



It's not a Rendezvous Without a Rogue (Wicked Widows' League)

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Description: Strangers to lovers

A midnight rendezvous

A forgotten feather

And an hour that changed everything

Masks are something people wear when they don't wish to be found.

Sunshine Price questioned the wisdom of showing up at a Christmas masquerade when she hadn't been to a public affair in five years. She had learned to trust the advice of her friends at the Wicked Widows League. But when she finds herself caught up in a scandalous dare with a man she's never met, seen, or heard of, the idea of a reintroduction to society suddenly feels heartbreakingly foolish.

Phineas Martin Blackmore, the newly minted Viscount Davies, has sworn off house parties, Almacks, the season—anything with fainting females, in exchange for the open sea. But the reckoning hour has come, and his aunts are determined to see him landbound until he secures a future for the viscountcy. Hell agree to attend a masquerade for their benefit, but he never expected to meet his match at midnight.

Is she the stuff of dreams, or will Sunshine Price become his real-life sirens song?

The greatest challenge isn't the unmasking hour; it's the hour that comes after.

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CHAPTER 1

Christmas Eve 1816

Midnight could not arrive fast enough for Sunshine Price. Perhaps it was adequately called the bewitching hour since she'd felt bewitched by the notion of attending a Christmas masquerade. The idea had been borne in her, set to seed by the faithful women of the Wicked Widows' League.

Now that she was here, and there was no polite way to withdraw, she had naught to do but make the best of a foolish decision. But the question still gnawed at her. What bedeviled-ridden path had her mind wandered down? Some sort of sleep deprivation must be to blame for her folly, else she'd have to blame herself.

Two weeks prior, upon visiting the Wicked Widows' League, the infamous Duchess of Justamere—one of the League's greatest successes—had suggested she attend a Christmas Eve party. Sunshine's instincts shouted flee for your life you silly ninny, but she had been humbled by the duchess's story. How a widowed Fredda St. George fell in love with her would-be solicitor, who happened to be a duke in disguise. And if that were not enough to solidify her deep abiding respect for the Duchess, then the equally humbling story that all her husband's many siblings were bastards gave her a sense of security from a woman who would never judge a simple artist's daughter or steer her wrong.

Sunshine wasn't looking to marry, but if the Duchess of Justamere could turn a nightmare into an adventure, then perhaps there was hope that Sunshine might make a memory worth keeping at the masquerade. It gave her hope.

Besides, the party was planned by two elderly sisters-in-law and was located just outside the city, a fair distance for a little freedom and close enough for a hasty retreat should she need it.

It was time to recover her smile. Happiness breeds happiness, and no good memory can be diluted by having more of the same. Unfortunately, guilt carried a shovel to bury most of the sensible notions of restoration.

She had to admit her life had grown tediously dull, uneventful, lacking hope or courage. Two things she had never been empty of before Richard's death. At some point in the past five years, she or society had become neglectful. During her first year in mourning, few had looked her way, and those who did looked on with pity and voiced concerns for her health. None had emotionally contributed to her future or happiness.

After five years of relative obscurity, it seemed as if she'd been labeled as unidentifiable. The word widow had become her moniker. A horrible reminder that she'd been in the world and was no longer welcome where happiness and the fertility of wellbeing existed. She wasn't quite a pariah. No. She was something worse: a person to avoid as if she had nothing else to offer. What did other widows do? How did they maneuver a bleak landscape without opportunity?

For a while, her favorite people had been the honest ones who simply didn't know what to say. But eventually, even that contact ceased until all she had left were the few servants in her modest home. And, of course, the wonderful women of the Wicked Widows' League. They understood her, the old and the young. That kind of grief does not play favorites.

After spending an afternoon with the Duchess of Justamere, Sunshine had truly thought she could manage a party. After all, it was a masquerade. She could hide. She could avoid people or not. She could be anything she wanted to be. That was the

benefit of being undercover. Of course, her natural cynical heart would not allow her to go off into some pitying anonymity, so she had enlisted a dressmaker. It was the first ballgown she'd worn in more than five years. And it was a sight to see, indeed. Burgundy red and wicked as wine, trimmed in lace as wicked as a wedding night.

Sunshine's name alone had generally prompted seamstresses to outfit her in yellow. As a result, she vowed for one night to be seen if not heard. To be reckless if not proper. To be self-absorbed if not convivial.

In other words, Sunshine vowed to make a memory. And for it, she sought out a modiste known for dressing a wealthy man's mistress instead of the diamonds of the first water. At twenty-six, she figured she'd earned it.

Two of Lord Davies's aunts masterminded the entire affair for the express purpose of welcoming their nephew home smack in the middle of the Christmas season. Sunshine had never crossed paths with the viscount, and since she'd not attended a Season in so many years, it was unlikely she'd know anyone at all.

The thought had bolstered her courage, strengthened her reserve, until she ventured from her pink paisley guest room at Willow Manor and descended the stairs one dreaded heart-faltering step at a time.

She practically snuck into the glittering ballroom, avoiding the main entrance pomp by way of the back terrace. Before she came in contact with anyone, she planted herself behind a large potted fern tall enough to hide an ostrich while simultaneously hiding behind her demi mask—thank goodness for small favors. The moment of reckoning called for a moment alone to catch her breath.

Back into society, indeed. What was she thinking? She wanted to run for home. The duchess had insisted this would be the perfect place to find her equilibrium again. Except this was an unequal society, and she no longer belonged if ever she had. Her

head spun, watching the carefree, dainty steps of at least three dozen women. All looked to be younger than her.

She closed her red ostrich feather fan and examined her dress for the third time, expecting to see her breasts spilling over on display. The swells dangerously pressed to the edge of her bodice, on the verge of breaching the fine red silk. With her back to the room, she smoothed down the skirt. She hooked her thumbs over the top of her bursting bodice, gave it another tug, and then adjusted her stays with a sharp tweak to help keep everything in place. The silk drape of the magnificent gown left no room for added layers, although she managed one petticoat secretly hemmed with delicate lace. It was one thing to line a gown with lace but another to wear it tucked away, as if it were a part of her that had been in hiding. No one would see it, but it made her feel special, and oddly enough, remembering it gave her courage.

“It’s all in place. I assure you,” a gravelly male voice that caressed her ears like velvet came from just this side of the fern, effectively startling her pulse like a bolt of lightning.

Liquid fear flooded her veins while she nudged her mask back into place, improving her view. In the meantime, her nostrils fed on the scent of sandalwood like a forgotten memory. She battled the fan hanging from her wrist, trying without much grace to whip the spokes into a demure response. The gentleman calmly circled her wrists with his warm, gloved fingers, steadying the misbehaving fan while he pressed a glass of champagne into her palm. Her fingers instinctively closed around the cool, fluted crystal.

“You look as if you might need it. I know I do,” he said, a trickle of humor in his rich voice as he took a sip.

“No doubt you’re correct, Mr...” She left off the rest.

He bowed as much as the cramped space allowed. “Mr. Black.”

She scrolled a glance, zigzagging over his person because, frankly, the name either fit him or it wasn’t real. “Because you’re dressed in black? Is your name part of the costume? Or is that your Christian name?”

“I believe it’s your turn. We can decide later what’s true and whether we should bring the Christians along.” He shattered her composure with a half-grin for that clever reply.

Leaving out the truth was sounding better and better by the minute, but she couldn’t think fast enough for something more ridiculous than her given name. “Sunshine Price.”

He smiled lethally, chuckling with enough charm to send a rumble through her heart. “Oh, that is a good one. Sunshine or Miss Price?”

Price was her husband’s name. “Just Sunshine. My good name is not in opposition to my Christian parts, I assure you.”

“I see. And which parts would those be, because that dress is as seductive as the devil himself.”

Banter was like a machine. It needed but a small amount of grease to run as if it had never been out of service. “What a shame. I had not intended to let my dress wear me. I rather thought I’d wear it this evening.”

“Nicely done. Miss Sunshine, you are a breath of fresh air in a room of overstuffed mothers and their chicks.”

“It would seem that the poor Lord Davies is on the hook. But I see other roosters

here. Would you be one, Mr. Black?”

He licked his lips, his dark eyes contemplating her through his domino, trying to see past her mask and into her soul. “Blackmore.” He filled in his name. True or no.

“So, you did lie. I thought so. Your cheek twitched.” She tapped the cold rim of her glass to her cheek for emphasis, feeling a wet spark of champagne pop on her eyelash.

“And you must play brag to recognize such a tell. Is that it? We should locate a deck of cards and test it.”

She chuckled despite the anxiety that led her to hide behind the fern in the first place. “I’m afraid I don’t play the game. My game involves a solitary game of cards.”

“Ah, patience.” He repeated her favorite form of solitaire. “One deck or two?”

“Two. It’s more challenging.” For all the improper conversation, this gentleman was easy to converse with. Wearing formal black and a perfectly tied cravat, he made her forget herself. His mask was understated for such an affair—no plumes or pomp about it—simply black and nothing else. Then again, he didn’t need anything else. The unruly dark curls of his hair were enough. The length was more than inappropriate, long enough for a queue, but somehow, he made the shoulder-length mane a guise for a trend. Her fingers itched to touch it and find out if it was as decadently silky as it looked.

“Someone needs to teach you whist or brag,” he said.

“There was a time I played whist. But for that, we’d need two more players, and if you must know, I am shamefully hiding behind this fern for a reason.”

“If we’re making confessions already, then I must admit, I was headed this way for much the same reason.”

She heard a laugh bubble up from her throat. The sound was achingly familiar, the feelings almost forgotten. “You’re a little too tall to make a good go of it, I’m afraid.” She took the excuse to gaze over his sinfully styled hair before resting again on his eyes.

He crouched, hunched down several inches into a stooped position. “Is this better?” His eyes sparkled through his thick lashes. A wayward curl slipped from behind his ear.

Sunshine couldn’t remember the last time she worked so hard to hold back a grin or a laugh. She tapped the tickling folded spokes of her fan over her unrestrainable smile. “Now, you look as if you need a cane, I’m afraid.”

“Behind this mask, I could be a man of sixty, and you’d never know it.” He straightened to his full height. At least a head above hers.

“And I could be a chambermaid named Cinderella, who was gifted a fine dress by a cat who turned into a fairy godmother.”

Tipping his glass toward her, he raised his brows, then took another sip. “That’s too bad of you because now I can’t stop thinking of your shoes.”

She lifted her hem, pointing her toes with the precision of a ballerina, daintily displaying one ruby red slipper. “No glass. I prefer to think I’m not that fragile.” Fear was one thing. Fragility was another. She’d survived a storm, and if she chose to live in the calm of the eye, then she would relish the peace as long as possible because, in her experience, all good things come to an end. It was only a matter of time before she was sucked back into the vortex. Reality rarely let up. It spun all about her, a

frenzy of whispering gossip to remind her that she didn't belong.

"Your fairy godmother did you a disservice if you expected to be invisible."

She crooked her lip, grimacing because it was true. "The dress may have been a poor choice but look at the women here." She spread two thick fronds open like Venetian blinds, revealing a ballroom moderately teeming with young women and men and, no doubt, a matchmaker or two. The pale-pink walls were bordered with a polished checkerboard of black and white marble. Mr. Blackmore placed his cheek so close to hers that she felt the heat of his skin and smelled the musk of man and sandalwood, all with the tang of greenery under her nose.

