to thee.”

She wanted to see him. He began to undress. As he raised his shirt over his head, he heard her sigh. He looked at her. Was it possible her lips were turning up slightly at the corners? Had he at last gotten a smile out of her?

“May I?” she said and walked toward him as he unbuttoned his breeches and pushed them down.

He had no idea what he was giving permission for. “You are my wife. Of course.”

She put her hands out and sank her fingers into the mat of his chest hair.

“Mmmmm,” she said. She extended and then curled her fingers and started rubbing his chest with her palms even as her fingers were weaving through his hair. She was petting him.

“Do you like that, darling?”

“Yeth.” She stepped away. “We need to get clean, Phineath.”

“Oh, darling.”

She held up her hands, covered in dry mud. “I got you muddy. I won't lick a muddy cock.”

With those words, his cock, which had been pointing down, now began to rise a little.

“Now, Caro, I told you I don't want that.”

“No, you didn't.”

“I meant, whenever *you* want.”

She put her hands up to her head and pulled at pins and a dark river of mud-encrusted hair fell down around her shoulders. “Your cock thays he wantth it.”

He took a deep breath and willed himself to detumescere as he stepped out of the breeches down at his ankles.

“I meant it when I said I want us to talk, Caro.”

“Then you thouldn’t have thuggethted we bathe together.”

There, his cock was going down a little, despite the arousing nature of her *thuggethted*.

She reached over her own shoulders and did something to the back of her dress. She pulled the dress over her head, leaving her in a chemise and petticoat. She wore no stays. Once she had put the dress down, clucking over the thick mud on it, she turned back to him and stared pointedly at his groin.

“Anyway, we can thtill talk. I can thay I want to thuck your cock.”

His cock twitched and started rising again.

“I am going to uthe thith” she stuck out her pink tongue “all over your thex, your thaft and your throtum.”

Now his member was hard, protruding, responding as quickly as it would have if he were twenty years younger. His forehead was sweating and he swiped at it with the back of his hand.

“Get out of that chemise and petticoat, wife, and talk dirty to me some more.”

“Do you want me to uthe *eth* wordth, Phineath?”

“Yes.”

She took off the chemise. “Do you want me to talk about thucking on your thaft?”

He groaned.

“Or about the wetneth on my theckth when I look at your phalluth?”

She untied her petticoat's drawstring and let it fall to the floor and was at last gloriously naked. She gathered her long hair in one hand, first combing flecks of dried mud out of it with her fingers, then twisting it and raising both arms up behind her head. For a moment, he thought she might be displaying herself to him and he wanted to lunge at her and seize one of her nipples between his teeth. But no, she was just pinning her hair back up. She took one of the towels and went and dipped it in the tub.

"It's hot."

He picked up one of the buckets of cold water and came up next to her and poured a little cold water into the tub and caressed the back of her thigh at the same time.

"Are we going to get in now, darling?"

"No, because the water will just get muddy. We are going to wipe all the mud off and then we are going to get in the tub."

Phineas got himself a towel and dipped it in the bath water. He thought he was going to get his own mud off, but he was delighted when Caroline took her towel to his face and head.

"You are terribly muddy," she said, scrubbing at his ear. "And what are you doing?"

Phineas had been wiping her breasts. He grinned. "I thought I should start with the clean places first before the towel gets muddy."

"You can do the clean part when we get in the bath."

"Yes, darling. Let me have your hands then."

She stopped scrubbing his ear and let him have her hands and he carefully cleaned them.

"Hold on," he said and walked to the door of the bathroom.

"Phineas. What are you doing?"

He opened the door. "Jones, do you have something for my lady's nails so I can get the mud out from under them?"

“Phineath!” She threw a towel at him. He grinned and draped it over his midsection, his cock forming an obvious tentpole.

He called again. “Jones.”

“Thtop it! Thtay here, damn it!” His wife, furious, stormed past him naked and out into her bedchamber. He couldn’t see her or Jones but he could hear them talking.

“Joneth, where ith that little thing for the nailth? Oh, thank you. Now, whatever you do, if his lordthip callth you when we are in the bath, do not come in. Or avert your eyeth. He hath a dithguthing habit of thowing off hith man partth. I apologithe.”

“Yes, my lady. I won’t look. But I assure you, I have eight brothers. I have seen everything, my lady. Don’t worry, they all have disgusting habits. His lordship is no worse than the rest of them.”

“I thuppothe tho.”

He grinned when Caroline reappeared in the door. But she was angry, her brows knit together. She came in and closed the door.

“I don’t know why you want to embarrath me in front of Joneth. Thatth what I get for talking that way to you. You got all eckthited and wanted to eckthibit yourthelf. You are a child.”

Oh, no. She was really angry. Yes, she was right, the thrill of having his wife say such lewd things to him had made him treat her like one of his mistresses, one of the ones who delighted in scandalous play and would have hooted in delight at his being naked in front of her maid. Like Horatia would have done.

Of course, that wasn’t Caro. How stupid he was. It was like calling her a bad girl all over again. He really must pay better attention.

She was standing at the tub now, cleaning her own nails with a little carved wooden implement. He came up behind her and put his hands on her waist.

“I think I was supposed to do that, darling.”

She kept cleaning under her nails. “Ith that my apology?”

“I’m sorry, Caro. I won’t do it again.”

She snorted.

“No, I promise. I won’t be naked in front of Jones or any other maid.”

“Yeth, well, I won’t do that particular thing again, either.”

“What thing?”

She had finished nails and now put both hands in the hot water to soak for a few seconds. “I won’t talk to you that way again.”

“Oh, Caro!” he wailed and pulled her against him.

“Thtop.” She broke his grasp and went to get a clean towel to dip in the tub. Now she was working on cleaning her face.

“How about the other thing?”

She stopped and looked at him. “What other thing?”

“You know . . .” he shifted his weight from foot to foot. He had an inkling that what he was about to say would cause further trouble, but he had to know. “The thing you were saying you were going to do to me?”

She stared at him. Now her eyes were unreadable. She said nothing.

He was getting more and more uncomfortable. “That’s all right, stupid of me to ask.”

She continued to stare at him.

“Maybe you’ll kiss Phin a little bit now, darling? Just so he doesn’t think you hate him.”

“Thut up.” She handed him a towel and turned around and put her back to him. “Clean the back of my neck and behind my earth.”

Silently, he wiped her neck and ears. When he was done, she turned around and went back to work on his ears. And she

was brutal, scrubbing at him so hard, he was sure skin was coming off. After finishing his face and neck, she did his chest where she had touched him and next his hands. Then she made a move as if to clean his flaccid penis, and he arrested her hand. He was afraid she would be too rough.

“I’ll do that, Caro.”

She shrugged and got in the bath. He wiped his groin carefully. There were only a few smudges of dirt from her muddy hands. When he was done, he looked at her.

“Well?” she asked. “Are you getting in the tub?”

He was sure she didn’t want him in there.

“I promised you a bath and talking, Phineath, and I am going to keep my word.”

“How is the temperature? Should I put more hot water or more cold water in?”

“More hot.”

He poured hot water in and she closed her eyes as he did so and let out a long sigh. He eased himself in at the other end of the long oval tub. She drew up her legs to give him room and now her knees were poking above the water level.

“Put your legs down, Caro, so your knees don’t get cold.”

She opened her eyes. “My kneeth are not cold.” But she didn’t fight him when he leaned forward and found her feet flat on the bottom of the bath and grabbed her ankles, drawing them onto his lap, straightening her beautiful, long legs under the water.

He held her feet firmly, worried she might pull away at any time. But she only closed her eyes again and sank down deeper into the hot water, so only her neck and head were now visible, her dark hair still pinned up but a few messy strands trailing into the bathwater.

“Go ahead, Phineath. Talk.”

He pressed his thumbs into the soles of her feet. “You know you could call me Phin, if you prefer.”

She opened her eyes. “But you like Phineath.”

She had noticed. “I do like that you call me Phineas.”

“Because of the *eth*?”

“Yes.”

She shook her head.

“Now tell me something *you* like, darling.”

“Darling.”

“Yes?”

“I like *darling*.”

“So you believe me? You believe *darling* is just for you?”

“You thaid you’re a bad liar.”

He chuckled. “Yes.”

“Do you really like how tall I am?”

“Yes.” He let go of her feet and ran his hands up the sides of her legs, from her ankles to mid-thighs and back down again.

“And my lithp?”

“Yes. Tell me something you like about me, Caro.”

A long pause came here. Was it so difficult for her to think of something she liked about him?

She suddenly withdrew her legs and lunged forward with her upper body, causing a little wave in the tub that splashed over the side. She reached out with one of her long arms and touched his mouth.

“Thith.”

“My lips?”

“Unh, yeth.”

She was against his body now like some beautiful mermaid. But with legs, which was even better.

“Should I use my lips now and kiss you?”

“I meant your thmile.” Her fingers fell away from his mouth. “But I like everything you do with your liph. Kith and talk.”

He was delighted to feel her hands, under the water, holding first his waist and then creeping around to his lower back.

“I like everything you do with your lips, too, darling. Kiss and talk.”

“Ith thith enough talking for you, Phineath?”

“You can never talk enough for me.”

She drew herself closer to him, so now she was fully lying on top of him.

“Are you distracting me from our conversation, Caro?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

It was just like what she had done to him in Sudbury. Just like what she had done to him their first night together here in Burchester.

She had *undone* him. This sweet, sweet girl who had been deprived of touch and tenderness for so long and was so hungry for these things.

And for him. She had made it clear. Only him.

“Will you show me sometime how you please yourself, darling?”

Her face turned red, but she did not look away. “If you call me darling.”

He chuckled and cupped her bottom under the water and pulled her closer. “The problem would be if you didn’t want me to call you darling.”

“Now?”

“No, not in the bath. I wouldn’t be able to see, would I? But how about I kiss you the way you like?”

“Yeth. Pleathe.”

So he lay in the bath with his wife in his arms and kissed her until she began to shiver. He washed her hair for her and then his own and used the buckets of formerly-hot, now-tepid water to rinse their heads. Then he took great delight in toweling off his wife. However, once they adjourned to her bedchamber, he did not repeat his request that she touch herself for him. He wanted to be the one touching her, washing away any bruises his former mistress might have left, just as he had washed Caro's mud and anger away.

THIRTY

In the morning, she steeled herself.

“I’ll go with you today,” she said at breakfast. “To meet the tenants.”

“You will?”

“Yes.”

After all, she had made a good start on the house, just as she had in London with the money. Now she needed to spare at least a few hours to do what her husband wanted. He had given her such care yesterday after their bath. It was almost as if he had known, without her telling him, how much she needed cosseting after Lady Starling’s words.

But I do hope you’ll be understanding when he wanders, because of course he will, eventually.

She must delay that inevitable wandering as long as possible. She must show him consideration while things were still new and good between them, and he wasn’t yet bored by her. Or frustrated with her. Or ashamed of her.

But she couldn’t help thinking he would be ashamed of her this morning, despite his words as he helped her into the carriage: “Everyone is going to love you, Caro, darling.”

What she witnessed on her tour of the Burchester farms was that everyone loved her husband. Every time she got out of the carriage with him to meet a farmer and his wife and their children, everyone smiled. Everyone laughed. Phineas held babies while he stood in the sunshine, looking up at roofs,

discussing the expense of new thatching. He squatted down to talk to the little ones and despite the fact he had not brought any sweets with him—"I forgot today because I brought my sweet wife instead," he said, tweaking noses and tickling ribs with the bold ones, waving to the shy ones—the children still wanted to be near him as he talked to their mothers and fathers.

And the golden nimbus of adoration she observed around her husband expanded to include her, too. True, the children did not flock to her, but the young ones petted Lavinia, perhaps remembering the dog from yesterday. Older girls asked Caroline about her dress. The farmwives offered her tea and smiled as they answered her questions about physicians and chickens and firewood and church services. No one pretended they couldn't understand her. No one laughed *at* her.

Phineas knew everyone's names, everyone's ages, that last year's potatoes had done well but the turnips hadn't, that a granny was lame and couldn't come out to meet the new countess but maybe Caro could duck into the cottage to greet her?

And everyone looked well. Even the lame granny was plump and smiling with her gouty toe propped up on a pillow. Clothes might have been patched but no one was in rags. Everyone had shoes or other coverings for their feet. No gauntness. A surprisingly large number of teeth.

"I told you." Her husband grinned in the carriage at her on the way home. "I told you they would love you."

No, they love you.

"Phineas."

"Yes?"

"You are a lord."

He looked at her questioningly.

"You are more a lord than my father ever was."

His face was blank as if he couldn't absorb what she had said. He didn't say anything for a long time.

“But the money, Caro—”

“You are a lord. A good one. The money is nothing. I’ll find money for you.”

“For us.”

“Yes. For us.”

“It means . . . it matters a great deal to me that you think I’m good at something.” He raised his eyebrows. “Besides the obvious.”

Besides the obvious? Her husband was deflecting her praise with a joke about his skills in the bedchamber. And yes, of course, she was the unquestionable beneficiary of those skills. But she couldn’t let him diminish himself that way.

He thought of himself as a rogue. She must make him see himself the way his tenants did. As a lord. An exceptionally caring and thoughtful one. A warm man who was good with people in a way she never would be even if her tongue had been normal and her speech clear.

How had she been so fortunate as to have this man marry her?

“You’ll teach our son how to be a lord, too.”

“I want that.” He leaned forward and put his hand on her knee. “I want that more than anything, Caro. To have children with you.”

Yes, in the future, after she had made the money she had promised him, she would have that hold on him. She’d be the mother to his heir, his sons and daughters. He would have to bed her to give her children.

He would roam, but he would come back to her.

Unexpectedly, she found herself getting up and folding herself into his lap, running her hands through his silver hair and putting her mouth on his. She didn’t care that they were in a carriage in the middle of the day when any passer-by might peer in the windows and see the Earl and the Countess of Burchester cuddling and kissing like the newlyweds they were.

“Will.” Phineas strode forward with a grin and an outstretched hand.

Another unexpected visitor that afternoon. But Phineas was at home this time and met William Dagenham in the front hall.

William looked as shabby and as ill as he had six months ago on his last trip to Burchester. Maybe *more* shabby and ill.

“On the run again, Phin.” William’s handshake was weak, not the hearty grip he usually gave Phineas.