She tapped the air with one pointed finger toward the crowd. "The women, or girls if you will, are dressed in pretty pastels, as if in a painting, with hair in ringlets and smelling of honey-dipped lavender."

"I can't find fault with the honey-dipped lavender part," he said, not taking his eyes from the dancefloor where a quadrille was underway.

"We'll let that inappropriate response go for the moment. But the dresses—there's nothing about them that sets them apart. They're repeated in the same hue if not the same shade."

"They appear as pink, blue, and yellow butterflies floating about the floor, waiting to be netted by an entomologist. The problem with that is the pale butterflies seem to be the ones carrying the nets at this affair. The men would do well to be on guard."

She rolled her head to the side, and he matched her, their noses a mere inch from touching. His eyes almost appeared black under his demi mask, but up close, she could see the circle of coffee brown that surrounded the warmth of rich mahogany. Much like his hair. Dark but streaked with gold threads that winked in the candlelight

and disappeared in the shadows. “I applaud your description, Mr. Blackmore.”

When she said his name, his gaze dropped to her mouth, where it stayed. “Phineas, Miss Sunshine. I believe we’re close enough for Christian names. We’re sharing a fern, for God’s sake.” The invitation was more than just permission to use given names. The weight of it was in his eyes.

For a moment, she thought he might kiss her. Her mouth went dry. It had been five years since she’d kissed a man. Five years since she’d done anything with a man. The thought alone felt as if she’d stuck a finger into the other side of the hurricane and felt the rush of thunderous spasms jolting her heart, charging her veins. She had to remind herself to breathe.

She swallowed. “The butterflies are precisely why I had this dress made for the occasion. More than festive, don’t you think?” She blinked away a stare and stood back.

“I think it’s wicked, Miss Sunshine. And brilliant. You’re not an ordinary butterfly.”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever been a butterfly at all.”

“Still a caterpillar?”

The question was pure innuendo, and she knew it. But the game was deliciously daring, and she was wearing a mask in the middle of a party where no one knew her. Where she didn’t know herself.

And ... she had not kissed a man in five godforsaken years . “Decidedly not a caterpillar, Phineas,” she answered without equivocation.

He cocked a brow at the same time he turned away with a forced exhalation, as if he

hadn't expected her to answer.

She let out a soulful laugh, more seductive than anything, as she gave him back the empty champagne glass. A fortifying warm haze covered her usual lack of confidence. "More declarations ahead. I confess I don't know a soul here. What about you?"

"Not more than a handful of guests." He held up five fingers, then brought up his other hand and released his index finger. "And only one woman." His brown eyes smoldered, and despite a morbidly cold winter, she felt too warm.

"No silly young unattached girls beckoning you for punch?"

He shook his head, watching her, handsome and forbidden. "Married?"

She shook her head and tried without success not to look at his mouth. "You?" she asked daringly. "Hiding from a shrewish wife, perhaps?"

Smoothing his lips into a broad smile, he shook his head. "Not me."

Was it his eyes behind the mask that captivated her? Was it his untamed hair? Or was it him?

"Don't you think a potted plant is a little cliché?" he asked. "Even the library isn't a proper hiding place these days. More interludes happen there than in the deuced bed chambers upstairs, I've little doubt."

"I suppose I need to rectify that. I've never been one for clichés. Then again, I am guessing you're just trying to shock me, Mr. Blackmore."

"And you digress to my surname because why?"

“Because your casual name is as improper as your remark about the library, and the statement lacks imagination.”

“Am I boring you?” His chuckle blundered her every thought. “I’ll have to try harder.”

“I never said you were boring.”

“I see. Then you’re afraid of me.”

Leaning back, she tilted her head, squinting her eyes like a jeweler with a loupe. “You disappoint me. A man like you, self-assured, to challenge a woman. I don’t respond to guilt or chiding. Try again, Phineas.”

He bit his lip, looking at the ceiling as if he were calculating the likelihood of her possible invitation. “If I were trying to shock you, I would have suggested a real hiding place. Something more plausible.”

“You’re doing fine. Keep going.” The champagne had a delicious effect.

His intense gaze chased a line from her eyes to her lips to her bosom and back up. But not in an ogling way. He looked more desperate than anything, as if he were afraid of saying the wrong thing, causing her to disappear. He bit his lip. “If we were near the docks, I’d say my ship.”

Now, she was shocked. She furrowed her brow. “You have a ship?”

“I captain a ship. I was in the Royal Navy, and after the stack of little wars that led to Waterloo, I couldn’t give up the sea.”

He was perfect. Gorgeous. Captivating. And the ocean was his home. Should she play

or leave? Looking at his broad shoulders, she couldn't keep her coiled fingers from wanting to touch him. She'd been with only one man and not longer than six months. She wanted to taste desire again, but this time without commitment. The ideal opportunity stood in front of her, wantonly tempting her to give herself one night to be anything she wished.

He regarded her quizzically, folding his arm and rubbing his bottom lip. "A rendezvous then? My coach at the end of the drive? Closer than a ship. A tiny bit less cliché than the library."

CHAPTER 2

What had he stumbled into? It was too good to be true. A beautiful woman had practically propositioned him. Just when Phineas thought his charm knew no bounds, she turned the conversation on its axis, and he was left to discern how to keep from tripping over his own tongue. He wasn't just Phineas Blackmore. He was Viscount Davies, and the glory of it all was that she saw him as the man he was, not the man he had to be. This ray of sunshine was not looking for a title. She was following desire. He couldn't resist her if he tried. Even if only to kiss her, he'd meet her in his coach and hope to God she wasn't torturing him with empty banter.

The headache plaguing him for days subsided. His great-aunts Vada and Nora meant well, but their task of finding him a bride before he met with some disaster at sea only made him wish to return to the churn of salt and water. There was a reason that ship captains rarely married.

But Phin had not anticipated a woman like Sunshine, with spunk and tenacity, to appear out of nowhere, showing up on Christmas Eve no less. The two doting older women still saw him as a boy who'd left home to fight a war. If he had any doubt of that, the women they invited to the rout were proof enough. Good breeding stock with plenty of years to ensure an heir. Some looked barely eighteen. His tastes did not run so young as to take a chance that he might meet a debutante who could hold his interest for more than ten idle seconds.

And then he spied her. Behind a potted plant, a hint of red lace peeking through the fronds had been enough for him to inspect. It could have been Christmas décor, but to his lovely surprise, it was a woman—a full-grown woman checking her bodice,

which gave him ample time and a good excuse for a furtive glance.

Not for one minute did he believe her name was Sunshine, and he didn't give a damn because it looked as if she didn't know him at all. Not by sight, anyhow. Even the hint of his name didn't spark a note in her. Better for his luck. All he really wished to do was talk to her, to share more banter and innuendo. He hadn't truly expected her to meet him in his coach, but on the off chance she would show, he messaged his footman to retrieve his coach from its stall and park it at the end of the drive. He even asked him to throw in a heated brick and a blanket for good measure. The winter was colder than normal. All the more reason to sidle up next to someone who called herself Sunshine.

The color of her eyes remained a mystery, but he would notice that burst of copper hair anywhere. He was counting on it.

He hastened to the coach, leaving his coat behind for fear he'd bump into someone wishing for a word or a dance or a fainting couch.

"Thank you, Mr. Cowell," he said to the footman as he relieved him of his duty. Phin stood at the back of the coach, out of sight of the drive. The waxing moon gave up little light, but with the illumination coming from the windows of the manor house, one could detect a person if not see them completely.

He rubbed his brow with thumb and forefinger, considered removing his mask again, and then left it on. The game they played was still a mystery, and he didn't want to lose her because of his ambition to know her better.

"Mr. Blackmore," a woman whispered from the shadowed drive—her cloaked figure outlined by the halo of lights behind her and the illumination of her frosted breath.

"Miss Sunshine." He bowed. "Your carriage awaits." With a twist, he swept his arm

toward the coach, mimicking a welcoming footman. The lady did show. Luck was on his side.

“Is it a pumpkin?” she asked, taking a step closer.

“Surely not. I plan to be here long after midnight.”

He could see her reevaluating her decision. She took a deep breath, held her cloak together with one hand, and picked up her skirts with the other. Once she’d made up her mind, her movements, her fa?ade, shifted into a very provocative confidence that put even him on guard. He took her gloved hand and helped her take the steps, seeing her seated before he took the opposite gold velvet squab.

She tugged at one glove, finger by finger, pulling her hand free, then proceeded to spread out her fingers over the fine velvet seat beside her. While she examined the fabric, he examined her for signs of regret.

“Luxurious. You must be somebody to own such a fine vehicle,” she said, raising her eyes to his.

“I believe we are all somebody.” He concentrated on not holding his breath, waiting for the moment she would recognize him and hoping she didn’t. Surprisingly, now they were seated and alone, he found himself interested in knowing her. He wanted her to discover who he was inside, before the unmasking when most people’s opinions were formed into a mold proofed by someone else. “Daring to dress in red and without a companion nipping at your heels tells me you prefer to think for yourself.”

“I would imagine that’s true for everyone. I’m simply determined to live. Too much of life is stolen in the mundane tasks and idioms that guide our lives. We give too much credit to those who make up the rules, the quotes, and the idioms. Don’t you

think?”

“What I think is you’re a beautiful cynic.”

“Perhaps I have good reason.” She folded her hands in her lap. “Did I come here to make a point or to learn something about the mysterious rogue who dared to invite me for a rendezvous?” She slid the other glove from her fingers, while presenting him with a daring bend to her lovely lips.

He folded his arms and then undid them in the same way she undid him. “You’re not like any woman I’ve ever met.” He squinted, leaning forward a bit to examine her eyes. “Blue. No, hazel. Your eyes.” He pointed to his own so she would understand his meaning.

“My father used to say they were as blue as the sky. I’m afraid he saw what he wished, though. My mother had hazel, green-rimmed with blue gray. I believe mine are the same. In some light, they appear blue. I applaud your interest in the detail, however.”

“I can’t imagine it any other way. Ignoring detail can get a man killed on the sea.”

“And your eyes are brown. I noticed that readily. Easy enough, except in the dark, they appear black. You could affect something sinister if you tried, and maybe even if you didn’t.”

“I’m not dangerous, Miss Sunshine, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Then you underestimate yourself, and I have a feeling you’ve never done that. Another misnomer, perhaps?”

“Me?” he asked with a gust of a chuckle, putting a hand to his chest. “I suppose it

would be a lie to say my curiosity isn't piqued enough to contemplate leading you astray. Though, I imagine you're not easily led anywhere."

"I came here, didn't I?"

"And how long did you stand behind that plant shuffling between the wisdom of coming at all?"

"No more than a minute or two." She flipped open her red ostrich feather fan, fluttering it under her nose and watching him through the holes of the scorching red half mask. "My shuffling wisdom, as you say, took twenty minutes of honest contemplation in my room as I dared the sage on my shoulder with the adventure." She lowered her fan, her cheeks dimpled.

"I shall not disappoint your trust." He rubbed his hands together, changing the subject and the relentless whisper of the devil on his own shoulder. "Champagne?"

She almost looked relieved. "Please tell me you aren't teasing."

"I wouldn't dare try." He pushed himself up from the seat and slipped through the door, returning with a bottle and two glasses. "I plucked these from a pail of snow. Chilled. No better way to enjoy bubbly wine." He jealously watched as her tongue swept her plump lips, and his mouth watered for a taste.

"The sage is warning me that you're plying me with spirits. How unfair," she said, taking the glass without a hint of trepidation.

"Unfair of me or the sage?" He lifted his glass toward her, and she met it with a tiny clink. "To a merry Christmas, Miss Sunshine."

"To silencing the sage and making a memory, Phineas Blackmore."

He felt a surge of lustful joy spread through him as warm as the alcohol spreading from his chest through his limbs. A kiss, he kept chanting to himself. Nothing more. Just a kiss. “Shall I put the bottle back outside to keep it cold?”

“And risk someone seeing? Or worse, stealing it? I think not. Better safe than sorry. Just a bit of proverbial wisdom for you. Besides, I rather think we’ll drink it before it gets warm.” She fought with the ribbon-tied fan at her wrist again while balancing the champagne. Phin took the drink from her grasp so she could finish her task. She set the fan aside, making certain the spokes were closed. “Thank you,” she said, reaching across the seats and retrieving her drink. So much of her seemed sophisticated until she fought that silly fan. That was the woman who truly intrigued him.

“Is it too forward to admit there is a warm brick and blanket if it gets uncomfortably cold?”

“I award you the blanket since I was smart enough to retrieve a cloak. I see you were busy with other things. Did you bribe the footman at the front of the drive?”

“My entire savings was worth every shilling to meet you.”

“I can only hope you’re not shy of funds then because I’ve no wish to bankrupt anyone.”

“I would guess you’ve bankrupted many youthful hearts and continue to do so.”

She bent her head, but not before he saw the soulful change in her eyes. Something about it tweaked his conscience. Perhaps it was the word youthful. Thankfully, the subtle change in her didn’t last. She returned his gaze with a forced smile. “More champagne if you please. It’s a rare treat that I should drink more than one glass.” She handed over the empty flute, then undid the frog at her throat, freeing her shoulders of the gray wool. “What shall we do about the masks? I understand

midnight is the unmasking hour, but I am not opposed to leaving them on.”

Like him, was she looking for anonymity as well? He handed her back the wine and then checked his watch. “We have an hour to contemplate the wisdom of shedding too much light on such a remarkable evening. Not that I wouldn’t wish to see your face. I can only imagine how beautiful you are since everything else seems to be well-placed.”

“Don’t bother. The champagne is working, so there’s no need for added compliments.”

“Except they are all true.” He was happy to leave the masks on. Why tempt fate? Besides, it didn’t matter because her facade was falling one revealing sentence at a time.

“I have to confess I am rather embarrassed about the potted plant. I was afraid of the butler’s ringing introduction into a room full of strangers, so I entered the ballroom through the outside terrace.”

“Funny, you don’t strike me as someone who’s afraid of anything.”

“Everyone is afraid of something. I’m afraid of being alone, I suppose, and there is nothing lonelier than a crowd of people you do not know.”

He filed that information away. “True. But then, even in a crowd, we can be anyone we wish wearing such frippery.” He wiggled his mask.

Her masked gaze swept over him from head to toe. Not so much a caress, but he felt it, nonetheless. His heart skipped, and so did his libido when her gaze drifted over his groin. Her gaze didn’t linger, so he took it for a simple look, but his simple brain took it for more. Could his aunts have mistakenly invited a courtesan? Part of him wished

it so, and another wanted to believe her interest was real. When she met his eyes, his mouth stitched up into a half smile.

“I believe you’re right about the masks. Do your eyes crinkle when you smile? You look like the devil himself.” Her head tilted.

“Do I look old enough for lines at my eyes?”

“Frankly, yes.”

He feigned a gasp. “I thought we weren’t speaking truth. Should we remove the frippery?”

“No,” she said quickly.

One more bullet dodged. He began to relax. She didn’t know him. And she wanted to remain anonymous. Affairs often started this way, which he would have to admit enticed him. But there was something about her more interesting than a liaison. A playful energy surrounded her and he wanted to be a part of it. “Am I allowed to play the guessing game?”

Careful to keep hold of her glass, she folded her arms, which accentuated her breasts. Not her intent, but who was he to question good fortune. The view made his mind wander. “Do your best, Mr. Blackmore.”

“It’s safe to say you are not a debutante or even a London belle.”

Her cocked brow nudged her mask high on her smiling cheek.

“I only point out that if you were a known debutante, certainly I would recognize your name and you mine.”

“Unless we both lied.”

“I am many things, but I am not a liar.”

“A thief of hearts then?” Her cheeks dimpled, and her eyes shone with champagne-induced mischief.

“Why? Have I stolen yours?”

“Mine is not available, I’m afraid. It’s well guarded against blackguards and men with lethally loaded smiles.”

He rested his arm on his elbow and tapped his chin with his wineglass, enjoying the heady mist of bubbles tickling his sinuses. He hardly knew what to say to her. Could it be that he’d been away too long? It had only been a year since he’d been home.

“Tell me, why did you answer my invitation for a rendezvous?”

“Because, according to you, meeting in the library was too cliché, and the potted plant created an indecent exhibition for a stolen kiss, which I suspect is something we both want.”

A cough threw him from his leisurely pose, sloshing a drop of champagne on his neckcloth.

“If this is to be an adventure, what’s next, Mr. Blackmore?”

“My name, for one.” He took her glass with his, setting them both on the floor near the side of the cabin in case they were inclined to tip. “Phineas. Or Phin, if you please,” he said, bent to his task.

“Or captain?” The sound of infectious, relaxed laughter filled his ears, reminding him

how infrequently he'd heard the genuine sound of joy, especially from a woman, in the last several years.

"Not landlocked, no."

"Well, Phin, I'm no Miss. Just Sunshine."

"You are every bit your name."

Her head tilted, and she watched her hands in her lap, a genteel shyness from a woman who had a moment ago proposed a kiss.

"Am I being played, Sunshine? And to what end?" he asked with a teasing tone. He only wished to draw her out again.

She cleared her throat. "I promise you that I've forgotten how to play that game. It's been awhile."

He sobered a little. There were tiny moments he wished to memorize about her that made him want to ask more. First whimsy, coyness, teasing, and then this shyness he couldn't explain. "I believe you're telling the truth."

She shrugged, unable to look at him anymore.

"More champagne?"

"I don't think so. It's possible I'm not thinking clearly." She still did not look at him.

"Would you care for me to escort you back?" There was no situation on the planet in which he wished to share a rendezvous with a woman who didn't agree. He almost held his breath because this woman held his particular interest. Perhaps it was the

mask. Or simply who she was behind it.

A breath shook in and out of her that he suspected had little to do with the temperature outside and everything to do with the heat building between them. “Not yet.” She squared her shoulders. “I came here for a kiss, Phin. I’m not leaving without one.”

CHAPTER 3

Could it be that Sunshine had made this virile, piratical-looking, libido-charging man nervous? Any unchaperoned woman who followed a man to an empty coach in the middle of the night must be seeking more than an ice-cold glass of champagne. He'd spoken of liaisons, and yet he sat across from her without budging an inch closer. He was right. She had practically propositioned him. The banter had been exhilarating, but she wanted more. And she wanted it from him. The reasons confused her, but she'd come this far, and she would not turn back.

He watched her with the intensity of an unanswered question, his head cocked in a way one does when they're crediting the next word to the other person. In this case, the next move.

"Am I that frightening? Or simply not appealing?" She couldn't help the dragging undertone of her lagging self-confidence. It had been easy for a while to pretend behind the mask. But there were things one could not hide, like inexperience. She might have been married for all of six months, but she'd never kissed another man, never been with another man, and certainly never propositioned a man, not even her husband.

"Oh, Sunshine. You are too appealing by half, and it has taken everything out of me to stay my distance because kissing you is only the beginning of what I wish to do. And that, my dear, frightens me."

Hand over fist, she nervously rubbed a knuckle over her lips. Then, as if her life depended on the fierce speed of a mind tormented by a far-too-tempting specimen of

a man, she gathered herself and quickly changed seats. “There.” She turned to Phin. “I believe we’re close enough now. If you’re too much afraid of me, perhaps you’ll tell me how to start.”

He twisted to face her. With his palm cradling her jaw, he passed his thumb lightly along her bottom lip, with the heated gaze of a starved animal or a man who spent too much time on the ocean and not enough in the arms of a woman. “I’ve never wanted anything so badly yet felt so unsure.” His gaze was riveted on her mouth.

She wet her lips, her heart retreating an inch, and whispered, “It’s all right. You don’t have to...” Before she could finish the sentence, his mouth silenced her. Erotically, simple, slow, and delicious, his lips moved over hers, and her breath stuttered with a coaxing lick of his tongue. His heat melted away her cold fear of the future, and she whimpered a release, five years in the making.

He smelled like winter—a mixture of snow and shaving soap—and tasted of expensive champagne. The intoxicating scent fed her racing pulse until she ached in places she’d forgotten. She wanted to hang on to him and beg him to remove his gloves and touch her, to resurrect her soul back with the living. Pain had been the thing that reminded her she was still breathing, but this kind of living in someone’s arms took her breath.

He tilted his head, slanting his mouth over hers for one devouring sweep of his tongue. The sound of her silk mask rubbing up against his satin domino reminded her of the barriers surrounding her. Some she’d erected, others built for her. She wanted to put them all to bed. When she felt his hands grip her upper arms, pulling her to him within an inch of her life, she folded into him. She slid her palms up his chest, registering lean hard muscle beneath the layers of clothes. It made his story about being a sea captain believable.

Her head lolled back with a sigh, and his kisses continued along her jaw with tiny

licks, slipping into the curve of her neck, sucking gently but with an underlying need building between them. She understood that much. His teeth grazed her shoulder, tugging at her gown. Then he buried his face in that spot, taking deep breaths, as someone gathering a memory through smell, touch, taste. “Who are you, Miss Sunshine Price?” he whispered against her ear. She fought the urge to lie back and forget every answer to his question. He pulled away, leaving little cold spots where his mouth had been, his tongue had licked, and a tingling sensation from his teeth. “Where on earth did you come from?”

“Nowhere of import.” Her voice sounded foreign, too breathy, too calm. She reached up and tilted his mask back into place, straight across his nose, then adjusted her own. “What time is it?”

“You have somewhere else to be?” It was a question she could tell he didn’t want to ask, was perhaps afraid of the answer.

“Midnight is the unmasking hour, and I don’t want to be anywhere near it. We can’t stay out here. It’s too cold.”

He reached for the blanket, flicked it open, and wrapped it around her shoulders. But it didn’t stop the chatter of her teeth, which had nothing to do with the weather.

She pulled it from her shoulders. “You need this more than I do. I have my cloak.”