“You know you’re always welcome here.”

“Hate to break in on your nuptial bliss so soon.”

“Don’t be silly. Come into the drawing room.”

Phineas had a hotchpotch of feelings. He was glad William still felt he could turn to his old friend when he was in need, but he was not sure how Caro would take to having the viscount come to stay.

He had just gotten her to start talking to him. Would she shut up around a man she didn’t know? Well, if she did, he would just have to find another place to bundle William off to. He couldn’t risk having Caro going quiet again.

William looked around the drawing room. “Place looks better.”

Phineas chuckled. “Doesn’t it though? I am learning all the advantages of having a wife.” Including a tribute that had gladdened his heart like no other he had ever received and some unexpected kisses in a carriage. Kisses he hadn’t had to ask for.

“Yes. Congratulations.”

William sat and Phineas noted how shaky his hands were on the arms of the chair.

“I’ll have some tea brought.”

“I think I’ll need something stronger, Phin.”

“The strongest thing we have in the house is small beer.”

William squinted at him. “Another advantage of having a wife, I presume.” Then his face changed. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Yes. Tea. Good.”

Phineas asked for the tea from his butler.

William leaned forward and clasped his trembling hands together. “Sorry. I’m in bad shape.”

“Think nothing of it. I’m here to help in any way I can.”

“You look good, Phin. Being a husband must agree with you. And matrimony must be catchy. First, Jack and George. Now, you.”

“I’ll confess I’ve become an enthusiast. Are you thinking of getting married yourself?”

William laughed. “Me? A woman would have to be desperate. And you need money to get married. But I know you don’t have any. You must tell me how you got away with it.”

Phineas kept himself from wincing. “I have a very clever wife.”

“I look forward to meeting her.”

“Yes. You missed both the wedding and the wedding breakfast.”

“I believe I was in bad shape that morning. In fact, it seems my life now is one endless day after another of being in bad shape. At least before, I would have a few good days mixed in there. But no longer.”

“We’ll try to get you some good days here, eh?”

William nodded but did not look convinced.

Caro’s entrance was heralded by Lavinia bounding in, sniffing at William once, and then turning to Phineas to get her petting.

“A dog,” William sputtered. “A huge dog.”

“Yes,” Phineas grinned while rubbing Lavinia’s ears. He turned to the door. “Lady Burchester, this is Lord Dagenham. You must have heard me or your brother speak of him.”

Caro curtsied and appeared entirely composed, so different from how she had been yesterday when he had come upon her in this same room with Lady Starling.

William had gotten up from the chair and bowed unsteadily. “My lady.”

“You are welcome, Lord D-d-Dagenham.”

“Thank you.” William bowed again.

“And this is Miss Lavinia,” Phineas said.

William acknowledged the dog. “Lavinia. Yes.”

“Pleathe thit, Lord Dagenham.”

William collapsed back into the chair.

“Darling, Will is going to stay for a bit with us, is that all right?”

“Yeth, of courthe.”

“Good.” Phineas smiled at his wife and then his friend. This was going to work out splendidly. Caro had barely stuttered and had not avoided using *ess* words.

“I’ll thee to a room being prepared for our guetht.”

“Thank you, Lady Burchester.” William struggled to his feet again as Caro left the drawing room, Lavinia following behind.

“I had no idea Edmund had such a beautiful sister. She got all the looks in the family, didn’t she?”

“And all the sweetness.”

“Congratulations, Phin.” William’s good wishes this second time seemed much more genuine. “If a rascal like you can get a woman like your countess, there’s hope for all of us. Does Edmund have another sister, by any chance?”

“No. I got the only one.”

“Devil it.” Williams slumped into his chair. “How about the dog? Does *she* have any sisters?”

Phineas laughed. “Miss Lavinia was sired in Sudbury so you’ll have to ask Edmund.”

“I’ll do that. Although I suspect he knows me too well to trust me with a dog.”

Tea came and William drank several cupfuls thirstily, one after another.

“Feeling any better? Up for a walk, do you think?”

“Not really.”

“Oh, come on, Will. It’ll do you good.”

“You know what does me good, Phin?”

Phineas was sure William was going to say whisky and ask for some despite what Phineas had said earlier about having nothing strong to drink in the house. But he was mistaken in his friend.

“You. You do me good. Always have. Your indefatigable cheer. Wish I was made like you.”

It wasn’t like William to be sentimental. Hell, this was verging on maudlin and he appeared entirely sober.

“No, you don’t. I’m not nearly as clever as you.”

“Or your wife?”

“Or my wife.”

“Well, it’s clever of you to realize that.”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it? Come now. Up. A short walk. I’ll bring Miss Lavinia along so you can admire her as we stroll.”

William made it through the mile ramble Phineas and Lavinia took him on and when they came back in, they sat down to dinner.

The food had gotten so much better since Caro had become mistress of the house. Phineas looked at his wife fondly. He liked to think he would have looked at her fondly

no matter what, but William's praise of his wife's beauty had puffed him up a bit.

He had made so few decisions in his life, having previously been content to see where fate and happenstance took him, and, in retrospect, his decision that he must marry Caro seemed now like a divine revelation of some sort. Because he knew it wasn't his own piddling cleverness that had allowed him to fix on her as his wife. It had been his cock. Thank God it hadn't led him astray in this respect but instead had granted him the miracle of being married to this beautiful woman who took care of him so brilliantly.

My cock is the clever one.

Caroline had not been in the company of very many gentlemen in her life. Indeed, her father, her brother, and Phineas were the only three with whom she had spent more than a few minutes.

But even with her lack of experience, she felt something was very amiss with her husband's friend, the Viscount Dagenham. Yes, the man sitting at the dining table was disheveled and unkempt, showed the unmistakable signs of recovering from a drunken binge, and looked ten years older than her own husband, despite Phineas' silver mane and Dagenham's brown head of hair.

But it was more than that.

There's some piece of his soul missing. And I don't think he's looking to find it. He's given up. He's like me before Phineas came to Sudbury. He's like my mother before she died.

She suddenly saw a whole different life for herself. One where William Dagenham had been her first dance partner at her first ball and the focus of her solitary sexual imagination for a dozen years. And when he had come to Sudbury Manor with her brother and Phineas and Lord Danforth and Sir Matthew Elliot, she might have crept into William's bed instead of Phineas' to have her one night of passion.

William Dagenham would never have had the stamina or persistence to pursue her afterwards as Phineas did, but what if he had? Would she be married to him now? She shuddered. Chained to another person like herself—damaged and fearful.

She looked at her husband who was laughing, talking about saving the best bits of dinner for Lavinia's late-night snack, asking William about their mutual friends in London, including her own brother, and about the baby boy that had been born to Lady Danforth, George Danforth's wife.

She had been rescued by Phineas. And not just from spinsterhood or old age in an asylum. He was saving her from herself, bit by bit. They had only been married eleven days, but in that time, she could feel some degree of her youngest self returning to her, warming her like a little flame. The being she had been in the time before she knew how deformed she was and how much her father despised her, in the time when she had been convinced she was marvelous and convinced all the other marvelous beings around her must think so, too.

“Are you all right, darling?” Her husband had turned to her and caught her staring at him.

“Yes, of course.” She looked down at her plate and busied herself with cutting a piece off her guinea fowl.

“Come now, Phin. Surely a bride gazing on her husband with love is no cause for concern,” William said and motioned to the butler to refill his glass of small beer.

Caroline could feel her face getting hot and a temper of sorts building. Why did everyone think she was in love? Amanda. Phineas. Now, his friend.

Her appreciation of her husband grew the longer she spent in his company. As she had realized today, he was an adored and esteemed earl. She was grateful he had courted her and married her and that he gave her ecstasy in their shared bed. She believed she would be content in the future if she could find a way to end the Burchester debt and have some breathing room that would allow her to bear children without worrying about the cost of raising them. She saw glimpses of the happiness that came to her husband so easily.

But she wasn't in love.

And if she did love him—no, she couldn't think that possible. That way madness lies. And unbearable pain. And the all-consuming rage she had witnessed in her father and sometimes, her brother. She could never let herself love him.

Because Lady Starling had spoken truths. Yes, about Caroline, named her ungainly height, her crippled speech. But she had also spoken the truth about Caroline's husband.

Phineas would wander. Hadn't he blithely bedded an unknown-to-him serving girl just seven months ago? He was not a man to withhold pleasure from himself or anyone else.

She might be able to put a halt to some of his spending—his clothes, his wine, his carriages, his jewels for his mistresses—but how could she rein in his appetite for women?

She couldn't.

Therefore, it was much better not to be in love and just to try to enjoy this time when she still had her husband's full attention. Well, split between her and Lavinia. And now split between her and Lavinia and William Dagenham.

She pushed away the persistent purr in her head.

It's too late, darling. You already love your sweet Phin, don't you?

THIRTY-ONE

Caroline left Phineas' bed just before dawn.

She came to her husband's bed at night, rather than the reverse. Caroline preferred to be alone with her husband while coupling, and Lavinia was much happier being shut away by herself in Caroline's bedchamber, surrounded by the smell of her mistress' things, while Caroline and Phineas experienced marital bliss. Afterwards, however, if his eyes were still open, more often than not, her husband would hop out of bed to let Lavinia into his bedchamber so the dog could settle on his carpet for the night and be near her people.

Also, Caroline slept fewer hours than her husband and it was easier to slip out of his bed and go to her own bedchamber to get ready for the day. If he slept in her bed, she might have felt she was disturbing him when she rose early.

After dressing herself, she and Lavinia crept down the stairs and left the house for their walk, both for exercise and so the dog could stop every few steps, marking the grass and the trees on the side of the lane, saying in dog-talk, *mine, me, mine*. How Caroline wished a wife could do something similar. But in a way that did not involve excretion, of course.

She was surprised to see a figure coming toward her down the lane. So early. As she drew closer, she recognized William Dagenham.

"Good morning, my lady." He swept off his hat and bowed. "I see we two and your hound are early risers."

“I hope you were c-c-comfortable in your room, Lord D-Dagenham.”

“Oh, yes. Perfectly comfortable. An enormous improvement from my last visit here. I just find I don’t sleep much these days. And your husband believes in the beneficial powers of a walk, so I decided to take one.”

Caroline nodded. She suddenly felt sorry for this man. He was so adrift.

“My husband’s fr-fr-friends are always welcome here.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “I won’t tell him you said that. I think he’s rather irritated that I burst in on your honeymoon.”

“Phineas would n-never be irritated.”

“You think so, eh? Well, it’s early days for you two. And if anyone could keep him from being irritated, I’m sure it’s you, Lady Burchester.”

She nodded politely and walked on, Lavinia at her side.

What was the man on about? Her husband was the most even-tempered man in the world. Even when she had been cold to Phineas, rejected him, he had treated her with nothing but kindness.

Resentment stirred. She liked her mornings here in Burchester. The mistakes of yesterday wiped away by her husband’s caresses the night before. The day unspoiled, with no stammers in it yet. No errors or omissions. Just the sunrise, the fresh air in her lungs, and the unconditional love of her La.

But William Dagenham had marred her morning with his insinuations that he knew her husband better than she did and that Phineas might not be the easy man she thought he was.

Given her morning was now ruined, she might as well face other people and get started on the tasks of the day. She walked another quarter of a mile, only so as not to be trailing after Lord Dagenham on her return to the house, and then turned around and headed back.

The housekeeper Mrs. Fox had shown Caro the door to the steward’s office, located at the end of a passageway at the rear

of the house. Mr. Albion Chambers actually lived in a cottage on the estate, but his work was conducted here. The ledgers should be in his office.

She went to the office, but the door was locked. She went back up to her bedchamber to fetch the heavy ring of keys she had insisted she have on her first day as mistress of the house.

She went through every key and none opened the office door. The house was stirring now and she searched out the housekeeper.

“Mrs. Fox, where is the key to the steward’s office?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, my lady. Is it not on the ring I gave you?”

“Let me have your keys.”

Caroline tried the housekeeper’s keys to no avail. She would have to wait for the steward to come. She understood the door might need to be kept locked, but no door in her own house should be locked against her. She waited in front of the steward’s office, frustrated to be forced into idling. Just as the gong sounded for breakfast, the man himself showed up.

“My lady.” He bowed. “May I assist you?”

“Mr. Chambers, I wanted to see the ledgers and found I have no key for this door.”

“You wanted to see the ledgers?”

“Yes.”

“What for?”

“I want to understand the situation here.”

“I see. Well, I would be happy to go through the ledgers with you as I have with your husband already.” He unlocked the door.

“I need a copy of that key.”

“This key?”

“Yes. I have no key to this door and neither does Mrs. Fox. There must be a key to the office in the house. In case of fire

or another emergency. And I meant to look at the ledgers early but could not get in.”

“Yes, my lady. Will you look at them now?”

“I’ll go to breakfast now. But I’ll come afterward.”

“Yes, my lady. I have some business elsewhere, but I’ll wait for you. Until you’re done with your breakfast.”

Breakfast. Had he said that purposefully? Was he mocking her? No, his face had no smile. His eyes were as cool and considered as they had been before. She must have misheard him, just as she had misheard her husband say *darling* when he had said Starling.

“Thank you,” she said, flustered now. “It won’t b-b-be long.”

I must not use ess words in front of Mr. Chambers.

She went into breakfast and suddenly the intruder William Dagenham, the man who had interrupted her morning, seemed very welcome in comparison to Mr. Albion Chambers.

“How are you, darling?”

“I’m f-f-fine.”

She was startled when her husband suddenly got up and moved around the table and landed a kiss on her mouth.

She blushed. “My lord.”

“You look so pretty with your cheeks so pink, I couldn’t resist. And now I’ve made them pinker. And Will doesn’t mind, darling.”

“No, I don’t mind. I was telling your husband yesterday how much I envied him his domestic bliss. It’s good for this cynic to see two people in love.”

Phineas sat back down in his chair. “We’ll soften up that cynicism yet, Will.”

“Maybe you will. And it’s good to see a wife taking her husband’s advice.”

“How’s that?”

“Ran into your lovely wife on my own morning walk.”

“Took Lavinia out, did you, Caro?”

“I did.”

“Yes, my two good girls, both following the advice I don’t take myself. I’ll have to see if I can force myself to get up early tomorrow to join you.”

Breakfast over, Caroline went back to the steward’s office.