He shook his head. “I’m quite warm. Too warm, perhaps.” She thought she saw a gleam in his eye. “I’m not keen on unmasking in a throng of people. What do you suggest?”

“Make our way to the back of the house, through the terrace doors, and hide out in a more cliché space.” She couldn’t help the smile that burst across her cheeks. “Like the library. We could read to one another by firelight.” She said it in jest, hoping he

wouldn't take her up on such a place. She wanted somewhere more private, more intimate.

He bit his cheek. "There might be someone there ready to unmask more than their identity." He cocked a brow.

She laughed despite the way it must look.

"I am staying here."

"In the cold?" she asked, clearly disappointed.

"No." He shook his head, smiling at her misunderstanding. "In the house. I have a room. Admittedly, it's a little cliché."

"With a hearth?"

He nodded, searing her with a look that said everything.

"Can you light a fire, Phineas?"

"Haven't I already?"

She retrieved her cloak from across the seat.

* * *

When they reached the back of the house, Phin led her to a shadowed part of the outside wall, then hedged along, peeking through the windows before gripping her hand, both of them hurrying toward the French doors. Sunshine grabbed up her skirts, fighting the tiny bubbles of laughter at every footfall. She felt like a girl again, free

and giddy over a forbidden adventure. Her shoes clipped along the terrace, the heels tapping the stone tiles.

Phineas stopped. “Hand me those noisy Cinderella slippers before we step inside.”

She obeyed without a word or a worry for her white stockings. Shoving her heeled slippers under his arm, he slid his hand into hers, and they ducked into the house, racing for the back stairs like lovers. With her red dress and hair, she couldn’t hope to go unnoticed if someone crossed their path, but she hid behind his wide shoulders for good measure.

In a different part of the house than she was staying, they rushed down a hallway, finding his door easily enough. Bounding into the room, he pulled her over the threshold with the footing of a lively waltz and shut the door with a loud thunk . When he secured it with a turn of the key, Phineas dropped her hand and shoes, and they simultaneously broke out with gales of breathless laughter. She held her middle while she gasped herself into tears.

He blew out a relieved breath. “I think we made it without being seen. Are you in one piece?”

“Except for the shoes, I believe so.” One oil lamp lit by the canopied bed cast a warm glow over them.

“I couldn’t risk it. If we were found, we’d be downstairs right now.” He checked his watch. “Unmasking in two minutes.”

They were both panting from the exertion up the stairs and the sheer fun of escaping the Christmas reverie. Sunshine unbound her cloak, allowing Phineas to take it as if it were an everyday occurrence. The corner of her mask dipped as one of the pins holding it in place fell to the floor. “I’ve lost one pin already. Shall we wait for the

clock to strike?" she asked, holding up one side of her mask with two fingers. She had pinned the streamers to the side of her hair because she didn't want to muss her coiffure with a ribbon.

Phineas reached behind and pulled the ribbon on his mask while holding it firmly to the bridge of his nose, the eye slits unwavering. "One more minute. Hurry, a kiss before it strikes, and we turn to salt." He waved her over.

She fell in beside him, reaching up on tiptoe to kiss his smiling mouth. The anticipation roared in her ears reminding her of a theater after a performance. They both laughed, counting down from the mark of ten, nine, eight...

At zero, Phin tossed his half-mask across the room while she braced herself. "Your turn. We're past the countdown." He held out his hand.

She stood back an inch, surveying the full force of his facade. Thick lashes against wickedly dark eyes softened his strong jawline, made even more merry by the curve of his smiling mouth. "You are too gorgeous a specimen, and I think I cannot compete."

"It's not a competition. It's an unveiling." Palm up, he waved a hand toward himself. "And thank you for the compliment, by the way. The men aboard my ship enjoy chanting my flaws. It's good to know they aren't so evident in the dark."

The room was dark with only one lamp lit. In one swift movement, squeezing her eyes closed, she tore the mask away, blindly thrusting it toward him.

When she didn't feel him take it from her, she opened one eye and then the other. "I warned you." She dropped her arm.

"God, Sunshine. You're beautiful." He stepped forward. He lifted her hair, half-

unbound by the loss of so many pins, rubbing the curls between his fingers. “Fiery red hair so thick with curls you can hardly keep it bound, and eyes that look sage green in this light, with lashes as thick and dark as a midnight storm. I’ll save mentioning your more obvious attributes except to say I love your charming dimples and can’t stop wondering if you suffer them anywhere else.”

Against her better judgment, she was drawn to his charm. It felt genuine. Though many, men and women alike, had complimented her hair, his words held more weight.

“Should I apologize?” A worried crease reached across his brow.

He misunderstood her silence. Her smile fell away but not from the conversation. It was the memory of being loved, cherished, and flattered. “No. It’s simply been awhile since a handsome rogue regarded me so fondly.” She blinked and dared to look at him.

“Who is this other rogue? I shall cut him down with my rapier.” His voice was smooth, rich, and heady; his fingers in her hair gave her scalp goosebumps that traveled down her neck and chest, seizing her nipples into hard, sensitive buds. As his mouth descended on hers, she reached her arms around his neck and held him as if he were life’s blood.

She heard herself moan into his mouth. The feeling was familiar and new. The ache in her belly didn’t stop until it reached the place between her legs. She’d given her virtue to her husband, but with this man, she greedily took from him without another thought. Tonight, it was her own pleasure she sought.

His teeth tugged gently on her bottom lip before he released her. “Let’s start a fire.” He began pulling off his gloves, smiling at the irony of the statement. “Not that we haven’t already.”

Sunshine slipped out of her own gloves. With her back to the hearth and the handsome man with hair long enough to sink her fingers in, she unfastened her dress, something she'd been doing on her own her entire life. She had learned to contort her reach enough to get to the stubborn fasteners at the impossible middle of her back.

She smelled him before she felt him caress her neck, warming her blood like a sip of wine. She stiffened, dropping her hands. His fingers brushed her sensitive skin with a tickling trail down her back until she felt a finger slip into the place between the threaded ribbon of her stays and her bare skin. The ribbon vibrated through the metal eyes, while the night air cooled her skin as her stays gave way, and the dress fell loose. She could hear him breathing as he nuzzled her hair with his nose, fanning his hands over her shoulders, baring them while he left heated kisses after every inch. Red lace-covered silk draped her arms to her fingertips. Sweet nibbles at her shoulders and a little nip of his teeth gave her goosebumps that followed the brush of his hands down her arms until her dress cascaded in ripples from her fingertips. His hands slid over hers, linking their fingers. He wrapped her in an endearing hug, chin on her shoulder, arms doubled with hers under her breasts. His eyelashes brushed her cheeks like gentle feathers.

"It's not too late to go back."

"Yes, it is." Her words came out breathy, and she laid her head back against him, felt his warm cheek with a sprinkle of night beard chasing a ripple of goosebumps down her neck. "I'm dying for you to touch me, Phin." It was the whisper of a lover in the dark, the light of a fire casting a glow, and the sensation of a man larger than life wanting her. Her heart raced with the caress of his fingers like raw desire against skin that had barely been touched for too long. He let go of her hands and cupped her breasts. She sucked in a gasp as his fingers grazed her aching nipples. With her mind adrift, she tried to live in each moment of his expert strokes, his gentle sucking mouth on her neck, shielding out every wise word she'd ever been taught.

The hard proof of his desire rubbed against her back between the dimples above her buttocks that he blindly referenced. He couldn't know they were there, but the fact that she did made the moment erotic as she anticipated him finding them for himself. Instinctively, she pressed her backside against his erection, feeling him shudder as she moved her hips from side to side.

Then his hands were at the last hooks of her dress. The loose fabric shimmied over her hips, pooling at her feet, leaving her standing half-naked with only a petticoat between them. She heard him release the buttons on his trousers and felt the more demanding hardness like a branding iron through the thin muslin underskirt.

His movements were insistent, methodical as she played with his desire, bending her knees slightly and pressing herself against his thighs.

“Lord, you’re going to end it for me right here.”

She couldn't help the heady chuckle that rumbled deep in her throat. “You’ll miss seeing the dimples if you do that.”

He stopped, held her tight against him, and whispered, “Tell me where.”

She looked over her shoulder. “They are not on these cheeks, I assure you.”

He growled, falling to his knees, tearing at his cravat. He whipped the ties with a jerk, undoing the bow on her petticoat, wasting no time pulling the ruffled cotton from her hips. His hands cradled her, his thumbs rubbing over her buttocks making the whole affair feel real. Her skin tingled, the hairs standing on end as if she were standing in a lightning storm. She knew he was searching for the dimples. “Damn the firelight.”

She laughed again, her mind leaving the world behind.

“You think this is funny?” He turned her bottom toward the fire, her feet caught in a tangle of petticoat and her heart in a tangle of time. What he did next made her laugh even more. He playfully smacked a hand against her bare skin. An almost animal sound came from him as she felt his tongue delve into the hollow of each little dimple at her back. “You are perfection. Do you know that?” he said while straightening from his crouched position. He put his foot between her legs, standing on the underskirt wrapped around her ankles, and whispered in her ear, “Step out of the petticoat, darling, and you’re mine.”

With hands strong, firm, and rough from so much work, he spun her about and found her mouth immediately. The kiss was passion fired by desire and coaxed with a longing she recognized in herself. Her lips were plump from his ardent kisses. Her tongue tingled when he pulled away.

“If you can find the bed yourself, I’ll be right behind you.”

Smiling, she bit her lip and nodded. “Don’t take your time. You aren’t the only one ready to end it all.” She crawled up on the high bed. The room was more lavish than she had expected. From what she could see, the bed curtains were velvet, the frame polished to a sheen, and the wood smelled like freshly cut mahogany. The counterpane was already pulled back at an angle, attesting to either his own ritual or to a thorough chambermaid. The color looked to match the drapes, but it could have been black or navy blue. Shedding light on it wasn’t worth finding out.

He threw his jacket and waistcoat on one of two chairs before the fire. His cravat lay on the floor where he left it when he was kissing her dimples. His trousers were off before she could blink. And who would want to waste that infinitesimal breach in vision and miss the heady look of a chiseled manly form obviously made for the little death.

Sunshine would not have been surprised if he had dove onto the bed from three feet

out. Instead, he ate up the space and crawled on top of the bed without any difficulty despite the extra height of the frame. He hovered over her, spreading her legs with his knee and leaned in for a smothering kiss.

“Please tell me again that you aren’t an innocent because I don’t think I can wait.”

She took his face between her hands, lifting up her head to meet him. She plunged her tongue into his mouth and heard him groan a swear. Then deliciously, quickly, thoroughly, he thrust his hard beautiful self inside her, sending a rush of blood to her head and a cry of pleasure from her throat. He took her quickly. He came hard. And thankfully, she remembered the rhythm that brought on the most wonderful sensation two people could cultivate.

He lay against her, leaning on his elbows, pinning her between them, and panting near her ear. “I’m sorry.”

With her legs wrapped around his narrow hips, she relished the last beats of her own pleasure, then lay back, breathing in deeply the rush of their ardor. Her cheeks hurt from smiling. Her eyes were closed in a dream. “I wouldn’t have had it any other way.” She looked up at him. “I think it’s been a while for us both.”

He brushed the hair from her forehead. “We have all night.”

“My carriage turns into a pumpkin at midnight. Or did you forget?”

He pulled away, gathering a sheet to take the brunt of the mess. She’d forgotten about that part. His stride was long, the flexed muscles down his back gleamed with tiny beads of sweat. Digging through his jacket, he pulled out the watch, made a good show of checking it, and then announced. “It’s not quite midnight.”

“But we unmasked ourselves.”

“My timepiece is often wrong.” He checked the watch again, his finger following the round curve of glinting gold. “Ah, yes, I see the problem. I inadvertently changed the hands when I cleaned it last. We have hours yet.” He tossed the timepiece onto his rumpled waistcoat, the gold case winking against rich, red paisley.

She pulled the clean side of the sheet up over her breasts and enjoyed the devouringly seductive glare in Phin’s eyes as he stalked her. He reached out and ripped the sheet from her clutches. A radiating determination in his eyes bore into her, and she could hardly look at him without laughing.

“You are far more charming without your clothes,” she said. “If you had given a hint of skin while you stood behind that potted plant, I would have dragged you up here myself.”

“Now you understand my problem because you, my dear, had skin aplenty to feast my eyes upon.”

“And what do you think now?” she asked boldly while her heart waited a beat for a rush of manly approval. It shouldn’t matter. But it absolutely did.

“I think we’ve spent too much time talking when all I can think about is touching you, tasting you. My mouth is watering for that delicious little pink tip.” His gaze fell to her breast.

Heat rose to her cheeks, undefinable by the shadows, and her body responded of its own accord. She stretched her arms over her coyly tilted head, unable to stop the wicked smile spreading across her cheeks, and worshipped him with a half-lidded gaze. Having never given a thought of being a man’s mistress, she truly felt like one tonight. The erotic sensation made her feel alive. No more dark clothes between her and the world. No more clothes at all between her and this man.

She fell into oblivion as his mouth softened over her nipple, and when his tongue stroked the peak, she lost the ability to think at all.

CHAPTER 4

Phin woke with a smile, a stretch, and a yawn. Satisfied and sated, basking in the stream of sunlight winking between the folds of the indigo curtains. Waking up to sunshine, next to a woman named Sunshine, couldn't be more ironic if he'd written his own story. He breathed in the lingering scent of lovers locked in bed sport all night and twisted on his pillow, swinging his arm over his companion.

But his hand came down empty on wrinkled sheets. He instinctively patted the pillow next to him where her head had left an indentation. Panic seized his pulse for a second before he considered that she was probably behind the privacy screen taking care of her morning ablutions. What woman wouldn't wish to wake early for a bit of privacy?

He listened for water, for humming, for the sound of dropping hair pins, but heard nothing. It was too quiet. "Sunshine?" he asked, sitting up and hoping he was wrong. No answer came. He felt the pillow and the space near him. Both were cold. How on earth had he slept through her leaving? Dressing alone would have made enough noise to wake him. Except he had gone to sleep more satisfied than he'd ever been in the aftermath.

Had she gone back to her room? That would be understandable under the circumstances. Perhaps she rose early to avoid censure. They fell asleep an hour before sunrise. Or... he had fallen asleep an hour before sunrise. It made more sense that she did not sleep at all.

As the reality of her departure hit him, he threw his legs over the side of the bed, and

his feet hit the floor with a thud. Not even the shock of the cold polished wood stalled him. He shuffled into his wrinkled trousers, haphazardly tucked in a shirt, and rolled up the sleeves. He didn't bother with shoes. He rushed down the corridor, choosing the back stairwell as opposed to the conspicuous grand staircase that led to the gallery above and to every proper room of entertainment below. The breakfast room shouldn't be teeming with guests this early, but he did expect his aunts to be there.

If he had been wearing shoes, he would have come to a skidding stop at the threshold of the breakfast parlor. However, without so much as a pair of hose, his bare feet solidly connected wherever they landed on the cold tile.

"Aunt Vada? Who's in charge of the guest accommodations?" Belatedly, he ran a hand through his undone hair.

"Lord Davies, you are not dressed. Nor have you made a proper greeting." His aunt pouted, an affectation he had no defense for.

"Aunt, you must call me Phineas. Otherwise, I'm not like to answer. In my heart, it's still grandfather's title."

"But you're the viscount, now. Such an exciting time for us all, wouldn't you say?" Aunt Vada's plump fingers patted his cheek. She stood at her full height of five feet nothing.

"Yes, of course. Now, who is in charge of the guest list?"

"I'm not certain. Nora saw to the hiring." Aunt Vada's short gray curls, piled into a little topknot, twitched every time she bounced a finger off her lip in contemplation. Her brows were drawn together, and normally, her general look of confusion made Phin smile. This morning it made his nerves outstretch their authority and sent his heart into a frenzy of frustrated panic.

“What hiring?”

“Of the solicitor who organized the extra staff and selected the guest list. Why aren’t you wearing shoes?”

“I’ll explain another time.” He looked over Aunt Vada’s head, daring a glance at the room, checking for a familiar face that, in truth, he’d only seen by firelight. No one was there, save a woman over the age of fifty who wasn’t likely to accost him. It wouldn’t do to be seen half-dressed.

“Nephew,” Aunt Nora called, sweeping across the floor, her starched skirts working up a rustle the closer she got. It couldn’t be said that Nora was the complete opposite of Vada, but she was taller and thinner, and her coiled hair had a touch of pepper in it. He attributed it to her spicy, smartly daft observations. “Where were you last night during the unmasking? I missed you,” she said, sidling up to him and slipping her arm through his, extending her cheek for the usual kiss.

He complied. He even managed a smile despite the effort to keep his patience in check.

“Aunt Nora, Aunt Vada tells me you helped with the solicitor and the guest list.”

“No, dear. Just the solicitor. I’m sorry. Truly I am Phineas. It was such a task for us two old birds to take on, and we wanted it to be a grand success. Did you enjoy yourself? I don’t believe I saw you dance more than twice.”

“I had a wonderful time. Thank you. And you know dancing is not my specialty.”

“No, I believe it’s seduction.”

He had to chuckle at that, not because of last night but because his Aunt Nora was a

romantic at heart and a little too free with her words at times. Her whimsical opinions were entertaining more often than not, but just now, he needed some answers. Most importantly, where was Sunshine's room?

"Right now, I've misplaced something, and I need to find your solicitor or the guest list?"

"Was it your shoes?" Aunt Vada asked.

"What?" His head snapped around. He feared it would take all day to get the needle of an answer from the two haystacks crowding him. Both women were of the same age, a number he'd lost count of after they turned seventy. One a widow, the other never married and both very dear to him. They managed to be smart as a whip when needed and remarkably forgetful when it suited them. They'd lived under the same roof for so long they looked more like sisters rather than not-quite sisters-in-law.

Nora had been his grandmother's sister, and his grandfather had seen to Nora's care when her husband passed at a young age. As for Vada, she was his grandfather's unmarried sister, and he had always cared for her. The women weren't exactly related by blood, but they were passably related by marriage and certainly related by sheer determination, something that neither lacked. Phin was happy the two women had each other. Right now, however, he needed them to forget the weekend party and help him find Sunshine, without having to reveal her name for the sake of his sanity and Sunshine's privacy.

Without wishing to think on it too hard, he also wondered if her name was a farce. Finding her gone this morning made it all seem more plausible. He couldn't allow himself to wander down that path. Not yet.

Would Sunshine have left the property? It made more sense that she'd be in her room, didn't it? Standing barefoot at the threshold of the guest's breakfast parlor suddenly

seemed foolish and silly. His heart had muddled his mind.

An hour later, cleaned up, minus a shave, Phin cursed himself for ignoring his gut instinct. Getting through breakfast was like wading through sludge, going table to table, speaking with the guests, and hoping to see or hear of Sunshine. If she had been telling the truth, then none of the partygoers would have been familiar with her had they even seen her. But that red hair. The dress. These were things that could not be missed, and yet it was as if she had never been there. A figment of his libido's overeager imagination.

Perhaps he would believe it more if his bedsheets didn't still smell of lemon and Sunshine—literally, Sunshine.

In the privacy of the library, there was no longer any need to play doting bachelor. By the afternoon, the guests who had worn a look of morbid hostility had changed back into young women who wore the standard look of unveiled hunger. He hid behind the pocket doors of the library, in as much as Sunshine had hidden last night, behind the plant. He smiled at the furniture and wondered if anyone last night had, in fact, found a spot in the library to liberate a wall, or a chair, or the sofa.

But not her. She had followed him to a coach and then into bed. He couldn't shake her. Not the memory of her kisses or the bed sport. But most of all, he couldn't shake the feeling he had in her presence. More than lust. With his libido completely satisfied, he was still looking for her. He wanted to know where she grew up, who she was, and what she wanted to do with her life. And for the first time in his life, he wanted to tell someone else his wants and desires, even his fears.

He poured a brandy, pulled out a sheet of paper, and started strategizing how to find Miss Sunshine Price. He decided to start from the beginning.

His aunts. The solicitor. The guest list. His room.

* * *

“She was not a figment of my imagination, Aunt Vada,” Phin said three days later, standing in the family parlor.

“I’m not saying she was. Oh, I wish that dratted Mr. Finch would show. He has an office in London. If the weather holds up, perhaps you can find him there.”

He had kept his relationship with Sunshine a secret from his aunts and wondered if the day would come when he would have to reveal it in order to find the woman.

Aunt Nora sauntered into the room at the end of Vada’s suggestion. “Is it possible you hit your head, Phineas? I knew a woman once who hit her head and forgot her own name for two years.”

“She forgot it for two hours,” Aunt Vada corrected. “And there was a fainting couch not a foot away where she lay posed most provocatively feigning the headache. I doubt she hit her head at all.”

“I choose to believe she did since she married Phin’s father.”

Phin paused long enough to give Aunt Nora a stalling look.

“Don’t look at me that way. She was a crafty one, your mother.”

“But a kind soul,” Vada finished.

Everything he knew of his parents came from the stories his aunts told, but he’d never heard that one.

“Vada, she was a tart. The boy is old enough to know that much.” Aunt Nora turned

an innocent smile on Phin. “But she was a tart who loved your father most convincingly. No harm done.”

“None at all,” Phin said, his voice drifting into a haze of confusion. A part of him wanted to laugh and congratulate his father for finding the diamond among the coal. His aunts spoke as if the conversation were ongoing and not at all improper. At least their demeanor held no malice, which told him either the story was true in the most beguiling way, or it was a stretch of the imagination, which made perfect sense as to why Aunt Vada would assume he’d imagined Sunshine’s presence.

Phin reached into the inside breast pocket of his jacket. “This, my dears, is proof that she’s real and proof that she was here.” He laid down a short, red ostrich feather from Sunshine’s fan. He’d found it under his bed. She had warned him about pumpkins at midnight. Now, if he could just locate her fairy godmother. Or the damned solicitor. Hell, at this point, he’d settle for the cat, whom she touted as the fairy godmother.

“What was her name again?” Aunt Nora asked, opening a folded sheet of paper. “I found the guest list.”