“Thank you for waiting for me.” She could not say his name. The *ess* at the end of Chambers.

He stood. “You wanted to see the ledger, my lady?”

She nodded.

“It’s here.” He gestured to a book sitting on the desk. “Do you want to sit at my desk?”

“I want to t-t-take it away.”

“I need it, my lady.”

“I’ll bring it b-back in the afternoon.” She could tell the man didn’t trust her. He didn’t reach for the ledger to hand it to her so she leaned over and picked it up.

She went to the morning room and sat at the secretary. This room had not yet been cleaned to her satisfaction, but it could be the last one managed since it was her room. Someday, when they had a bit of money to spare, maybe she could make it over to be like her mother’s morning room in London.

She began her examination. Albion Chambers wrote in a clear hand, so that was a blessing. And the accounts looked current with the last entry just dated yesterday, the cost of some nails and lumber. She assumed it was for the repair of the stile she had seen broken the other day.

She flipped now to the beginning of the ledger.

Outgoings were far too large. She would have to institute some harsh economies.

And the rents were small. Very small. Much smaller than the ones paid by the tenants in Sudbury. Were the rented fields here tiny? She had not been under that impression yesterday when they had gone out to meet the tenants. She would need to see a list of the size of the parcels. Was the land poorer and therefore the farmers? She knew her soft-hearted husband would not want the rents to be a hardship to his tenants. She sighed.

She had been so absorbed in totting up numbers in her head that she was startled by a hand on her shoulder.

“Darling.” She turned and looked up into a pair of hazel eyes.

“What are you doing? Are you reading? I’m glad to see you sitting for a change.”

“Looking at the rents.”

“Oh, yes.” Now it was her husband who sighed. “I’ve been through the books myself you know. Even Will had a look last year. But you are so good to take this on, on top of everything else.”

“Phineas, these rents are very low.”

“Are they?” Her husband went into his tailcoat and pulled out his spectacles and put them on. As ever, she felt herself aroused by the spectacles.

And her husband knew it. A sly grin.

“You like these, eh, Caro?”

He winked and turned his attention to the ledger, leaning over her, pressing into her shoulder. “The rents have been close to this for awhile, I think. Are you sure they’re low?”

“No.”

Phineas took off his spectacles. “I’m going out to the stables for a bit. Exercise my horse. I’ll take Will.”

“Yes.”

“I won’t be stupid and say something useless, like telling you not to work too hard, darling. Instead, I promise I’ll be

useful myself this afternoon.” He put his hand on the secretary and leaned down. A soft kiss.

She sharpened a quill and got out a piece of foolscap and began taking notes on the various tenants and the rents they paid.

She caught an addition error.

“My lady.” She turned around. Mr. Chambers stood in the doorway. “Are you done with the ledger?”

The man no longer seemed calm. He had furrows in his forehead. He shifted his weight back and forth, from one foot to the other.

“No. I n-n-need more time. And I want to see the ledgers for other years.”

He started to say something and stopped. He bowed. She turned back to her work.

A while later, she was interrupted again.

“My lady.”

She did not turn around. “Not done yet, Mr. Chambers.”

A small laugh. “I’m sorry, my lady. It’s William. Uh, Lord Dagenham.”

She turned around in her chair. “Oh. Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m interrupting you.”

“May I help you?”

“Just looking for your husband.”

“He’s in the stables.”

“Very good. What are you looking at there?”

“The rents.”

“Oh, yes, I had a look last year myself. Not that I’m expert.”

“Did you think the rents were too low?”

“I don’t recall, but can I see?” He came towards her, patting his coat. “Where did I put my spectacles? Oh, may I borrow these?”

He pointed at a pair of spectacles lying on her secretary. Phineas must have left them there.

“They’re my husband’s.”

“Good. His spectacles do for me. I’ve had to borrow them before at the club.”

“Yes.” She handed them to him. He put them on and leaned over her.

“I see what you’re saying. But I understand the steward is from these parts and his father owns land? Surely, he would know an appropriate amount to charge for rent.”

“Yes.”

William took off the spectacles and put them back on the secretary. “I’ll head out to the stables now, but I would be happy to help you later, my lady, with anything you need in terms of adding up figures, *et cetera*. It’s the only thing I’m good for these days, looking at an upside down balance sheet full of debt.”

“Th-th-thank you, Lord Dagenham. But I think my husband hopes you will r-r-rest here.”

“Rest doesn’t agree with me. I must keep moving or the reality of my sins will catch up to me and I will collapse. I would very much like to perform some service for you and your husband. Please think of some task I can do for Burchester. I owe your husband a great deal for his friendship.”

“Yes. Thank you, Lord Dagenham.”

William bowed and left the room.

She was right last night at dinner. He and she were similar. They were both fugitives of some kind. And they both sought sanctuary with her husband.

During luncheon, Phineas chatted about how he and William had spent most of the morning riding over the estate.

“You must ride more, Will. You barely kept your seat with some of those hedges we took.”

“Yes, I think my days of riding a hunter are over. I need a donkey. Or the security of my own two legs.”

Her husband turned to her. “And you, Caro? How was your morning, cooped up here?”

“F-fine.”

Her husband looked at her, clearly expecting her to say more.

“I am looking at the m-m-most recent ledger.”

“I do wish you would do something for pleasure and read some of that poetry you love this afternoon and not feel you have to look at those numbers.”

“L-l-lord Dagenham has offered to help me.”

“Well, then I will have to work, too. Like you, darling. Your industry is a good influence on me. I’ll ride out to help the Swifts with their chimney. I don’t know much about masonry, but I can carry rocks with the best of them.”

THIRTY-TWO

The late spring days settled into a rhythm of sorts.

Caroline got up early with Lavinia and went out of the house, often seeing William Dagenham out walking as well. Sometimes, he would merely greet her. Sometimes, he would fall into step next to her and her dog.

Phineas took William out riding after breakfast while Caroline busied herself with improving the house, consulting with the cook, the housekeeper, the gardener. Then, in the afternoon, Phineas went out to the farms, either by himself or with his steward Mr. Chambers, and she and William would settle at a large table in her husband's study with the ledgers.

She discovered William had not overpromised on his skills. He was very good with figures. He also had a nimble memory, recalling, for example, from month to month the exact amount of each butcher's bill and that the bill came due on the fifteenth day of the month, making it easy for her to jot down numbers and compare.

In the evening, William was very polite, excusing himself to go to bed early so she and her husband could be alone in the drawing room or retire early themselves.

It was not what most would consider an idyllic first month of marriage, but Caroline had never expected that. And it was a more gratifying life than she could have ever hoped for when she still lived with her father. She basked in her husband's affections—his touches and kisses, his grins, his words in her ear as he moved against her at night. Over and over again, she

felt her luck that she was married to him, a man so unfettered by darkness.

“Did you know drink is not my real demon?”

William was largely silent on their morning walks. However, this morning he had spoken to Caroline. This startling statement, out of nowhere.

“I . . .”

“Being a drunkard is a secondary sin. My real vice is gambling. I only drink when I cannot gamble.”

She nodded but did not know what to say.

“I mention it to you, Lady Burchester, because I know about your distaste for drunkenness. I know about your mother. Your brother told me about her one time when I was nursing a particularly vicious hangover. Apparently he had picked me up out of the gutter the evening before and then sat with me all night to make sure nothing went amiss. That I did not get up in my drunken stupor and fall. I think he felt he needed to explain to me why he had been so worried. So he told me about your mother and her death.”

She must change the subject. She kept her face directed straight in front of her, did not look at him.

“Why d-d-do you gamble, Lord Dagenham?”

A very heavy sigh. “It’s so damn exciting. Please excuse my language, Lady Burchester.”

She nodded her head and made a murmuring sound, indicating she accepted his apology.

“But that’s the truth of it. I crave the excitement. You never know what a throw of the dice or a deal of the cards will yield. And the disappointment of losing never detracts enough from the thrilling unpredictability. Or at least not enough to keep me from doing it again and again. Wagering money I don’t have. Risking everything.”

William kicked a stone in the lane. “Drinking alcohol, on the other hand, is not exciting. It yields a reliable result. Insensibility. Stupor. Which is what I seek when I’m not gambling.”

He wanted to lose himself. Just like Caroline did. Was that why she had always been so vulnerable to the pleasures her husband offered her? Because in those moments she could forget everything except their bodies and their sweat and the sweet build toward release?

Her mother hadn’t had that. Her poor mother. A daughter of an earl, a lady with few interests apart from her drinking. Which had come first, Caroline wondered. The lack of occupation or the drinking? Either one could so easily lead to the other.

“It’s been both good and difficult for me to be here, Lady Burchester, and I thank you for the part that has been good. But I know it must be difficult for you, as well.” She started to protest and he cut her off. “No need to be polite. Having a guest when you’re first married, getting accustomed to a husband who takes in his vagabond friends, managing a new house—you have been very gracious.”

She did not know what to say to that, so she said nothing.

“Do you know the poet John Keats?”

“N-n-no.”

“I heard Phin mention you like poetry.”

“I d-do. But I don’t know n-n-new poets.”

“He’s brilliant, I think. He’s very young, and I suppose he might be too modern for some. He had a few poems last summer in the *Annals of the Arts*. Do you know that periodical?”

Caroline shook her head. No periodicals and very few newspapers had ever come to Sudbury Manor.

And last summer. How long ago that seemed now. She had still been so alone. But she had devised her plan to bed

Phineas last summer, hadn't she? How bold she had been. How well it had all worked out for her. She almost smiled.

"One of the poems just struck me, though, as something you would appreciate. *Ode to a Grecian Urn*. I understand a collection including that poem is to be published this summer. If I have the funds, when I go back to town, I'll procure a copy of the book for you. I think you'll enjoy it."

"That is very kind of you, Lord Dagenham, but you needn't go out of your way."

"The poem ends with some rather remarkable lines. *Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*"

Beauty is truth, truth beauty. The phrasing was lyrical and lovely, but the meaning of the words? Entirely false. The truth was horrible and ugly. She was surprised William would repeat these lines to her. It sounded like something her husband would say, back when he was still quoting poetry to her.

"We two would be wise to remember the value of the truth, Lady Burchester."

She didn't like this conversation so she made no reply. She was no liar, but there were some truths which could never come to light. For the first time in several days, she wished William Dagenham would leave Burchester. She much preferred her husband who avoided unpleasant subjects and was content with her as she was and didn't push her, didn't prod at her.

In the middle of the morning, Caroline had occasion to go to the steward's office. She wanted the ledgers from six and seven years earlier to peruse with William this afternoon. She was just about to knock on the door when she heard raised voices coming from inside the office.

"You should have thought of this before." A woman's voice. Mrs. Fox, the housekeeper, maybe.

Chambers answered. "There's no difficulty. The viscount —" His voice dropped so low Caroline couldn't hear him.

“Today?” the woman said loudly. “Good.”

Someone walked past the far end of the passage, and Caroline suddenly felt guilty. She was eavesdropping. She knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Chambers called out.

Caroline opened the door and was confronted with a red-faced Mrs. Fox and an expressionless Mr. Chambers. The atmosphere felt unpleasant. She asked for and received the two ledgers she wanted and left the office as quickly as possible.

Phineas Edge surveyed the tidy fields of the Willoughby farm. He had always liked this bit about being earl, seeing how people lived, getting to talk to them, trying to ease their worries. But in the past, that pleasure had been overshadowed by the sense that he couldn't do much, he was too poor, he had no grasp of money, he was failing everyone who lived on his land. Those guilty feelings combined with the vexations of the Burchester house had always pushed him to return to London, to his friends, where he could be lord of *the chair* in his club. Where he could spend his days delighting lonely widows and losing himself in whisky and billiards and mindless copulation.

But with his wife now taking on the responsibility of solving his money problems and making the house as comfortable as Sudbury Manor, London held no appeal. And his afternoons out with his tenants had become the second best part of his days. Second best after bedtime, of course, when his Caro would come to him and quiver under his touch with the same lovely responsiveness she had first shown him in her father's house.

His life was very full right now. Full, but not complete. He wasn't a fool; he knew there were still many things he didn't know about his wife. But he had learned some patience and, as ever, he was hopeful.

Phineas turned to his steward as they rode away from the fields. “The Willoughby farm looks quite prosperous, doesn't

it, Albion?”

“Yes. They’re doing well. I meant to tell you earlier that Mrs. Hewlitt has not paid her quarterly rent yet.”

“She hasn’t?”

“No.”

“Has she been farming the land herself since her husband died?”

“Yes. Her eldest son is fourteen, and he has been doing most of the work, I believe.”

“That’s a heavy load to carry at fourteen. Shall we ride over and see if we can assist her in some way? Maybe the family would be better off in the village and we can find the son an apprenticeship of some sort.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Phin, Albion. Phin.”

Albion smiled. “Yes, Phin.”

“Good. You’re as good a friend to me as Will, you know.”

“Lord Dagenham has been here for a while now.”

“Mmm. Yes?”

“He just has never stayed this long before.”

“No, I suppose he hasn’t.”

“This place must hold a greater attraction for him now. Because of Lady Burchester.”

Strange. Albion had said something similar to Phineas yesterday and the day before, mentioning that William must like Burchester now because of Caro. Phineas didn’t doubt it—he shared that sentiment with William—but it was odd for Albion to harp on about it. Almost as if he were trying to tell Phineas something.

“Why is that, do you think?” Phineas asked.

“She’s made so many improvements, hasn’t she?”

“Yes. And, of course, she’s highly decorative herself. I am very lucky in my wife, Albion. I wish the same for you one day.”

“Oh, I’m far from being able to marry.”

“Why is that? Do I not pay you enough?”

“As your steward, I have to tell you my salary is adequate.”

“But you do such a good job for me, Albion. I’d hate to lose you to someone like the Duke of Kittredge. I’ve heard he’s on the hunt for a new steward, and I can’t have you leaving me and Burchester. Let me talk to my wife, and we’ll see if we can’t pay you more.”

“You must speak to your wife?”

“You know she’s in charge of the money now.”

Albion raised a brow. “*Your* money?”

“Truth to tell, it’s her money. But she kindly says it’s *our* money.”

“Yes, she and Lord Dagenham have been spending a good deal of time together going over old ledgers.”

“Will has a head for figures.”

“And they walk together in the mornings, as well, I notice.”

“Yes.”

“It seems odd to me that a woman would spend so much time with a man who is not her husband when she is so newly married.”

“It’s very good of her to make my friends welcome.”

“Yes. And it’s very good of you to be so generous with your wife.”

Phineas could no longer ignore the unpleasant direction of Albion’s comments. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if I were just married, I wouldn’t want my wife touching another man.”

Bile rose up in Phineas' throat.

"Touching?"

"Yes, your wife is so affectionate and open with Lord Dagenham. Almost as if she has known him for a long time. Her brother must have introduced the two of them, I suppose."

"Do you know, Albion, I think I won't go see the Hewlitts today. I'll leave that to you. I'll head home now."

"Yes, Phin."

Phineas turned his horse toward his house. His chest was tight and his gut squirmed like a basket of eels. It was just as he had felt years ago, standing on the deck of a ship, helpless, waiting for the French to fire their cannons.

He'd feel better once he saw Caro.

"This can't be right."

Caroline looked up. "What?"

"This receipt that was tucked in the ledger for the year eighteen-fourteen. Stuck to one of the pages." William slid his chair over so it was next to Caroline's. He put a receipt down in front of her. It was for a horse purchased six years ago. The cost was one hundred and eighty pounds. At the bottom was the signature *William Dagenham*.

"Was in a tight spot back then. Well, I thought it was tight, but not nearly the chokehold I am in now. Phin offered to buy one of my horses to help me out."

"Yes?"

"I didn't cheat him. He offered a fair price, and I accepted it. I'm not as sharp as I used to be, but I could swear I sold this horse to Phin for eighty pounds. It was a carriage horse, not a hunter or a racehorse."

Caroline looked more closely at the receipt. The ink of the numeral one in the hundreds place was a slightly different color than the ink of the eight next to it.

“Do you think it’s been altered?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s stop looking at ledgers and look at receipts instead.”

She left William in the study and went to Mr. Chambers’ office. She had not yet received the key she had demanded, but the office was unlocked and unoccupied. She went in. There was a small cabinet, also surprisingly unlocked, filled with neat stacks of receipts. She gathered up an armful and took them up to the study.

William had piled the ledgers at one end of the table. She spread the receipts out.

“We’ll start with all the receipts for more than one hundred pounds,” she said.

They sorted the receipts into two piles. Caroline sat down, pulling a piece of foolscap toward her and picking up her quill, and as she did so, she jarred the table. Lavinia, who was sitting at Caroline’s feet, raised her head. The unstoppered inkpot jerked and splattered.

“The receipts!”

William snatched up the closest pile.

“No harm done, Lady Burchester. Unfortunately, the same can not be said for your dress.”

Caroline looked down. Her dress had several drops of ink on the bodice.

She stood up carefully just as William was moving around her chair to pick up the other pile of receipts. They bumped into each other, she intent on getting to Jones quickly to try to rescue the dress, William likely concerned about the papers.

Her body against his for a fleeting second. Meaningless. But then they could not seem to get out of each other’s way. She went right as he went left and their bodies almost touched again. She jerked, her legs hit the chair, and he put a hand on her upper arm to steady her.

“Will!”

She looked to the doorway. Her husband was standing there. She took a step away from William who let go of her arm.

“Trying to manage a bit of an ink calamity with Lady Burchester—”

“That’s not all you’re trying to do with my wife.”

Her husband was pale, fists clenched.

“No. No, Phin—” William started.

“You’re a snake. Coming here, wanting help, and at the first opportunity, getting close to my wife,” Phineas snarled.

“It’s all totally innocent—”

“I should beat you within an inch of your life.”

“Phin—”

“I want you to get out of this house now. Never come back.”

William placed the receipts down on the table carefully and moved the inkpot away from the edge and put the stopper in it. He took off his spectacles and placed them in his tailcoat pocket. He bowed to Caroline.

“My apologies, my lady.”

William walked toward the doorway and Phineas, stopping to bow. “Lord Burchester.”

“Out,” Phineas seethed.

William walked out the door, and Caroline could hear his steps in the passage, receding. She forced herself to look at her husband. He wasn’t looking at her. He was staring at a wall. His face had gone from white to red. His fists were still clenched. Lavinia was against Caroline’s leg, growling, teeth bared. She put her hand down on Lavinia’s head to calm her.

If only she could find the words to do the same for her husband.

“L-l-l-lord D-d-dagenh-h-ham d-d-did n-n-nothing wrong.”

Phineas slowly turned his head to look at her. The once-twinkling eyes were filled with suspicion. The full lips were compressed in a line. Another side of her husband she had never seen before.

“I saw how close you were to him, how you were looking at him, Caroline. You were letting him touch you.”

“I d-d-d-d-d-d—” *I did nothing wrong, too.*

“What?” her husband barked.

She took a deep breath. “Y-y-y-y-you’re m-m-m-mist-t-t-taken, Ph-Ph-Phineas.”

“If you’re not guilty, why are you stuttering?”

Who was this man? This was not the man she married. This was not the man she was promised. This was her father, all over again.

THIRTY-THREE

Phineas' beautiful wife straightened her shoulders, looked away from him, and walked out of the room, her dog following behind her.

As soon as he was alone, his fury dissolved into agonizing regret. He had never before been struck by such a powerful and hateful feeling as the jealousy that had come over him when he had seen William holding Caro as his wife stared into his friend's bespectacled eyes.

Every little bit of worry he had ever had over the fact that he wasn't his wife's ideal husband had risen up like an enormous swell and he had let himself be overturned and dashed to pieces by it.

He knew his wife hadn't really wanted to marry him. He knew he had failed her in the most important job of a husband, creating prosperity and giving her a good, safe home to raise children with no worries.

And he knew how his wife felt about men in spectacles. Tall bespectacled men who could recite poetry.

As his derangement ebbed, he hit his own forehead with his fist because of course, of course, of course, Caro wasn't promiscuous. She had been a virgin at twenty-nine, for Christ's sake, when she had given herself to him. She had never acted the way he had—bedding dairymaids and whores and countless widows, happy for any warm, female body next to his.

Seized by a crazed jealousy, he had muddled her behavior with his own. And the same for William. Phineas was the one who had seduced his friends' women in the past, not Will.

He caught William in the front hall, going out the door, bag in hand. The man stiffened and stepped back as Phineas approached him.

"I'm sorry, Will. Please, I'm sorry. I lost my head. I can't explain it, but I did. Please stay."

William shifted his bag from his right hand to his left and stuck his right hand out.

Phineas shook it. "Does this mean you forgive me?"

"You had a fit of temporary madness. Nothing I haven't had a thousand times myself."

"So you'll stay?"

William shook his head. "No. You better keep your attention where it's needed. I'll make myself scarce."

"My attention?"

"Your wife. It's one thing to talk to me that way, Phin. We're men. We can walk away from this with our friendship intact. We understand each other. But you clearly do not understand your wife."

Despite his resolution to stay calm, Phineas bristled. Who was William Dagenham to tell him he didn't understand his wife?

"Listen for a moment, Phin. For once in your goddamned life, listen. That woman is made of honorable stuff. Can you think of any other woman you know—forget woman—can you think of any other person you know who would come into a situation like the one you placed her in and put her head down and start trying to fix it, immediately? Has she complained to you once about how poor you are? What a rundown wreck this house was? I come here and the whole place is changed and I know that's down to her. I go to the morning room my first day here, expecting her to be perhaps

writing some ladylike letter and instead she's hunched over a ledger like a clerk."

"I know my wife is a hard worker."

"Hard worker? She's a saint. And she loves you, Phin."

Phineas shook his head.

"Don't shake your head. She may not say it. Hell, she may not know it. But she does. And you've taken advantage of that in your own way. But I'll leave you two to sort this out. I'm sure you'll be able to charm her back into a good temper. Charm is what you do best, after all."

William saluted and walked out the door, into the spring sunshine.

Phineas climbed the stairs and knocked on the door between their two bedchambers.

"Caro. May I come in? I'm awfully sorry, darling. I'm so stupid. And rash."

There was no answer.

"Caro?" He opened the door, thankful she had not locked him out.

She stood at the window. Lavinia was next to her, but Caro was not touching the dog. Lavinia turned her head to look at Phineas and whined. Caro did not move.

"I've apologized to William already for what I said. I don't know what happened, darling. You know I'm not the type to lose my temper."

She did not move.

"And I know I'm completely in the wrong here. I know you would never do anything untoward or invite advances. I'm so sorry. Please accept my apology."

She did not move.

"Please turn around and look at Phin, darling."

She did not move.

“We’re married, Caro. Each of us is going to make a mistake at one point or another. I’m sure it will be me most of the time. But we have to be able to sort these things out by talking to each other. Please talk to me. Say something. Tell me how angry you are. How hurt. Something.”

She did not move.

“Darling.”

He was getting nowhere with his words. He walked to her and put a hand on her waist.

“Tell me what I can say or do.” He stepped to the side so he could see her profile. There was no evidence of tears.

“Shall Phin hold you?”

She shook her head. He let his hand drop away from her.

“Do you want to strike me? I deserve it.”

Another small shake of the head.

“You must give me some hope, darling. I’m just going to stay here and talk to you until you do. You can’t escape me, you know. I’m sure I come off as the worst kind of ne’er-do-well, but I was a naval officer once upon a time and I can be persistent if it’s important, and I really can’t imagine anything more important than this.”

Lavinia whined and came around Caro’s legs to find Phineas’ hand.

“You’ve been so patient with me so far, darling. Please don’t give up on me.”

His wife cleared her throat. Thank God. She was going to say something to him.

She spoke three words to him and they cut into his heart like a bayonet.

“Go away. Pleathe.”

He went away.

She did not come down for dinner.

He did not go through the door to her room that night. He knew his best chance of communicating with her was in bed but he did not want to be rejected in that way in addition to the rejection of her stony silence. Not when coupling had, in many ways, been the best thing between them.

And he didn't want to couple with her when she was upset at him. He wanted to make love to her and feel love coming back to him. He craved it. He felt it in his cock, his hands, his heart. But there would be no love-making with Caro tonight.

Therefore, he was surprised to be woken with her mouth on his, her hands on his chest, her naked body next to him. The room was dark. He put his arms around her and pulled her closer, pressing her breasts into him. Her hands went to his cock and her lips to his neck.

“Oh, Caro, darling,” he murmured in her ear as she stroked him and covered his neck in kisses. “You’ve forgiven me, you sweet thing, haven’t you? I knew you couldn’t stay angry at Phin for long.”

There was a momentary stilling of her hand on his cock and her lips on his neck.

Shit, what did I say wrong now?

Then, blessedly, she continued what she had been doing.

“Ungh, Caro.”

God, she got him so hard, so fast. And now she was climbing on top of him, straddling him, rubbing his cock against her cleft. He slid his hands from her back to her breasts, using his palms against her nipples. “Oh, darling, are you going to ride Phin? Just like you wanted to the first time?”

She put him inside her. Oh, his beautiful wife and her beautiful quim. Just as glorious as ever. Oh, my God. He pinched her nipples and she whimpered.

“That’s so good, darling, do you like that?” He pinched them more, wishing he could see her face, but her answering groan gave him reassurance.

She sat down on him hard and then raised herself up high, so high he thought his cock might come out of her, but it didn't, and she sat down hard on him again, grinding her bottom into his scrotum.

“Yes, that's right, ride me, Caro. As rough as you want. You won't hurt me. You feel that hard cock? That's all for you. You do that to me. You make me crazed with desire.”

He ran his hands down her body around to her back and grabbed the cheeks of her bottom, kneading and groping and squeezing, even as she rose and fell and rose and fell on his shaft.

“Yes, darling. Ride Phin. Let me fill you up.” He took his right hand off her buttock and brought it to her maidenhair. “Let me touch you here while you ride me.” He found her nubbin and chased it with his fingers as she rose and fell.

“Are you going to come this way, Caro? Are you going to come on my cock, darling? That's what Phin wants.” He took his other hand off her buttock and by coming off the bed a bit, he was able to stretch his arm out and reach her breast and pinch her nipple while she was upright. “Phin wants you to come this way.”

She grunted and the speed of her rise and fall increased.

“Are you close, Caro?” He was close himself, oh, my God, he was close. He kept one thumb on her nubbin and continued to strain off the bed to keep her nipple between two fingers. “Come for me, you're such a good girl, you know you want to come, so come for Phin. “

She gasped. She let out a high, shrill cry and he felt a contracting wave around his cock, over and over again. Her rising and falling was now uneven, as stuttering as her speech had been earlier today, and he took his hands from her breast and her quim and brought them to her hips so he could lift her and push her back down on his cock. Lift, push, lift, push. She was barely participating now, almost limp on top of him, even as her thighs and the muscles in her pelvis quivered and shook around him.

Goddamn it. With a quick twist, he put her down on the mattress and was on top of her, pumping into her.

“Oh, Caro, oh, fuck, it’s so good.” And then his release was on him and he pulled away and pulsed and throbbed and spilled outside of her.

He collapsed on top of her, his mouth on her collarbone. Oh, oh, oh. His breath was gone. His speech was gone.

His speech was never gone.

Her arms did not come around him as he lay on top of her, trying to draw breath. Finally, he raised his head.

“Caro?”

She said nothing. Her breasts went up and down under him but otherwise, she did not move. He shifted his weight to lie on his side next to her.

“Have you forgiven me?”

The silence was his answer. She hadn’t.

And this had not been the love-making he had been craving.

This had been a fucking. And he had fully participated in it and not turned it into the communion of their bodies it could have been.

It had been use, plain and simple. She, of him, and he, of her. He had never imagined that could happen in his marriage. With his Caro.

He rolled away from her onto his back.

“You can go back to your room if you want. I won’t stop you, darling.”

He felt movement on the mattress and his heart twisted. He thought she was getting off the bed. But instead there was a fumbling at his side and a hand crept into his.

She was holding his hand.

“You fr-fr-frightened me.” Her voice was very low.

He turned his head toward her in the dark. “Just now?”

“N-n-no. When you were angry.”

He put his other hand on top of hers so now her hand was sandwiched between both of his.

“I said I was sorry as soon as I realized how terribly wrong I was, darling.”

“I know.”

“You know Phin hardly ever gets angry.”

“I know. Ith why I married you.”

“It wasn’t my tongue?”

She made a sound that might have been a laugh. “When we were in the church, I didn’t think about your tongue. I thought about you.”