“Lord, God Almighty, why didn’t you say so?”

Nora gave him a chastising look. “With your language, it’s no wonder God is teaching you patience.”

“It’s not working,” he said. “May I see it?” He impatiently put out his hand for the list.

“After you tell me her name.”

He had given his aunts only her first name since Sunshine could hardly belong to anyone else.

“Sunshine.”

“No Sunshine here.”

He sucked in a calming breath, holding out his hand. “If you don’t mind, Aunt Nora?”

Vada added, “What is her surname?” Vada sat primly on the sofa, hands patiently clasped in her lap.

“Price,” he said absently. “Sunshine Price.” He scanned the paper, his eyes following each name, registering the surname first.

Vada straightened. “You mean Mrs. Richard Price?”

“No. Not Mrs.” Then it dawned on him how much he didn’t know.

Mrs. Price. His finger found the name. Mrs. Richard Price. He swore under his breath. No wonder she skipped out. No wonder she showed up at a party where no one would know her. He never considered this angle. It was a liaison. An affair. One he’d now prefer to forget. He’d spent three days on a conniving seductress.

A silent storm brewed inside him. He tossed the paper on the tea table, watching it slide across the polished wood, off the edge, and float to the floor out of sight.

CHAPTER 5

Christmas morning, it had taken Sunshine ten minutes of hard convincing to persuade a footman from Willow Manor to drive her to the nearby township so she might purchase a ticket for home. In the end, Christmas cheer won over the footman as well as a good-natured hackney driver. A mere mile from the outskirts of London made the trip doable. It was the reason she had agreed to attend the holiday affair in the first place.

The drive wasn't a long one, and in retrospect, she should have requested the use of Mr. Arthur Wallace's town coach. It would have been more appropriate for a trip an hour from the city limits, and Mr. Wallace had been an attentive steward, for lack of a better word. Benefactor came to mind, but in this world, it meant something different than a kindly gentleman seeing to the affairs and livelihood of a poor widow.

After Joseph Wallace, Richard's best friend, engaged him in numerous capers, including the phaeton race that took her husband's life, Joseph Wallace's father took it upon himself as a matter of peace to provide for her future. It went without saying that the man was wealthy. Even five years after Richard's death, his friend, Joseph, could not look her in the eye. She knew he felt grief for the accident, but it was his father who felt the need to compensate her. As a poor painter's daughter who had married a good gentleman but not one of means, she had little hope of surviving the calamity without a handout. Of course, nothing could repair the loss, but knowing she would be fed and have a permanent roof over her head gave her the time she vitally needed to grieve wholeheartedly. Perhaps that's how she had fallen into a morbid five-year mourning period. It was times like these that she missed being married. Settled. Her future answered for.

The kind driver of the hack that brought her home refused to charge her for the trip and considered it his goodwill gift for the first day of Christmas. Admittedly, Sunshine was grateful since funds were not as lucrative as her special gown from the masquerade might have suggested. Her travel home was done in the spirit of her normal attire of brown bombazine.

She didn't look as if she needed a handout, but in truth, she did.

Mr. Oswald had been surprised to see her on Christmas day. She had a handful of servants, and when she noticed the dining table set for a dozen and several small tables set for more, she realized they had planned a nice dinner for their families. She didn't blame them and rather thought her presence would put a pall on the day.

"We'll set another chair," Mr. Oswald had told her.

Her servants were closer to her than anyone, proof that she no longer belonged at a masquerade where she was more of a commoner than a guest. To compound the situation, she'd left her little unplanned liaison on Christmas morning without a goodbye.

Shame settled into her bones when she realized that she and Richard had never woken together on a Christmas morning. She had disgraced his memory. Worse than that, the imprint of Phineas and sandalwood overrode her senses until she could not recall the scent of the man she'd married. Richard's memory would always be with her, but the little details were lost on the edge of survival. She'd courted the man for a year, been married six months, and after one night with a stranger, she'd all but forgotten her husband.

The ugly thought of what she'd done weighed on her conscience for three days.

Previously, she'd been trapped by the brown bombazine gowns and the grieving

period she had visibly extended. She'd been virtually invisible from a teeming public for five years, and now she felt vulnerable and blinding like a winking eclipse. Anyone who gave her a fleeting look would surely know she'd done a wicked thing. The only consolation was that Phineas Blackmore would be returning to his ship. He'd sail away without a backward glance, and she'd buy a shovel to bury her shame.

Today, she buried it in a tangled web of her own making. A needlepoint pattern of a girl examining herself in a looking glass. She couldn't bring herself to fill in the face.

"Madam, there has been a man standing across the street all morning, staring at the front of the house. I thought him waiting for someone at first, but now I'm concerned. Do you know him?" her butler announced.

Sunshine stopped jabbing the innocent piece of muslin with a saber the size of a needle and considered the curtained window that graced the front of her townhouse. Heart thumping and her mind flipping through the possibilities, she slowly put her sewing aside, visibly paused, and then, without a look at Mr. Oswald, walked to the window on shaking limbs.

A foreboding beat hammered in her chest like a warning. She took a bodice-tightening breath and pulled aside the sheer curtain just enough to see across the street from her second-story drawing room. She exhaled, frosting the cold glass. She rubbed a little circle with the side of her fist and peered through.

A man wearing a greatcoat and a beaver hat stood unwavering on the walkway beyond the street. The clouds cleared a path of sunshine directly in front of him, a small compensation for the icy weather. He turned his face up to the house, but she couldn't see much else of him. The first thing she noted, however, was his hair. Or the lack of it. He didn't appear to have a queue, and no wayward locks peeking from under his hat were picked up by the breeze.

Her heart settled. It could not be Mr. Blackmore.

Disappointment collided with her initial unease, causing riotous chaos in the far reaches of her well-being.

She'd done this to herself. She had no one else to blame.

She silently cursed the sage on her shoulder and returned to her needlework. It was silly to think Phineas Blackmore would seek her out. She knew so little of the man that she couldn't have pointed out his normal posture, having only seen him crouched behind a plant, or seated in a carriage, or lying in bed. Good Lord.

"I can't place him, Mr. Oswald. If he doesn't find a hack or his home by noon, perhaps we should send a note around."

"To the man?"

"No. To Bow Street. I don't wish to spend money on the post if it's nothing." But her heart said it was something, and she wondered if the stranger had seen her in the window returning his stare.

Less than five minutes later, Mr. Oswald returned. "There is a Lord Davies requesting a moment of your time."

"The viscount?" she mumbled. Why would the viscount call on her? Unless Phineas knew the man and had bragged of his exploits. Men did that, didn't they? She squeezed her eyes closed. "Tell him I am not at home to callers." She half rose. "Wait. Is he the man from across the street?"

"It would seem so. Would you have me put him in the downstairs parlor?"

“No. He should know better than to call upon a woman he’s never met. Especially in the middle of the day without notice. If it’s important, let him leave a message.”

She nearly left the room and walked to the top of the stairs, where she could see the foyer. Curiosity made a poor companion. She forced herself to pick up her embroidery, seating herself again in a highbacked chair covered in sandy chintz with a dark-violet floral design. The chairs had been a favorite of her mother’s.

“Excuse me. My apologies,” the butler interrupted her again. “But now he says his name is Mr. Blackmore. I told him you were not at home to callers.”

Sunshine almost dropped her embroidery basket on the floor. “The viscount says he’s Mr. Blackmore?”

“Yes, madam. The same man.”

“You’re sure?” Of course the butler was sure, but her heart, her rattling nerves, could no more wrap themselves around the idea than she could wrap her thread around the spool. “Tell him I’m not home, and you’re not certain when I’ll return.” She tried to sound even and cool, but her voice quaked. Mr. Oswald threw her a baffled look but went to do her bidding without another word.

How could Phineas Blackmore be the viscount? If that were so, then he left his own party to spend the night with her. And he lied. That little vexing detail was not lost on her while she tried to make sense of it but could find no excuse for what he’d done.

For what she’d done.

How did he find her? True, her name was an anomaly, but that didn’t mean she could be readily found. She was a virtual unknown, and he was supposed to be a blasted sea captain.

What on God's green earth gave him the notion to find her after he'd lied himself into a liaison? She started to fold the embroidered muslin, fought against the tangles for less than a second, and threw the lot on the chair. She tiptoed to the gallery and saw the living proof below.

"Tell your mistress that I am not leaving a message, nor am I leaving the house until she grants me an audience." As he said it, his gaze rode up the staircase and clashed with hers. The urge to pull back into the shadows overwhelmed her, but tenacity kept her feet planted. She wouldn't hide behind another potted fern.

"Mrs . Price," he called to her in a loud voice that brooked no argument. "How lovely of you to welcome me."

Her fingers curled over the railing, gripping as much to steady her as to keep her from responding in kind.

Mr. Oswald had the good grace not to follow Mr. Blackmore's—or Lord Davies's look. He stood at rigid attention with the same reply, "Let me show you out, Lord Davies."

The viscount gave her a challenging cock of one eyebrow, his beaver hat in hand. She noticed then that his hair had been trimmed to a handsome length that left a nice wave with a hint of curl at the ends. A detail she should not be noticing.

She heaved out a sigh, took the stairs, and requested Mr. Oswald bring refreshments as she, without another word, continued into the little parlor on the first floor. Lord Davies followed.

"You have no more reason to be angry with me than I with you," he said after crossing the threshold behind her.

She swung around. “Shut the door, Lord Davies . Or is that too far below your station?”

“Not fair.” He reached for the doorknob and shut the jib door. It disappeared into the buttercream wall with a mahogany chair rail. The visual effect, usually pleasant, now made her feel a bit closed in without an escape route.

“What is not fair, is you tracking me to my home when it was apparent that being followed was not my wish.”

“I guessed as much when I woke up to an empty bed,” he retaliated in kind. He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling before closing them. “I didn’t come here angry, but I cannot express my displeasure enough that you left me without a word.”

“Oh? Did that bruise your sensible ego?” She was overreacting to a situation that already had enough jarring chaos without being derailed by wasted words. But she couldn’t seem to help them from falling out of her mouth.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, it did. What kind of woman runs out?”

“A trollop?”

“Don’t say that. Don’t ever say that.”

She crossed her arms, forcing him to stand because she refused to sit. Without the fire lit, she felt as if she were standing in an icehouse. But she didn’t want to be cozy. Not with him. Not after he lied. She needed descension. “I’m too old to be chastised, thank you very much.”

“No one is too old for correction.”

“Oh, lovely, then let’s have it, Lord Davies.”

“You wish to know why I didn’t tell you. This I understand.”

“You don’t.”

“I do.” He lifted his hat with a tiny jiggle, raising his eyebrows in a question. She motioned to a side table by the door. He set the hat down and proceeded to talk with his hands, first pressing them both to his chest. “In my defense, I had a difficult time believing that your name was Sunshine, so I didn’t see the need to give you mine. Not completely. In fact, I was happy that you didn’t recognize me. You can’t know what a drain it’s been.”

“The poor viscount has too many women to play with?”

“With such clipped responses, I’m beginning to see how much I do not know you.”

She gripped her arms more snugly in place, slanting her mouth.