He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed her fingers one by one. “You know I can’t promise you never to get angry again.”

“Yeth.”

“But I can promise I’ll never stay angry. I never have. I don’t bear grudges or nurse hurts.”

“I know.”

“And you’re so brave, Caro. You shouldn’t be frightened of your silly husband.”

“You’re not thilly. You’re good.” And then she let out a sound he interpreted as a sob, so he released her hand and cradled her, putting his arms around her and drawing her close. But she did not continue to cry, or if she did, her tears were silent.

“I’m not good, Caro. But I can promise you I’ll always try hard to be good to you.”

Her hand found his head, her fingers brushed his hair.

“Phineath. I get angry, too.”

“You do, darling? What are you angry about? The money?”

“N-no. I told you, the money ith nothing.”

“Then what?”

She tugged on his hair. “I th-think of yy-y-you with other w-w-women.”

“That’s in the past, Caro. You’re my only woman.”

“But l-later, when—”

“No. Wait.”

He turned away from her, breaking her grasp on his hair, and found the tinderbox and a spunk and lit the lamp next to the bed. He had sworn he would never interrupt her, but this was important. She needed to see his face. He needed to see hers. He held his body away from her. Her green eyes, blinking in the lamplight, so anxious.

“I love you, Caro. And I want you to know I took my vows seriously. There are no other women, there will be no other women in my life, ever. I’m flawed and I’m going to do my damndest to be better. But this assurance I can give you. I promise. I will never bed another woman. Ever.”

He couldn’t tell if she believed him. His quiet wife did not say she loved him back. But she came into the circle of his arms when he held them open, and for the first time in their life together as man and wife, she fell asleep before he did, and he thought he might have put some of her worries to rest.

THIRTY-FOUR

She did not leave her husband's bed when she woke the next morning. She waited for him to open his eyes and reach for her and when he did, she repeated her actions of the night before, but this time she tried to suffuse them with care for him.

They made love. She was willing to name it as love. Her husband, the very bad liar, had told her last night he loved her. He had slipped it in among his promises of fidelity, but she had heard it and clutched at it and used it to soothe the part of her that had been so scared, so rattled by his unfair accusation and his anger.

And those words had comforted her far more than the release she had sought last night.

I love you.

In many ways, an ideal thing for her to say back to her husband. No *esses*. A short sentence, unlikely to induce a stutter.

And it was the truth.

It had been the truth for awhile now despite her efforts at denial, but *I love you* surged inside her today like an inexorable tide.

But she still couldn't bring the words to her lips. So she made love to her husband instead of telling him she loved him.

She went about her morning tasks, speaking to Mrs. Beckford about the meals for the day and the grocer's bill,

mentioning to Mrs. Fox that the rugs in the morning room needed beating, writing a letter to a creditor in London who demanded an immediate response. And as she did these things, she came to acknowledge her part in Phineas' anger when he saw her and William's accidental physical contact. Why should her husband trust her when she was, in truth of fact, untrustworthy? Not in the way he had suspected, but he was still justified in seeing shadows when he looked at her.

That afternoon, Caroline went to the study as usual. She looked at the ledgers, the stacks of receipts, the dried spatters of ink on the table.

She missed William. So strange. She was well used to being alone. Had she become someone who needed people?

She picked up the receipt for the horse William had sold to Phineas. The viscount had a good memory. He would not remember eighty pounds if it had really been one hundred and eighty.

Again, she looked closely at the one in the numerals denoting the amount disbursed. The color of the ink of the one was redder than the ink of the eight and the nought.

She went to Phineas' desk and found a magnifying glass in a drawer.

Yes, the numeral one on the receipt was in a different ink than the rest of the writing.

She began to go through the other receipts. She found nine receipts where she thought the leading numeral, always a one in the hundreds place, appeared to be a slightly different color than the rest of the writing on the receipt.

A receipt showed one hundred and eighty pounds had been spent on a horse. Phineas would pay one hundred and eighty pounds and William would receive eighty. And where had the other one hundred pounds gone?

Into Chambers' pocket.

And the small rents. Could it be the tenants were paying adequate rents but Chambers was recording smaller payments and pocketing the difference?

She needed to see a ledger from before Chambers was steward, to see what the rents used to be. She needed to talk to the tenants, ask them the amounts they paid in rent to the steward.

She stood. She and Lavinia went down to the steward's office. It was locked and there was no answer when she knocked.

She would wait. She wanted Chambers to have no more time alone with receipts and ledgers. She wanted none of her potential evidence destroyed. She leaned on the wall of the narrow passageway and stroked Lavinia's ears.

An hour passed.

Mr. Albion Chambers appeared suddenly at the far end of the passage and strode toward her. She straightened out of her leaning position.

"My lady." He bowed.

"I want the ledgers from fifteen years ago and earlier, Mr. Chambers. Before my husband was earl."

A nervous laugh from the steward. And there was a gleam in his eye that put her in mind of a wild animal, caught in a trap.

"I would have thought you would have learned your lesson, Lady Burchester. You would have realized money is men's business. And men resent women who meddle in their business."

This man resented her, that was clear. But her husband didn't. He loved her. He had said so, just last night. And her duty was to protect her husband and his property.

"I also need all the receipts."

A pause.

"Thertainly," Mr. Chambers said and walked past her to the office door. He slid a key into the lock and turned it.

Thertainly. He meant to disarm her with his mockery. But she had Lavinia at her side, she had her husband's love in her

heart, and she wasn't afraid to unmask this thief who had taken such advantage of her husband's trust.

She followed Chambers into the office.

His back was to her as he walked toward his desk. "Well, let'th thee, all th-th-the retheiptth, m-m-m-my lady?"

He pulled a drawer open, took something out, and suddenly her arm was in his grasp, she was being pulled toward him, something was poking at her neck.

"Tell your dog to lie down or I'll kill you both right now," Chambers hissed in her ear.

She could not say anything at first. Her mind was swamped with panic. How stupid she had been to think she was safe and protected because her husband had said he loved her. Of all people, she knew everything and anything could change quickly, completely and irrevocably in a split-second. With the opening of a drawer. With a teeter at the top of a flight of stairs.

How arrogant she had been.

"La," she got out and snapped her fingers and pointed to the floor. She did not dare to turn her head to see if Lavinia obeyed her but there was a sound that might have been Lavinia lying down.

She was pulled toward the door and her arm was released for a few seconds as Chambers shut and locked the door. But the thing poking at her neck did not move.

"I wish you weren't making me do this, Lady Burchester."

His hand was back on her arm and he was propelling her toward the desk.

"Sit."

She sat in the chair behind the desk. She could see Lavinia lying down across the room. Her body was on the floor but her head was raised, her eyes on her mistress. The lips of Lavinia's muzzle were pulling back, her teeth about to be bared.

“Tell your dog to stay, Lady Burchester. This is a knife against your throat. I will have no compunction about using it.”

“La,” she said, trying to keep her voice even and held out her hand, palm down.

Lavinia let out a growl but put her head on the floor.

“Good. Now go into the top drawer of the desk and get out a piece of paper. Open the ink. Find a quill. You’re going to write something for me.”

She did as he instructed.

Think, Caroline, think. Think your way out of this. But she could barely breathe, let alone think.

“Write what I tell you to write, Lady Burchester.”

She wrote with a shaky hand, leaving blobs of ink across the paper.

Phin—

It’s over. It’s all over. I love you, but I can’t.

Caroline.

“Wh-wh-what?” she choked out.

“Well, clearly you’re deranged. Can’t even speak properly. And you’re so despondent over your husband’s poverty, you run away.”

No. This note wasn’t meant to show a wife who had run away. It was meant to show a wife who had killed herself.

Phineas would know the note was a lie. It would be too late, but he would know. He was Phineas for her, not Phin. She was Caro for him, not Caroline.

And she had never told him she loved him.

Despite her fear for her life and her dog’s life, at that moment her greatest regret was that *I love you* might be one of

the clues that showed this note was false when it was the only true thing in it.

She closed her eyes. If she escaped from this, she would make sure Phineas knew she loved him.

A knock at the door.

“Keep quiet,” Chambers whispered in a strangled voice as her eyelids flew open. The knife poked into her throat and she felt something warm and wet running down neck.

“Albion? Are you in there? Just looking for my wife.”

Help me, Phineas. Help me, help me.

“And Miss Lavinia, too, of course.”

Hearing her name, Lavinia raised her head and let out a single bark. Chambers’ other hand clamped down on Caroline’s shoulder.

“La? Are you in there?”

The knob rattled.

“Lavinia?”

Her dog barked twice more. A thud against the door with the rattle of the knob. Phineas was trying to use his shoulder to get the door open.

Please, please, please. But the door didn’t open.

Steps going away. He was leaving, he was going elsewhere, he was abandoning his silent wife and her barking dog.

Then some sounds Caroline couldn’t understand. A quick *tap-tap-tap* getting louder and a crash and the door burst open and her husband was in the room.

Phineas saw his wife. In the first fraction of a second, he could only see Caro’s face. Her eyes were wide, her skin pale.

Redness at her neck. *Caro doesn’t wear red* was his first foolish thought

Then.

Blood.

Knife.

Albion.

He didn't think. There was no time to think. And thinking was not what he did best.

He came across the desk, using one arm to push Albion's hand away from Caro's neck and the other arm to pull Caro out of the chair and to his chest.

Lavinia had been barking ever since he came into the room, but now she was growling. And Albion was screaming, staggering back, his ankle in Lavinia's mouth.

Phineas pulled Caro all the way over the desk and got her behind him and was backing them toward the door.

"La, he'll hurt La." His wife's whisper in his ear.

A moment of relief that his wife could speak. But, yes, Albion still had the knife in his hand and in the next few seconds he would realize and start slashing at the dog.

"Call her," Phineas said.

"C-c-come." A whisper. It was too quiet.

"Louder, Caro."

"Come! La!"

Lavinia appeared around the corner of the desk, loping toward them, and Albion fell behind the desk and couldn't be seen.

Phineas got his wife and her dog out into the passageway. He was trying to look at the wound on his wife's neck and his wife was trying to kiss him and the dog was whimpering and rubbing up against both of their legs.

"Caro, darling, blast, let me see your neck."

Her body immediately went still and she raised her chin for him, showing him her throat. He could see the cut was

shallow, only a trickle of blood coming from it. He put his handkerchief to it.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“N-n-n-no.”

“I want you and Miss Lavinia away from here. Go to your bedchamber and lock the door.”

“Phineath, no.”

“Yes.”

“He’ll hurt y-y-you.”

“He won’t, darling. I won’t let him. But I need you to go. Now.”

At that moment, Albion limped to the doorway of the office.

He smiled at Phineas. He raised the knife. He put it to his own throat and sliced.

A scream as blood appeared and Albion crumpled to the floor. Phineas knew it wasn’t Albion who had screamed. He thought it might have been himself.

But it wasn’t. Mrs. Fox, the housekeeper whom he had hired on Albion’s recommendation, hurtled down the passageway, pushing Caro and Phineas to the side, throwing herself onto Albion’s body.

It was a macabre tableau. A gruesome *pietà*. Mrs. Fox had pulled Albion’s head into her lap, was holding his neck and wailing.

Phineas herded his wife back down the hallway. “Let’s get you away from this, darling.”

Mrs. Fox raised her head and pointed a blood-covered finger at Caro.

“You! You did this. If Albion dies, you’re a murderer!”

Phineas put both hands on Caro’s waist and turned her away.

“Go upstairs. I’m safe now. You and Miss Lavinia go upstairs. I need to take care of this.”

He waited until his wife was all the way down the passageway with her dog before turning back to his still-breathing steward and the wailing housekeeper.

THIRTY-FIVE

In hindsight, it was a mistake to have sent Caro to her bedchamber with just Lavinia. Phineas should have gone with her and let others manage the sending for the magistrate and the doctor, the care for his wounded friend, and the quieting of the blood-soaked housekeeper.

He should have gone with his wife and cleaned her neck and bandaged it and held her and let her kiss him as she had wanted to do.

But he hadn't. He had thought she would wait for him to come and comfort her.

But she didn't.

When he finally got upstairs to her bedchamber, she was gone. Along with the one creature on Earth who could have found his wife for him quickly.

He set Jones and Dashwood and his butler and the chambermaids to the task of searching the house. But he knew she wasn't here.

He went out to the stables. He didn't wait for a groom. He saddled his horse himself and rode out into the lane. He thought she might have gone to the woods as she had before, so he rode in that direction.

He tied his horse to a tree and walked and called and walked and called. But there was no answering bark from Lavinia. He came to the stream where he had laid Caro down in the mud and forced her to say his name, but she wasn't there.

Finally, he gave up on the holt and went back to his horse and started riding toward the village.

He passed two carriages heading the other direction. The magistrate and the doctor, most likely.

A half mile outside the village, he saw a tall figure ahead of him and he galloped toward it, recognizing her dark hair and issuing a silent prayer of thanks.

But his chest was ripped open when he saw she had Lavinia on a leash and was carrying a small bag and wearing a coat despite the warm weather.

She wasn't escaping the house temporarily as she had with Lady Starling. This time, Caro was leaving him.

She looked over her shoulder as he approached with no break in her relentless, long stride. But when he got off the horse, saying "Caro, stop," she darted off the lane into a field of not-yet harvested winter wheat, running.

He ran after her. She dropped the bag. She dropped Lavinia's leash. Her legs were long but her skirts hindered her, and he caught up with her.

He grabbed her and held her. She fought against him, pushing at his chest, pummeling him with her fists, trying to kick his legs.

"Stop. Stop, Caro, darling, you're going to get hurt. Stop."

But she wouldn't listen. She struggled like a wild animal, past all sense and reason. It took all his strength to hang onto her.

"You have to stop." He was losing his breath. "You're safe. You're safe now."

She whipped her head back and forth and flailed her body.

"Tell me why you're running. Tell me."

She suddenly went still and put her head back and keened into the sky. An inhuman sound, filled with pain.

Coldness sank into his bones.

Someone, something tortured his wife.

She wasn't just a brave woman who had lived in isolation for years with a cruel father. She wasn't just a clever woman who had muted herself because she didn't like how she spoke. She wasn't even a woman who had just had her life threatened in her own house.

She was a woman who had grappled with agony for years and it had left its mark on her.