“I came here to rectify that. Honestly, the fact that I’m not running out the door now should be proof enough of my sincerity.”

“Perfect. You’re a diplomat.”

“Sunshine.”

“Mrs. Price.”

“And that is another thing.” His temper was barely hidden, and she dared to find out just how deep it went. For that, she stood still without a word and coaxed him with a lift of her eyebrow. “Why didn’t you tell me you were married?”

“Because I am not. Not anymore.” Her heart tricked her voice into a mumble. She took a breath. “Besides, it wasn’t any of your business or concern.”

“You speak so well for me. All these years, I didn’t know I needed an interpreter.”

“Then we’ve all learned something new today.”

“You are something, aren’t you?” His gaze skated over her with a pattern of confusion lining his brow.

She felt her nostrils flare as she clenched her teeth. A barely audible tap caused them both to look in the direction of the jib door. Before she could propel herself forward—and in truth, she didn’t wish to cross his path—Lord Davies pulled open the door. Poor Mr. Oswald was on the other side, barely balancing a too-large silver tray with rattling china and a hot tea urn.

“Allow me,” Davies said.

Her butler gave him a haughty look that said everything about his loyalty to Sunshine. The viscount took a step back with a conceding bow. Mr. Oswald arranged the spread, poured her a cup, and ignored Lord Davies.

“It’s just as well,” the viscount said. “I prefer clotted cream.” He directed it toward the butler, but his glare was for her.

“Generally, speaking,” the butler intoned, “we are better prepared.” He flipped a cloth over his forearm. “That is, when guests are invited, sir.” The sixty-year-old butler produced a retort that a younger man would not have tried. Her servants were clearly a part of her life.

Sunshine thought she saw the wisp of a smile in the viscount’s eyes. “My apologies. I

stand corrected.”

“Which I am told is appropriate at any age,” she said. That was the moment that broke the proverbial ice.

* * *

Phineas thought her a rare jewel, even with his temper peaked, or perhaps because of it. The women his aunts had invited to the masquerade had been colorless, fragile, and at the same time, overeager.

They were girls. Sunshine was a woman who knew her mind. She was also a woman still grieving if her clothes were any indication. He pointed to the open door. “Do you mind?”

She shook her head, dropping her arms to her sides. The room at large opened a fraction, and Phineas took the lead in conversation.

“Your butler is devoted to you.”

“My relationship with my servants is a little unconventional.”

“I like it.”

She opened her mouth and closed it. Her brow bent into a charming vee between her eyes.

“Would you mind if we sit?”

“You may sit if you like.” Her demeanor was abrupt, withdrawn, on the edge of dismissive.

He couldn't sit, of course. Not without her, so he walked to the window and absently pulled the sheer curtain aside with a pinky. "I saw you upstairs. I assume you were checking on me?"

"I didn't know it was you. I suppose that is the theme of the day." She rounded the settee, set her cup down, and took a seat in one of the wingback chairs. It was a pretty room, pleasantly decorated in muted tones of sky and sand and with a clever jib door to disappear behind. Sunshine looked out of place, somber in a room that should have been lit up with her smile.

He refused to be bated again. "Christmas morning, how did you manage the trip? I found a servant who said you asked for transportation to Town where you could purchase a ticket home. I would have gladly given you a carriage if you'd asked."

"I didn't want to wake you."

"You didn't want to see me, is more like it."

She licked her lips, rubbing a thumb over her cuticles. "I didn't know what you'd think of me in the morning when I wasn't certain what I thought of myself."

"Understandable, but not a good reason to leave. I can't imagine it was easy to find a fare on Christmas day. It must have cost a fortune."

"It cost me nothing. A cab was returning and offered me free fare as a first day of Christmas gift. I was surprised." She looked away, almost embarrassed or ashamed.

"Do you see how people respond to such a kind face? Because that's who you are, Sunshine. A kind person." He thought she needed to hear it.

"Is that what you thought? A kind face?" She went from shy to vexed in a heartbeat,

and he didn't understand. He didn't understand her, but he wanted to.

"That and a few other things crossed my mind."

"And your view?"

He scratched the side of his nose and took a seat on the settee opposite her. He still wore his greatcoat, but he managed to get semi-comfortable despite it. "I am guilty of noticing an attractive woman who happened to be made for me. So, yes. I enjoyed the view because even then, subconsciously, I knew you were something special—more than a remarkable specimen of a woman."

"A kind-faced woman."

He tilted his head and sat back. "I will concede that our meeting was unconventional."

"And based purely on attraction." The statement sounded like a question disguised as contempt.

"Decidedly."

"Your answers do not make your case any better. And I am not just a kind face. I am a foolish woman. A foolish, lonely woman." Her underlying emotions trickled out, one sentence at a time.

"If you suggest that I took advantage of a widow, our first argument will not end well." He kept his voice level, curious where she might take the conversation next.

"Such a threat for someone who came to apologize." And there went her arms again, folded across her chest. A view he had enjoyed in the coach that night. Currently, it

did her no favors in the high-collared dress she wore. It didn't do him any favors, either.

"I..." He scratched his cheek, closing his eyes against the words he wanted to say. Words such as: He wasn't sorry for their night together. He wasn't sorry for anything.

He sat forward, slicing the air between them with the side of his hand. "Sunshine, what I need from you is more than a sentence or two. I need to talk with you. To know you, for lack of a more florid explanation. Is it possible we can speak honestly?"

"It is safe to say that most things are possible when the question is put to."

"You are exhausting me."

She blinked with nonchalance. "It's but a small townhome. I'm sure the door is in the same place as when you arrived."

He held silent. Like a vigil, he crossed his arms, tilting his head to the side. The level, patient tone evaporated from his lungs.

She sucked in a steady breath, held it, and extended the exhale with a long sigh. She absently massaged her kerchief-draped collarbone while she deliberated. "Clearly, it was a mistake." She blurted the words as if they were forced out.

And there it was. Her truth. He nodded in a way that was not agreeable while grinding his teeth in a sawing motion.

"Oh, you want more."

"It would be nice."

She might appear brave, angry, confident, but she was on the verge of tears. He could see that much. “That woman was not me. I don’t know what else to say, except I do not behave that way. Normally.” She spit out the last bit like an afterthought. “Can you not understand I was not thinking clearly? I lost my husband.”

“How long ago?” he asked carefully.

“What does it matter?”

“Because I don’t wish to be crass, or unkind, or unsympathetic with your situation if, in fact, it happened recently. But I have the feeling it was a measure more than a year.”

“And I shouldn’t be grieving anymore? Is that it?”

“You are skirting the subject. The questions. The everything about that night, and we both know it. So, my ill-timed and rude question is apparently necessary for a real answer. What say you?”

“Five years ago. And I am still sad.”

“Of course you are.” He blew out a relieved sigh. “Your grief is not in question. It’s your desire to live that took you to the rout. At least admit that much.”

“I wanted to make a memory.” She couldn’t look at him when she said it.

“And so you did.” He took an emotional step forward. “A good one, I hope.” The conversation turned softer. He tilted his head to see her better while she bowed hers, studying the fine red carpet fibers of a Persian rug that drew out the warmth of the room.

She fumbled with her hands, pulling at her fingers. “You must understand I am not proud of my behavior. If I were a man, I would be accused of seduction, held on trial in the ethical court of gender.”

“And? What does that mean?”

She looked up at him. “Surely, you realize what I’m saying. It was a mistake, Lord Davies.”

“And I prefer Phineas, which is why I didn’t tell you.”

“Lord Davies,” she continued as if she didn’t hear, “the woman you met Christmas Eve was not me.”

“Strange, but she looked very much like you. You have a twin, then?”

“Masks are easy to hide behind, and I’m afraid I hid behind mine. For an evening, I put away the woman I am, along with propriety and every hair of wisdom atop my head. I made a memory, yes. One I shall live with every day forward as a reminder of the inconsiderate way I treated my husband’s memory.”

“The husband that is not here anymore?”

“You aren’t very nice, Phineas Blackmore.”

He smiled at that. And by the coarse glare in her beautiful hazel eyes, he knew it was a smile too large, too radiating, for the situation. But damn, if she didn’t make him want to laugh. “You are a contradiction. You cannot fault me for clawing for a lifeline. I do, however, appreciate the use of my name. You can’t know how many times I missed a question or didn’t answer a call because someone addressed me as Lord Davies.”

She dealt him a well-deserved glacial condescending glare.

“And you have faced even worse. I see that. So, what is your preferred address?”

“From my friends? Sunshine. Everyone else? Mrs. Richard Price.”

It was a dig that hit home. Even her saying her late husband’s name made Phineas somewhat jealous. Taken down by a ghost. He couldn’t see any good in continuing. She needed time to process what he’d already known. He rose and bowed his head. “Mrs. Richard Price, I would be honored if someday we might be friends again.”

He moved to leave, and she quickly stood. “I thought you were returning to your ship.”

“I had planned on it, but if you hadn’t noticed, it’s a bit frostier than normal. My crew moved the Gallant back to a safe coastal distance from the frozen Thames. I’m as stuck here as if I’d already married.” The last part, although true, was something he should not have said. “Oh, one more thing,” he said, reaching into his inner-coat pocket. “I believe this is yours.”

Her eyes fixed on the red ostrich feather. Its plume wilted slightly from being pocketed for days. He carried the damn thing everywhere, hoping to find her.

She took two steps toward him, her hand outstretched.

He held it back, making a warning sound. “I find I’m not quite ready to give it back.” He decided this on a moment’s whim. If he kept it a while longer, it would give him an excuse to see her again. Even the feeble arguing was better than not hearing her voice, or... For the love of God, he caught a scent of her cologne, lemon-based citrus, and Sunshine. He took in a fortifying breath. Making a memory, she had called it. Well, she certainly had made one for him.

“It’s my feather.”

“I can’t be certain, now, how I came upon it. It looks like the fan you carried.” He raised his eyes toward the ceiling, brushing the soft feather end of the quill against his bottom lip. “But it was dark. Oh, there was candlelight.” He pointed with the feather as if it were an extension of his hand; animated in speech, he waved it in front of himself, between them. “But even the color of your hair looks different in the day. It’s a little more moody red than I remember.”

“Moody red? What color is that exactly?”

“It’s yours, my darling.” He cleared his throat. “I apologize. Mrs. Richard Price.” He left the parlor, leaving the jib door open because he couldn’t resist baiting her to follow, which, of course, she did.

“I do not understand you, Lord Davies, and I am finished with this conversation and your visit.”

He pivoted, banking a smile.

She came to a rearing halt two steps before she collided with him, quickly recovering. With one arm crossed, she held out her other hand palm up and smirked. “I want my feather back.”

“I found it. I keep it.”

She bit her lip. He blinked and sighed. Without notice, she picked up her skirt, spinning about into a brisk, purposeful walk to the open parlor. She emerged with his forgotten hat.

“Put it in your cap, good sir.” She rushed at him, flinging the beaver hat at his chest,

forcing him to catch it while she swept from the room without a backward glance.

From the time he stepped foot on land, his sole purpose had been to make his aunts happy. He had been engineered to find the fastest, safest route from point A to point B. But he hadn't counted on Sunshine Price.