"You're safe now. You're safe. I'll keep you safe from now on, I promise. And you can tell me anything, Caro. I love you."

"You wouldn't, you wouldn't, you wouldn't." Her head tossed back and forth, the words coming out of her in wrenching gasps.

"I wouldn't what?"

She resumed struggling against him, trying to get enough space between their bodies to use her elbows on him.

"I'm stronger than you are, Caro. I'll last longer than you."

"You wouldn't love me!" A howl. Then a broken whisper. "If y-y-y-you kn-kn-kn-knew."

"If I knew what, darling?"

She fought on, her inhalations great gulps of air, her exhalations sobs.

"Tell me."

"I c-c-can't."

"You have to. Because I'm not letting go until I understand why my wife is running away from me."

She hung her head and went limp and he was no longer holding her to keep her from fleeing but to keep her from collapsing to the ground. Very slowly, he went to his knees and then laid her down on the bent stalks of wheat. But he lay next to her, keeping his arms around her, holding her close, wary that she might roll away at any moment.

“Tell me, Caro.”

She buried her face in his chest and shoulder. Her words were muffled.

“I’m a m-m-m-murderer.”

He loosened one arm to stroke her hair and the back of her neck. “No, darling, Albion is alive. And even if he weren’t, he hurt himself. You can’t blame yourself for that.”

She shook her head back and forth.

“I-I k-k-k-killed my m-m-m-mother.”

He held still. Then he pulled himself together and gathered her in even closer.

“I’m sure you didn’t, Caro.”

She began to squirm, trying to break his hold again. “I d-d-did. I’m a m-m-murderer.”

“I still love you.”

“N-n-no, you d-d-don’t.”

He could see the cut on her neck, still bleeding slightly. She needed a bandage.

“Don’t tell me whom I love.”

She was silent.

“I thought your mother fell.”

“L-l-l-let go of me.”

“No. You’ll run, won’t you?”

A sudden shout of “Yeth!” and a push against his chest.

“My legs are too tired to run anymore. But my arms are strong enough to hold you. And my heart is strong enough to hear the truth.”

He had been holding her tightly, but suddenly she was against him of her own volition, as if she was trying to bury herself in him, climb inside his skin. Her whole face was against his neck so when she began to cry, he felt it

reverberating through his throat, into his voice box, and it felt like he was crying, too.

It was the most horrible sound he had ever heard.

He held her, in the middle of a field of wheat, her bloodhound circling them as if suddenly transformed into a herding dog, determined to keep them together.

In time, the crying lessened. And then stopped, he thought.

Finally, she spoke, her head still on his shoulder so he couldn't see her face, and her voice was so flat, so expressionless, that if it were not for her lisp and her stutter, he would have sworn it was not her speaking.

“The d-day my mother died, my father had been to hith club earlier and one of the other gentlemen had r-referred to me ath not being right in the h-head. That man wath the father of one of the young men who had partnered me at the ball. The ball where I met you.”

Her only ball in her only Season. Phineas tightened his grip around her back.

“My father raged at me and my mother. My coming-out wath her idea and my mother had laid the family open to thame by having me go to a ball when I couldn't talk properly.

“My mother drank more and more wine ath they threamed horrible thingth at each other. My father thaid I wath a bathtard and my mother wath a whore who had l-lain with a half-wit to make a child like me.”

Caro was no bastard. One look at her showed she was her father's blood. The green eyes, the square jaw, the height. The man had either been deluded by his fury or intent on saying the most hurtful thing possible.

“I couldn't b-bear it. I went out onto the landing. After more yelling and my father thaying he wath g-going to divorthe her and dithown me becauthe I wath more thameful than a divorthe would be, my mother c-c-came out to me. Thee could barely keep upright. I might have gone to my mother and helped her walk to her bedchamber where her maid would have taken care of her. But I didn't. I hated her. I believed my

f-f-father, believed my mother had done thith to me. Made me what I am.”

What you are is the most precious thing in all the world to me, darling Caro.

But he did not interrupt.

“My mother wath at the top of the thtairth.”

A pause. The sound of his wife swallowing.

“My mother held out her armth to m-me. I turned my b-b-b-ack on her. I didn’t warn her. I didn’t go get Edmund. I didn’t reach for her. I t-t-t-turned away. Then a cry made me look around and the landing wath empty and I heard thumping. Her body going down the thtairth.”

He didn’t know the wisdom of speaking or not, but he couldn’t keep silent any longer.

“You didn’t kill her, Caro.”

“My father thaid I did.”

“Your father was wrong. And he was wrong, too, about you not being his child.”

She tensed in his arms. “I know. I know all the pictureth in the gallery at Thudbury. I know I look like the him and all the other Hathkett going back generationth.”

“So you know he was a liar. You’re his daughter. You didn’t kill your mother. And even though I’d like to blame your father, I can’t. It happened. She drank too much, and she fell. It was an accident. There was no murder.”

“It wath murder by neglect.”

“No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t.”

“I could have gone to her.”

“Your mother could have not imbibed so much. Or Edmund or your father could have followed her out onto the landing to help her. They must have seen how drunk she was.”

A whisper. “Yeth.”

“And if you had gotten to her in time, she might have taken you down with her, and I wouldn’t have my darling Caro here today.”

Stillness.

“You can let go of me, Phineath. I won’t run away.”

“I know you’re a woman of your word, Caro.”

“Yeth.”

He slowly released his grip and she took her head off his shoulder and rolled away from him and he gazed at her face. For the first time when he looked at her, he saw a woman with thirty years of life.

“So now I know,” he said.

“Yeth.”

“And yet I still love you. Every bit of my heart is yours.”

She looked at the sky rather than at him. “It dothn’t fix me.”

“What doesn’t, darling?”

“Your love.”

“That’s not what love is for. Maybe it’s caring and nurturing, but it’s not fixing. And you don’t need fixing.”

“I f-f-feel broken.”

“You’re not. You’re clever, you’re strong, you’re wise. And you are so, so, so beautiful, my love. Yes, you’ve been hurt. And I hate that you were injured over and over again and I’d give anything to be able to take that away. But I can’t.”

“No. You can’t.”

“No one can. But aren’t there things that make you happy, darling? Aren’t there reasons to stay with me? Do you really think things would be better for you somewhere else?”

She raised her head and looked at him. “B-but I hurt you. I’m b-b-bad for you.”

“You are the exact opposite. You’re the best, most marvelous thing that has ever happened to me. I was living a meaningless life before you, one entirely dedicated to pursuing my own comfort. Now I get up every day wanting to do something to make my farmers’ lives better. To make our life together better. You’ve given me a purpose.”

“You don’t rethent me?”

“You inspire me. You make me want to put money in the bank. So we can have babies.”

She laid her head back. He inched closer to her and rested his head on one hand and put the other arm around her waist, not to restrain her but just to touch her, his wife.

“Do you want that, darling? To have children with me?”

She bit her lip before saying, “Our baby might lithp.”

“Yes. The baby might. And I’ll love that baby for the lisp, not despite it. And, don’t forget, the baby might be short.”

“You’re not thort.”

“As long as I’m with you, Caro, I don’t mind how tall I am.”

She gave him a sidelong look. “We might have enough money for a baby in a year.”

“We might?”

“I think tho.”

“How about in nine months?”

“Maybe.”

“Shall we go home and make one, darling?”

“Yeth.”

He kissed his wife and helped her up and led her home.

He was not so foolish as to think his Caro would wholly forgive herself after thirteen years just because her husband had told her that her mother’s death was not her fault. It would take time and care. But he had both things. An abundance of

both things. And he knew no better way to spend his time and care than on his wife.

He would never give her the emeralds he had once dreamed of giving her. He could not imagine she would ever permit that. But if she would let him give his time and his care, he wouldn't mind not giving her the jewels.

He had planned an evening in bed with his wife, tending her cut and maybe the rest of her body and starting the baby they both wanted, making sure she knew how much he loved her. However, his plan was interrupted by the magistrate standing in the front hall, wanting information about what Albion had done, how he had come to be wounded.

Jones suddenly appeared at Caro's elbow. "I'll take my lady upstairs, my lord."

"Yes," he said, not able to keep the concern out of his voice and off his face.

"Don't worry, Phineath. I'll b-b-be good," his wife said. And then her lips definitely curved upwards. "I'll be good."

THIRTY-SIX

Caroline woke up just before dawn, in her husband's bed.

Last night, Jones had bandaged her neck and helped her bathe and put her in a nightdress. Caroline then had climbed into the bed in her own bedchamber and eaten dinner off a tray. She and Phineas had made love in this bed once, that one time after their bath together, but she had never slept here before. Suddenly, she didn't want to sleep alone in a bed she didn't know. She went into her husband's bedchamber, Lavinia trailing behind her, and fell asleep in his bed.

She had turned to Phineas when he had slipped in next to her last night. He had taken her in his arms and murmured, "Everything's all right, darling, the doctor says he's going to live," and kissed her. Very quickly, however, his eyes had closed. She had held still and let him fall asleep.

Now she lay in the dark and listened to the slow, deep breaths of her husband. The man who had rescued her. The man who had held her and listened to her confession of murder and then told her he still loved her. The man with the biggest heart in all of England.

No, the world.

And he had told her that all of his heart was hers.

He had also said *whenever you want* in her bathroom once upon a time, before they had bathed together. She would take that as permission.

Because *now* was that *whenever*. She wanted. She wanted him. All of him.

Blessedly, Phineas was on his back. If he had been sleeping on his stomach as he usually did, she wasn't sure how she could have shifted him without waking him up.

She ducked all the way under the covers. It was even darker under the counterpane, but she knew his body so well now. She ran a hand up his thigh and found the wiry nest of hair and his scrotum. She lightly took hold of his member. She tentatively licked his shaft from the base up to the top, keeping her tongue gentle. Then she took a deep breath and put his soft phallus in her mouth.

She would not be forceful initially. She did not want him to wake up unless he was aroused. She was worried he would stop her as he had before, but she didn't think he would stop her once she got him very hard.

Again, she was surprised by how much she loved the taste and the smell of him here. It was a highly-concentrated and very animal form of Phineas' scent. She could see how she might come to hunger for it and do this for him if only to get this smell and taste. Hadn't she wanted to coat herself in his scent the first time they coupled? Hadn't she hugged and rubbed herself with his shirt for weeks? She began to feel a throb between her legs.

Her thought was that her mouth should act like a quim for his cock. He had said her quim was tight and warm and wet and she felt sure those were words of praise and what gave him pleasure.

She held his cock at its base and moved her mouth up and down the shaft, trying to make a firm seal but still keeping her lips moist and shielding her teeth. So quickly, he was stiffening and growing in her mouth, responding to her lips and her tongue.

The pattern of his breathing had changed. One of his legs moved. He was waking up. She moved up and down a little more quickly.

Then a very sharp inhale from him, the covers being shifted away from her head.

“Caro.”

She looked toward where his own head must be, but it was too dark to see him. She kept moving her lips and her tongue on his cock. His hand was in her hair. “Caro, oh, God. Caro.”

She took her mouth off of him and said, “Light the l-lamp, Phineas. Light the lamp so you can watch your wife suck your cock.”

He grunted and she sensed a tightening of his abdomen and a slight twist of his body. The scrape of the strike of the tinderbox, a spunk flared and lamplight filled the room as she put him back in her mouth. She no longer needed to hold the base of his shaft—his cock was bolt upright, hard and thick and swollen. It filled her mouth entirely. She fixed her eyes on his and slid her mouth very slowly up and down.

“God, Caro. You don’t have to do this.” He groaned.

She withdrew her mouth from his cock, making sure to get it very wet with her tongue as she did so and then stroked him with her hand as she spoke.

“I want to do this.”

Keeping her eyes on him, she took him as deep into her mouth as she could so the head of his cock nudged the back of her throat.

He groaned and clutched at the mattress. “You heard me, right, Caro?” His voice was raw, rasping.

She very slowly withdrew, sucking on him the whole time, lingering just at the end to swirl her tongue around the bulbous head of his shaft.

“I heard you. I don’t have to do this.”

“So you can stop if you like.”

She shook her head. “It’s what I want.”

“You want to?”

She put her head to the side and licked his shaft from base to tip. “I want to worship you with my tongue.” She engulfed just the tip with her lips and licked the head. “I want to make

you spend with my mouth.” She kissed his slit. “I want to do for you what you do for me.” She sat up. “Can I?”

“Oh, God, yes. You can do whatever you want to me.”

She took him in her mouth again. “Oh, darling, that feels so good. Your mouth, your tongue.” She brought a hand to his scrotum and squeezed him there gently. “Oh, yes, that drives me mad. Your mouth and you touching me. Keep doing that and I’ll come in the next minute.”

She withdrew her mouth. “Not yet. You have to let me practice.” She put her hand on his shaft and her head ducked lower and she licked and sucked on his scrotum while lightly rubbing his shaft, burying her nose at the base of his cock and inhaling deeply. Her Phineas.

“I’ll let you practice. You can practice all you want. I am always available for practice. Oh, my God.”

“Is this all right?”

“Yes, yes, yes. It’s marvelous. Oh, Caro, what you’re doing to me, it’s incredible, darling, and I love it. Your tongue is amazing, your touch on my cock, it’s so lovely.”

She stroked over his soft sac harder with her tongue now, giving him firm, fierce licks.

“Oh, but Caro, don’t you want to take your nightdress off? Don’t you want me inside you? Don’t you want to make a baby? Oh, my God.”

“We can make a baby tomorrow. This is for you.”

“And for you, too, right, Caro? You don’t mind, do you?”

She lifted her head and growled. “I am wet from doing this.”

“Really?”

She straightened up and moved on her knees toward his head. She seized his hand and put it under her nightdress and between her legs. “Feel me, Phineas. Sucking your cock did this to me.”

She looked at his face as she felt his fingers delve into her folds and discover the evidence of her arousal. His expression had been one of concern and uncertainty mixed with desire ever since he had lit the lamp. But suddenly his eyes were sparkling and his worry was replaced by a grin.

“You’re so wet, Caro, you sweet thing. Take your nightdress off so I can see all of you.”

Shuddering as his fingers stroked her in her most sensitive place, she lifted her nightdress over her head.

“So beautiful, you’re so beautiful.”

“Phineas.” She drew in a breath. “Please.”

“Please, what?”

“Please let me keep doing what I was doing before? Let me pay attention to you? Practice?”

He reached up with his other hand and covered a breast with his palm.

“Whatever you want.” His voice was soft. “Darling.”

She shuddered again and leaned down and brushed her lips against his and then moved away from his hands, back toward his cock. He had lost none of his size in the moments she had used to prove to him how aroused she was.

She put her hand around him. She stroked his cock as he had taught her. “I want your seed.”

She moved her hair to one side and engulfed him once again with her mouth. She felt his hand on her head, on the back of her neck. She looked up at him, not stopping her movement up and down his shaft with her lips and tongue and her hand.

“It’s so lovely, darling,” he ran a hand over her back, “God, it’s almost as lovely as you.” His member incrementally increased in size as she tightened her grip with her hand.

“Oh, Caro, darling.”

She increased her attentions, sliding her mouth and hand more quickly now, using her other hand to hold his scrotum.

Her hand on his shaft became a little rougher, her tongue firmer, her mouth more frenzied.

“You know you’re all I want, Caro, and I just want us to be happy together. And I want to give you lots of babies and I want you in my bed every night or I want to be in yours and I want you to look at me and see your husband and I want you to love me because I love you so much, darling, I can’t help it, I just do, I can’t stop, and, oh my God, Caro, don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop—”

As he continued telling her not to stop, something she had no intention of doing whatsoever, he grabbed her thigh, his muscles in his own legs and his abdomen tensed, and his groan filled the room even as he filled her mouth with a throbbing warm wetness. Salty, sweet, viscous. She swallowed as she kept moving her mouth and her hand, remembering Phineas in the bookshop and how he had not released himself until he had stopped pulsing.

He loosened his grip on her leg. “Now stop, now stop, now stop, darling.”

She took her mouth and hand away from his cock and with the hand that had been on his scrotum, she caressed the inside of his thighs. She looked at him and his eyes were on her and there was something there she had never seen before.

“Caro, you love me, too, don’t you?”

She took a deep breath and straightened up. “Yes. I love you.”

“Oh.”

His eyes were wet. He was crying. Phineas Edge, the most carefree man in England, was crying. He held his arms out to her.

“Come here, darling.”

“Not yet.”

“Oh.”

“I want to tell you why I love you, Phineas St. John Augustus Edge. I love you because you see the best in

everyone and in the world.”

“Some people would call that a failing.”

She shook her head. “I don’t. It’s not a failing. It’s a gift. And if you didn’t have it, you would never have seen me.”

“I see you. I see you, and I want to hear you, Caro.”

“Yes.”

“So come here and talk to me.”

FIRST EPILOGUE

JULY, 1820.

“My lady, may I suggest his lordship have at least one new tailcoat which he is not allowed to wear whilst he plays with the dog? I mean, with Miss Lavinia?”

“Yes, I agree, Dashwood.”

Caroline was in her husband’s dressing room in Burchester with a sheet of foolscap and a pencil, Dashwood at her elbow. She was making a list of items for which Phineas should be fitted upon their long-delayed return to London next week for the very end of the Season.

There would be no difficulty in using the best tailors and haberdashers as befitted her husband’s title. They had money now, and all of the outstanding bills in London had been paid.

Albion Chambers had survived his self-inflicted wound, having made only a shallow slash with his knife. He had recovered under the care of the doctor, and he had confessed to his embezzlements, perhaps thinking to shield Mrs. Fox, his lover and probable accomplice.

Lord Chambers, Albion’s father, had made full restitution of the stolen money and rents after Phineas had declined to charge his steward with a crime. Theft was a death sentence, after all, and Caroline and Phineas agreed they couldn’t allow a charge to be made when there was the possibility of execution. Phineas said he had hope his friend would turn his hand to redeeming himself, and also Phineas owed Albion for not turning him in for his poaching when he was a boy. And

Caroline never again wanted to live with the regret and grief and guilt of an avoidable death.

“What else does my husband need?” Caroline asked Dashwood.

“New cravats, my lady.”

“How many?”

“A dozen.”

“Seven.” She made a note on her paper. “One for each day of the week.”

“A nightshirt or two.”

“You and I both know his lordship does not wear nightshirts.”

“Yes, that’s true. But what if he should have occasion to stop at a coaching inn?”

“He can wear one of his ordinary shirts.” She saw a cedar box behind her husband’s hats. “What is this?” She reached for it, pulling it forward.

“I believe his lordship keeps his private things—”

But she had already opened the box.

She saw a bound book which she instantly recognized as one of her girlhood diaries. It had two letters stuck in the middle of its pages, acting as placeholders, and was nestled in a bed of white silk. She touched the cover of the book and then flipped it open and looked at the entry facing the letters.

Oh, oh, he is so handsome! I am sure he knows he is handsome, though. He is quite arrogant in the most delicious way.

Her last diary. He had it. Her last entry. He had read it.

The two folded letters tucked into the diary were both addressed to Phineas in her own hand. They must be the only two missives she had ever written to her husband—the note arranging the meeting in Hyde Park the day before their

wedding and that formal and dismissive letter, telling him she didn't want his attentions, good or bad.

And the white silk. She knew this lace. It was her nightdress she had left on the floor of his bedchamber when she had gone to have her one night with him in her father's house.

It was a box of her. Her husband had a secret box of her, tucked away in his closet.

She closed the cover of her diary and closed the lid of the box.

She turned to her husband's valet.

"Trousers? Tell me about his trousers."

"He needs some new ones, my lady. And not only because of Miss Lavinia but also because of all the mucking about he does with his tenants now."

"Yes. Four new pair, I think. But don't dispose of the old ones. Have him wear those when he goes out to muck about, as you put it."

"Yes, my lady."

After she and Dashwood had completed their inventory, she made her way down to the morning room to copy her penciled list in ink.

She sat at her secretary for a long time.

Then she got out a fresh piece of foolscap, took up her quill, dipped it in ink again, and wrote a letter.

Her husband came and found her reading in the drawing room before the dinner gong. He was only partially dressed for the meal, his cravat hanging around his neck, his waistcoat unbuttoned. His face was a little red. His eyes, worried.

"Darling."

She put her finger in her book to hold her place. "Yes?"

"Darling, Dashwood just told me—I mean, when he was dressing me, he mentioned you had opened my box and I've

wanted to tell you but it never seemed the right time, and I'm such a coward, and I didn't want you angry with me so I kept putting it off—"

"Why would I be angry with you?"

He looked taken aback. "Your diary, Caro. I read it."

"Yes?"

"I found it in the library of your brother's town house. And I read it to find out about you and then I used what I read to get you to marry me. It was duplicitous and it was awful and my motives were selfish and I hope you will forgive me."

She stood. "Yes, I forgive you."

"You do?"

"I might not have kept my word and married you if you hadn't read it and found out my silly girlish wishes. All those roses."

"I hope it wasn't just the roses that made you marry me, darling."

"Of course not."

She went to him and kissed him, a long kiss, the kind she gave him to tell him she both loved him and desired him. After the kiss was over, she began to button his waistcoat.

Her husband chuckled. "When you kiss me like that, I'd rather you be undressing me than dressing me."

"Dinner first, Phineas. I know you must be hungry."

He raised his eyebrows. "For you. Always."

"For dinner, husband. Hungry for dinner." She put her hands to his cravat. "I know I won't tie it as well as Dashwood, but I must try."

"I like you doing it, Caro. And I'm so relieved you're not angry."

"The only thing I'm angry about is that you kept the letter where I jilted you."

“Now, see here.” He tried to make his face and his tone stern. “Lady Lutton told me that you and I did not have an understanding so there was no jilting involved. No one jilts Phineas Edge.” He could not maintain the sternness and broke into a grin.

She smiled, too. “I see.”

“Such a pretty smile. Shall I get rid of the letter, darling?”

“No.” She finished tying his cravat. “But I wrote another. I want you to put it in the box after you read it.”

“You wrote me a letter?”

“Yes.”

“Where is it?”

“You can have it when we go to bed.”

Her husband ate dinner with alacrity that night. He meant it to be funny, to exaggerate his impatience to get to bed. But his eagerness was real, she thought. He wanted to read her letter. He knew she still had difficulty expressing herself as she wanted to, even with him, and he wanted to know her thoughts.

And that was why she wasn’t angry about the diary. He had always wanted to know her. And his knowing her seventeen-year-old self had made him do enough of the right things to keep her from breaking her word about marrying him. And marrying him had turned into loving him, the most miraculous thing that had ever happened to her. Yes, reading the diary had made him do silly things—like pretending to know poetry—but he had also done wonderful, affectionate things, like falling in love with her dog.

When dinner was over, she made her way toward the drawing room.

“Darling?”

She turned. He was standing at the foot of the stairs.

“Aren’t we going to bed now, Caro?”

She gestured at the drawing room door. “My book.”

His face fell. “Oh.”

Her husband looked so disappointed she couldn't twit him any longer. “I need something to read while you read my letter.”

He grinned. “I'll wait.”

They climbed the stairs together, Lavinia bounding ahead of them. In Phineas' bedchamber, she reached under a pillow and took out a sealed letter and gave it to him. He sat in a chair and broke the seal and unfolded the letter, Lavinia settling at his feet. Caroline sat on the edge of the bed and although she opened her book, she did not read it.

She watched her husband read instead.

To my husband, my friend, my own darling, my love:

Today, I discovered you know (and have known for a while) that you are not the man I thought I would marry when I was younger. But what you don't know is that you are the man I didn't dare to dream of.

Let me tell you first, to appease your vanity, you are far too good-looking for me to have thought of you as a husband. Husbands are meant to be plain, not so handsome and arousing that they make you think wicked thoughts all hours of the day and night.

You're also too charming. Husbands are meant to be dull, not devilish and full of compliments and jokes and stories. I could listen to you talk forever if I could only devise a way to kiss you on the mouth while you're still talking.

But perhaps the most important reason I could not allow myself to think of you as a husband was that I didn't know love could go hand-in-hand with joy.

And I love you. Have I told you that today? I love you, Phineas Edge.

But before I met you again, I thought happiness was for other people. And I'm sure I would have

continued to think that for the rest of my life, if not for you.

You make me happy. And no one else ever has. I must learn to do it for myself, of course, but you've shown me what happiness feels like and looks like and that is a rather good first step toward being able to forge it on my own. How can I fail when I have you holding my hand?

Because you've changed me, my love. I was a cold woman, and you thawed me. I was a closed woman, and you opened me. I was a silent woman, and you listened to me. I was alone, and you gave me yourself.

You will never know how grateful I am that you have gifted me this life with you, but I will try to make you feel a bit of that gratitude.

You grew me. You grew my love. And now something else is growing, my sower of seed.

If all goes to plan, you are reading this in your bedchamber, and I am with you.

Please make love to me tonight.

Your wife now and forever,

Caro.

Phineas raised his head. His eyes were glistening.

“Is it true?”

“It's all true.”

“I mean about the baby. The something else that is growing?”

“I think so.”

He got up from his chair and crossed to her and sank to his knees next to where she was sitting, encircling her waist with his arms, putting his head in her lap.

“Oh, Caro.”

She ran her fingers through his hair.

“Where are your words, husband?”

He raised his head. “I love you, and I’m so happy. Did you mean it? That you’re happy, too?”

“Yes.”

“And you love me?”

She smiled. “Yes.”

Her husband would never be a poet, but *I love you* and *I’m so happy* were the only lines of poetry she would ever need from him.

There is a comfort in the strength of love;
‘Twill make a thing enduring, which else
Would upset the brain, or break the heart.
—*William Wordsworth*

Thank you for reading *Bed Me, Earl*, the third book in *The Bed Me Books* series! I hope you enjoyed it.

Want to read more about Phineas and Caro? Their love story has a **free second epilogue**, a short story that takes place eighteen years later. The second epilogue is exclusively for my newsletter subscribers BUT you must sign up at www.felicityniven.com/bedmeearl. Even if you are already a newsletter subscriber, you still need to go ahead and sign up. If you use the same email address for sign-up that you already

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**Bed Me, Earl:
Second Epilogue**



Please also page ahead for brief [author's notes](#) and a sneak peek at [Duke the Halls](#), my steamy Christmas novella that acts as a prequel to *The Bed Me Books*. Also, look for *Bed Me, Baronet* and *Bed Me, Viscount* and *Bed Me, Marquess*—all coming in 2024!

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Caroline has both a lisp and a stutter. Chapters written from her point of view do not contain her lisp written out phonetically in her dialogue (only in her thoughts). However, the chapters written from Phineas' point of view do contain a phonetic representation because Phineas loves Caro's lisp.

The embezzlement by Albion Chambers in *Bed Me, Earl* is based on a real case of fraud discussed in the letters of Lady Williams-Wynn. Mr. Young, the steward for her son Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn, fifth baronet, defrauded the Welsh estate by much the same means as the fictional Mr. Chambers (changing amounts on receipts) until discovered in 1814. Mr. Young was able to burn the evidence against him but confessed anyway and, despite being on suicide watch, was able to procure a knife and slice his own throat. Like Albion Chambers, Young survived his suicide attempt and the baronet refused to press charges upon the condition that the property Young had purchased with his ill-gotten gains was turned over to Sir Watkin.

DUKE THE HALLS

A STEAMY REGENCY ROMANCE
CHRISTMAS NOVELLA & A PREQUEL
TO THE BED ME BOOKS SERIES

The Duke of Kittredge is that rarest of men—a wealthy, tall, and still-unmarried duke at the age of thirty-one. As such, he’s perennially at the top of the “Most Eligible Bachelor” list of the ton. And yet, he’s never gotten close to landing a wife. Young ladies don’t seem to like him. Scratch that. They revile him. And he’s in complete sympathy with their opinion of him.

Because he is, without question, an insufferable clodpole.

But to please his mother, he’s promised to attend a Christmas country house party where he will meet a dozen possible future duchesses. He will waltz and carol and stand under mistletoe when all he really wants to do is cloister himself in his London library with a blazing fire, a stack of books, and his dog.

So he does what any rational, right-thinking duke would do.

He runs away.

*Enter **Franny Cranhill**, ray of sunshine. After what they’ve both been through, Franny just wants her little brother Ren to have the best Christmas ever. And he will. She’ll make sure of it. And if that means she has to give an adorably grumpy duke lessons in how to speak, act like a human being, and win a wife, she’ll do that.*

If only the darling duke weren’t so handsome and so brooding and so unintentionally funny.

And such a good kisser.

Duke the Halls is a steamy Regency romance Christmas novella and a prequel to ***The Bed Me Books*** series.

Chapter 1: December, 1817, Kent

Kittredge was in a hurry to escape Little Fricking-Green or wherever the hell he was and hadn't taken any particular notice of the girl when they had both climbed aboard the stage coach.

She was an ordinary girl. Just like any other girl. On her way somewhere for her Christmastide, no doubt. There was no reason to give her a second look, let alone a second thought.

In the coach, she and Kittredge were crammed into the only two places not taken up by the other passengers, corner seats against the side of the carriage and opposite each other. He had to angle his long legs awkwardly toward the door to keep his knees from brushing her skirts.

At first, Kittredge kept his eyes glued to the carriage window, looking for any sign that someone had realized who he was. But his luck held and the stage coach left the stableyard of the coaching inn and then the town itself with no one running after it and telling it to halt because he had absconded. When he finally looked away from the window, the girl across from him was holding a book only inches from her eyes, obscuring her face completely.

But within a few minutes, a sound erupted from behind the book. Golden, warm, sweet. Pure and joyous. The most remarkable sound he had ever heard.

It was so remarkable he needed several seconds to recognize it as laughter.

She loosed her remarkable laugh again—a slightly louder variation but no less appealing for that—and he noted how the laugh invaded her whole being, sweeping down her legs to make her scuffed boots dance and stamp while also rolling up her torso so that she shook and swayed with her rumbles and cackles and guffaws.

For the next hour, her page-turning was regularly punctuated by that glorious laugh. She rarely lowered the book, but when she did let it dip, he spied waves of dark brown hair under her woolen bonnet. Quirking, intelligent brows. Large, dark brown eyes to match her hair. A pert little nose. Pink cheeks. But, maddeningly, her mouth stayed hidden behind the book.

His curiosity—rarely stirred by another human, let alone a female—was getting the better of him. What was she? A young woman, not a girl after all. She might be a gentlewoman in distressed circumstances with her worn clothing and old boots, but she was no lady. She was unchaperoned on a stage coach, and, of course, there was her remarkable laugh. Any lady would have had that laugh schooled out of her long ago.

And what could she possibly be reading that was at once so amusing *and* so absorbing? The book was old, the cover stained, the pages battered around the corners. Naturally, the spine was faded to illegibility.

Kittredge was able to maneuver an arm without elbowing his neighbor and get inside his old tweed hunting coat and pull out his spectacles. No, the blasted things were no help whatsoever in deciphering the title of the volume. He tucked the spectacles away and scratched at the beard he'd grown over the last six weeks in the hunting box.

Just as he had every autumn since leaving Cambridge, he'd decamped at the beginning of November to the wilds of Hampshire on a hunting trip with Hadleigh and Bevel. Of course, a good part of the time had really been spent sipping whisky and reading books in the hunting box when it rained. But one couldn't claim that one had to leave London just so one could read in peace. Or at least Hadleigh said one couldn't say that, and Kittredge always deferred to Hadleigh in terms of what passed for acceptable.

And where was Hadleigh when you needed him? Because Kittredge was wondering if he might interrupt the woman's reading and ask the name of the book. But they had had no introduction. Could a man properly ask a woman outside the

circle of his acquaintance what she was reading whilst aboard a stage coach?

He didn't know.

He had no idea.

He'd never been on a stage coach before.

Riding to London on a stage coach was not something a duke did.

Unless, of course, the duke was running away from a dozen young ladies lying in wait, ready to force the still-unmarried Duke of Kittredge through the gauntlet known as a Christmas house party in order to find out for themselves if His Grace really was the arsehole everybody said he was.

But this was his Christmas gift to all those unmarried maidens of the *ton*. He was sparing everyone a great deal of trouble by slipping away now, even before reaching the country estate of the Marquess of Merrifield.

Because he himself had come to the only possible determination a long time ago.

The Duke of Kittredge was, without question, an unmitigated arsehole.

Oh, gobbledygump.

Franny couldn't help but laugh out loud at the jest book she had bought from the odds-and-ends stall. The book might be old, but the jokes were still hilarious, and she was sure to get at least a smile from her far-too-serious younger brother Ren with the naughty story about the vicar and the pig.

But she must be such a nuisance to the other passengers. Lady LeClere had told Franny often enough that her vulgar laughter verged on the indecent and she needed to control herself. And the handsome man across from her with the dirty clothes and the brown scraggly beard was glowering at her and the older woman next to her kept sinking her pointed elbow into Franny's side when she exploded into a giggle.

Just as her neighbor bruised Franny's ribs for what must be the twelfth time, a brilliant idea struck Franny. This was not

an unusual occurrence in the life of Francesca Cranwell. Magnificent notions smote her all the time. *Papà* used to say it was Franny's particular curse to be assaulted by only the most delightful whims of genius.

And today, her idea was truly first-rate. *I'll buy everybody in the coach a nibble to make up for my annoying outbursts.*

She had thought to buy some biscuits or a bag of sweets at the next coaching inn stop, but it turned out they didn't sell such things. What might divide up nicely? She saw a tray of steaming meat pies come out of the kitchen, and her stomach growled.

"Oh, a dozen of those splendazzling pies, please, each wrapped up, please. Oh, please, please, as quickly as you can. Thank you."

She managed to nip back to the coach just before it left. Almost breathless, she passed out the pies, first to the coachman and the passengers on the outside, then to the passengers inside.

"Happy Christmas, everyone!"

"It won't be Christmas for six more days," protested her elderly neighbor with the sharp elbows.

"I'll take your pie then since you don't want it." The portly man sitting next to the man with the beard huffed and reached for the pie, but the woman snatched the wax-paper-wrapped packet out of his grasp and held it to her chest.

"It's mine. I was just pointing out it wasn't Christmas yet." The matron pursed her lips.

How funny that someone might object to a gift! Still, Franny didn't want anyone to be kerfluffed when her intention had been to spread a bit of cheer. "Please don't mind me. I love Christmas so I started early. I want to stretch it for as long as I can."

The carriage filled with a chorus of *thank yous* and the sounds of wax paper crinkling and chewing and murmurs of appreciation and the smell of hot, fresh pastry and savory meat. Franny grinned and half-stood up from her seat to get

her book out from underneath her bottom. The coachman must have speedily gobbled his own pie because the carriage started moving with a jolt and she would have fallen onto (and likely crushed) the elderly woman if not for a sudden, tight grip on her upper arm holding her in place. It was the handsome, bearded passenger who had boarded the coach with her at Little Frittenden-Green.

“Oh, thank you!” she blurted.

The man nodded and she realized that he hadn’t been angry at her for laughing. Not one bit. Smoldering was just his normal expression. And, oh, his blue-gray eyes now made her feel quite warm despite the coldness of the cloudy day. He gently guided her back down into her seat and only then did he release her arm.

Biggledy-dee! I can still feel his fingers. Strong. Capable. Commanding. Oh, crispikins, Franny. Fingers can’t be commanding.

Ungh.

His are.

“What was you laughing at, miss?” asked a youth at the other end of the carriage around a mouthful of pie.

Franny smiled. “Just some very silly jokes.”

“Would you read us a few, miss?”

“Oh, doodly-ho! I don’t want to bother anyone more than I already have.” She laughed blithely until she caught the eyes of the man across from her and her giggle petered out as her heart began to pound in a most violent manner.

“I could do with a few laughs meself,” said the elderly woman as she bit into her pie suspiciously.

The rest of the passengers all chimed in with *yesses* and *pleases*. All except the absolutely deadly man who was dispatching every last bit of her already scant common sense with his brooding silence and his penetrating, stormy-sky eyes. And, oh, those broad shoulders and muscular thighs.

But the thighs were encased in dirty trousers where his shabby coat fell away from his legs. And that unkempt beard. And there was a hunger in those eyes.

Poor soul.

Well, if she were to oblige everyone by reading aloud, she couldn't very well eat the meat pie she had kept back for herself. It would soon go cold, and she didn't really need to eat it, did she? The stage coach would be in London soon enough and she would be ensconced with Ren and Mrs. Tumney in a cozy kitchen and stuffed with all kinds of treats from now until Twelfth Night.

The bearded man with the hungry eyes was still holding his meat pie in his right hand, almost as if he couldn't believe his luck in getting something to eat. She reached out and put her own pie in his left hand.

How curious. He wore very fine leather gloves. She hoped he hadn't stolen them but had been gifted them by some generous benefactor who had taken pity on his cold hands.

Stolen them! That was an uncharitable thought and not worthy of you, Francesca.

The man looked down at his hand and then back up at her as if startled at the appearance of another pie.

She smiled encouragingly. "Please do eat up while the pies are still hot. And a happy Christmas to you."

Then she settled back, opened the book of jests, smiled into the pages, and began reading aloud.

Her mouth.

He groaned silently as his cock stiffened in his mud-spattered trousers.

Her mouth was an invitation to sin. Rosy red. A plump lower lip and a cupid's bow on top. An eminently kissable mouth. And when she smiled, her lips parted and displayed an adorable gap between her two front upper teeth.

His eyes dropped. Admirable breasts he hadn't noticed earlier. Very proportionate. Were her nipples red to match her

mouth? In his imagination, they were.

If he were anywhere else besides a moving carriage, he would have long since disappeared. Found privacy behind a locked door and given himself some relief. But he *was* in a moving carriage and could not flee. He would have to maintain his barely civilized veneer.

And, ultimately, he came to be grateful he could not flee because he would have missed the unparalleled experience of listening to this woman with the gap-toothed smile and the sensual lips and the widely-spaced dark eyes reading hackneyed tales and chestnuts from what must be an ancient edition of *Joe Miller's Jests*.

He couldn't remember a better afternoon in his life.

And the best bits were when she could not read because she was too overcome with laughter, so choked with mirth at the quip or pun that was coming in the next line. And even though no one in the coach could understand the words that erupted around her helpless spasms of merriment, everyone laughed anyway.

Everyone but himself.

He was the Duke of Kittredge. He did not laugh. It was well-known he had no sense of humor.

He *did* eat his own pie, though. To refuse it or to give it away would be the act of an ungrateful churl. And to do so might hurt the laughing woman's feelings. Though he had no earthly idea why he should care about her feelings.

Besides he was hungry, having last eaten just before he and Hadleigh and Bevel had left the hunting box yesterday and gone their separate ways.

He balanced his pie on top of the one in his left hand and used his teeth to remove his glove. Then, he managed to unfold the wax paper, lift the pie to his mouth, and sink his teeth into it. It was good. Very good. His pie disappeared down his gullet with unseemly haste.

When he had first bitten into his pie, some of the precious gravy had oozed out and coated his fingers. He had no

handkerchief. He could wipe his hand on his coat or his trouser leg before replacing his glove, and that's what he would have done two days ago in the hunting box when Hadleigh and Bevel would have been his only witnesses.

He looked around the coach. No one was paying any attention to him.

He licked his fingers clean for the first time since childhood, savoring each drop of the succulent juice. How could he find a pie like this one somewhere in London this evening? He knew he would not get a pie at his club tonight. He would be served a chop or a fowl or a joint. How lamentable when what he wanted was another pie. Or two or three. And to keep listening to the voice and the laugh of this dark-haired Scheherazade with the scuffed boots.

He put *her* still-wrapped pie in his pocket for safe-keeping. She would eat it when she was done reading.

At the next stop, the matron next to the laughing woman made a movement as if to get up. Kittredge opened the door and got out of the carriage to help the elderly woman down. But the pretty Scheherazade got out first and Kittredge had a terrible moment when he thought she was leaving the coach as well.

But then he saw she did not have her book or her reticule in her hand. She was merely making it easier for the older woman to exit.

His relief was agonizing, keen, and almost certainly palpable to everyone in the stableyard.

After assisting the matron out of the coach, Kittredge offered his hand to the Scheherazade and she flashed her gap-toothed smile right at him as she rested her hand on his and mounted the step. He couldn't recall a woman besides his mother ever smiling at him. Really smiling at him. Unabashedly, unreservedly, with no fear, no nervous desire to please.

And then he had a perfect view of her arse as she stepped back up into the coach. And, oh, it was lovely and ample and

gorgeous, proudly jutting out and straining the gathers of her pelisse.

Kittredge liked to think of himself as a man with few weaknesses. But one was for a shapely, generous bottom whose curves would fill his rather large hands. He flexed his fingers as his cock began to feel like a pulsing length of iron.

And now I can sit beside her if I wish.

Kittredge paused. It wasn't immediately clear to him if he would prefer to be across from her so he could look at her or to sit next to her.

Next to her. Yes. He'd already sat across from her. Now it was time to sit next to her. Maybe the side of her delightfully round arse would carelessly nudge against him. A meaningless contact to her. But a Christmas gift for him.

His chest got a peculiar ache to match the one in his cock.

What was happening to him? He looked up at the sky. It continued to be gray but not threatening. The air was cold, but was it cold enough?

If only it would snow.

If only it would snow so much that the coach would be forced to stop at the next coaching inn before reaching London.

And it would be crowded at the inn because of the snow and so many people traveling for Christmas and there would be only one room and only one bed so he and the Scheherazade would have to pretend to be husband and wife.

He would not take advantage, of course. He would assure her that he would sleep in a chair, but he could imagine that if she got cold, she might ask him to join her in the bed so that they could use their shared body heat to ward off the chill.

He wouldn't scare her. He would move without haste. He would be deliberate and gentle. She would never know the need pent up inside him. He would keep his mouth shut so that there was no chance he would say something offensive. He

would just hold her and warm her against his chest and smell her dark hair and her soft skin.

Bah.

Such things only happened in books.

I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from *Duke the Halls*, the adventures of Franny and the Duke of Kittredge on their way to their Christmassy happily-ever-after!

QR code for *Duke the Halls* on US Amazon store:

Duke the Halls



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All errors and failings are mine and mine alone.

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/bedmeearl and sign-up for her newsletter to get the free, steamy, second epilogue to *Bed Me, Earl*. Finally, in addition to following Felicity 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.



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[Duke the Halls](#) (Christmas prequel novella)

[Bed Me, Duke](#) (Book 1)

[Bed Me, Baron](#) (Book 2)

[Bed Me, Earl](#) (Book 3)

Books 4, 5, and 6 coming in 2024

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