CHAPTER 6

Was that the same man Sunshine met on Christmas Eve? The light had been dim. The candles had made a soft, romantic glow. But now, in the plain light of day, she could hardly look at him without staring. He was beautiful. And she was an idiot.

After Sunshine threw him his hat and flung her last insult, she returned to the parlor, the place where she could still feel him and smell him. She wondered what possessed her to behave poorly. Anger was never the answer. She couldn't remember a time when she'd ever been angry enough for irrational behavior.

Phineas Blackmore. Lord Davies. Why did men carry such a variety of pseudonyms? Was it because they could plead anonymity, or did it make it easier to imbibe in lecherous activities?

But the thing was, even after finding out he was the viscount, she didn't feel as if he'd been purposely misleading. She hadn't given her full married name—not to him, at least. Perhaps her soul was as debauched as a scandalous rake's. She couldn't help the smile that crept up at the wild thought of it.

No. It wasn't her. She was not that woman. And after what she'd done, he had every right to be angry with her. Little of the storm she'd created today made sense, not even to her. How was she to explain her feelings to a virtual stranger?

She expelled a defeated sigh. The bigger question was, how could she have been so promiscuous? So impulsive? Never did she consider he would seek her out. And then to bring the feather. Why? Why had he saved that feather? If he were any other man,

he would have stuck it in his hat, as she suggested, and gone on his way proud as a peacock for seducing the widow.

Except he hadn't seduced her. She had only herself to blame for that bit of genius.

She fell upon the perfect distraction, the unappreciated tea. She owed Mr. Oswald a hefty thank you. She bent and emptied the tea from one delicate cup into the other. The cups, a gift from her father on her parents' fifth wedding anniversary, were a reminder that they had been in love. She allowed her heart a moment and traced the royal blue flowers with swirling turquoise leaves before stacking the plates carefully.

"Let me do that, my lady," Mr. Oswald said, no doubt checking on her after the passionate blast of temper in the foyer.

"There is no need."

"The platter is too heavy. I refuse to watch you struggle."

She supposed the butler had something to prove after Lord Davies pricked the man's pride. Mr. Oswald slipped her an extended glance over the top of his spectacles as he bent to his task.

She dropped onto the settee. "How much did you hear?"

"It's not my place to listen at doors." Which, of course, was exactly what her faithful butler had done. "But I did see a glimpse of the red feather. The scoundrel," he muttered the last part under his breath as if she couldn't hear it.

"So, you weren't listening. I see."

He stopped and straightened, turning toward her at full attention. "It isn't my place."

“Then whose is it, Mr. Oswald?” She took in a breath, preparing to let out a big sigh until she caught the scent of the man who’d just left. She held it in for a second, feeling a visceral connection to Phineas as she sat on the same cushion he’d recently vacated.

“I think he’s a blackguard,” Oswald enunciated with unveiled disdain, a redeeming quality for a loyal butler and one Sunshine rather appreciated. His white-gloved fists shook at his sides. “I think he’s the worst kind of rogue for not telling you who he was and acting a cad, seducing a widow. It’s shameful.” Mr. Oswald managed the tirade while standing at bridled attention.

Sunshine focused on her fidgeting hands, wishing she had that feather. “Don’t you think it would have been easier to seduce a woman by announcing his title?” She looked up at Oswald. “The ballroom was full of beautiful young women waiting for a chance to be his viscountess and ready to swoon on command over his magnetic gaze. What Christmas gift that would have been.”

Oswald had been her champion since Richard died, and she appreciated his misplaced disgust. Oddly, Sunshine felt the need to defend the blackguard against her unfailing butler. Her feelings were like wading through molasses in the dead of winter. Cold, thick, and yet sweet. A turmoil of confusion confounded by the lust she felt for Phineas Blackmore, Viscount Davies, the blackguard of London. She smiled to herself.

Mr. Oswald left with the tray of rattling china, leaving Sunshine without a distraction unless she considered returning to the needlework, which was as knotted as her life.

* * *

In the morning, she paid another visit to the Widows’ League. She could not fathom why they had encouraged her to go to that party. They had always looked out for the

welfare of their clients, and all they asked in return was that she give her time in rotation with the other widows.

Today, she hoped sharing her thoughts with Lady Emily Fairchild, another like-minded widow, would serve her purpose. Except that nothing could be settled or solved when one party was looking for a devotedly dishonest agreement. She realized all this about herself, and it reminded her of Phineas's remark that no one is too old to be corrected.

Expecting moral support for an anger that was disqualified by ignorance and stupidity was the model for poor advice. And so, she understandably left there with none. As always, moral support was a given with the widows, but there could be no greater advice than her own realization that she'd done wrong. Lady Fairchild's patient guidance was all she required.

The winning gold ring was the fifth day after Christmas when she called upon her staunch supporter, Mr. Arthur Wallace, the father of Richard's dear friend Joseph, who'd been with him the day he died.

Mr. Wallace was owed a visit after she'd turned down his invitation to Christmas dinner. She suspected he stayed in the city during the holidays specifically for her because she had no family left.

"Oh, you make an aged man feel spry," Mr. Wallace said when she greeted him in the family drawing room of his London address.

She kissed the older man's cheek, who was no older than her father would have been if he were alive today. A young fifty-two with light brown hair and nary a gray one on his handsome head.

"Spry as a man who enjoys the challenge of a good fox hunt."

“And a pretty lady.” He led her to a seat by the fire, kissing her hand before settling her into a cozy, red velvet-lined chair. She gazed at the painting over the hearth of an English sunrise with a pretty manor house and a tree swing in the background.

Mr. Wallace smiled as he took the chair that flanked the fireplace. “A bit of your father here too, hm?”

“Yes. It was kind of you to purchase it. It brings such fond memories for me.” She held on to her composure because seeing the works of her father made her want to weep. The monies earned from the painting had helped her make rent for the modest home over the artist shop where her father had worked her entire life. He did commission work as well as taking pride in selling the creative works by local artists. He liked to think he kept food on the table for many a family. And so did buyers like Mr. Wallace, who paid more for the painting than she had asked for after her father died. The matching painting of a sunset hung in Mr. Wallace’s personal study at his country seat. In many ways, Mr. Wallace had seen to her care even before she married Richard.

“He was like family,” Mr. Wallace said. “And so are you.”

She knew he meant Richard because she had not met the Wallace family until after she met her husband, the same year she lost her father. Her father was the kindest soul and the most talented artist she’d ever known.

“I am always delighted for your visits, but I can see something is troubling you. Could it be funds? You barely take enough allowance to live on, and you know you are like a daughter to me.”

The painful truth was that Mr. Wallace had felt a measure of guilt for Richard’s death. Joseph and Richard had been very close since university despite their difference in societal positions. Joseph was the son of a wealthy landowner, and

Richard was the son of parents who had scraped to save enough for their son to attend a proper school. They had wanted to give him the best start in life. His friendship with Joseph gave him that and more. When he met Joseph, the world opened up for him. He was invited to important parties and included in private functions where mingling can make the difference between a good name or, worse, an unknown.

Clout was weighed by those you knew. Richard had been on his way to purchasing a plot of land. Sunshine always thought he should have married someone with an ample dowry or substantial family connections. She had neither. But he loved her, and she loved him.

“I wish you wouldn’t worry so much about me, Mr. Wallace. You have been more than kind, much more than I deserve.”

He watched her with something akin to pity, but she knew it was an internal punishment he bestowed upon himself, not on her. If they had been sitting closer, she might have taken his hand.

“It was not your fault. It wasn’t even Joseph’s fault,” she said.

“If I hadn’t offered him the trip, then it would have never happened.”

“Oh, yes, it would.” She gave a small chuckle despite the somber subject. “Those two young men were as brothers, and shenanigans were the glue that held them upright. I don’t blame you, and I don’t blame Joseph either. Richard chose to race that phaeton.”

“But I owned it.”

“And should you be responsible for the behavior of a full-grown man?”

“You settled him. If he had not attended my son on that tour, if he had stayed home with his new wife of six months...” He let the sentence trail. Words were not needed between them. They both had regrets on that account, for if she had denied Richard the holiday—and she knew in her heart he would have stayed home with her—he would be here today. They would have shared Christmas with the Wallace family, and she would not be here now asking for a favor that would put her in front of another man.

“Mr. Wallace, I insisted that he go. We hadn’t been married long, but the opportunity was one of a lifetime. It was your generosity and desire to see him flourish. It was not your fault. It was not my fault. Accident is the very definition of its own word. It cannot be explained. If you knew when you walked out the door, you would fall down the stairs, then you would not walk out the door. And so, we don’t know. He didn’t know. We didn’t know.”

He forced a smile that did not meet his weary, blue eyes. Sunshine took some blame for that since she’d been wearing mourning clothes for five years. It was time to let go.

“Joseph should have married you afterwards. It was his place to do so. Then you would have been my daughter-in-law, and no one could make up ghastly stories about my helping you.”

Joseph could barely look at her after the accident, much less marry her. Not to mention she would have never agreed. The guilt Richard’s good friend carried was greater than any, and she was a constant reminder of his folly. Mr. Wallace had considered it his lifelong responsibility to see her taken care of, which also left her as fodder for some of the nastier gossips. But she could not afford to care.

“We are both too hard on ourselves, I suppose,” Mr. Wallace conceded. “But look at you,” he continued with a genuine smile replacing the pall that had fallen over the

visit. “Your dress is mint green. A fine refreshing change and the epitome of your name. It is good to see you in bright colors again.”

She looked down at her day dress, spreading her hands over the silk-woven linen, a smile tugging the corners of her mouth. “It’s time, isn’t it?” She looked up shyly, a skip of her heart, feeling unsure of her next move. She needed reassurance—the permission from someone more like a father to her than anything.

“Do you think Richard would care?” She knew the answer, but again, she needed to hear it physically vibrate through her soul where wings expand. She needed to grow again as a human being. As a woman.

He steepled his fingers. “If I didn’t know better, I would wonder if you had a beau.”

She felt the all-telling blush heat her cheeks, proof that her heart was still beating, that lightning had not struck her down. Not yet.

“Oh, my dear. You do.” Mr. Wallace’s reaction was filtered through awe. He looked happier than she’d seen in a while.

She gave him a nervous glance.

“If you are looking for my blessing, you have it, my dear. And Richard’s too. I’m certain of it.”

Tears burned her eyes, leaving a sharp knot in her throat. The emotions were either for Mr. Wallace’s kindness or because she had grown serious feelings for the blackguard—as her butler so aptly called him. Phineas Blackmore as she knew him. Lord Davies to the real world.

“That’s why I’m here.” She respected Mr. Wallace enough that she thought he

deserved the truth.

CHAPTER 7

As Sunshine traveled to Willow Manor in the coach Mr. Wallace so generously provided, she realized it was more than transportation she had sought yesterday. It was permission, a blessing, a validation that to live was not the same as forgetting. The two were unrelated.

Oh, she had made a memory, all right. One she couldn't shake. Mr. Wallace, along with the Wicked Widows' League, successfully convinced her that she owed it to herself to find out if there was more. And since the blackguard, Lord Davies, had not given her notice of his impromptu visit, she decided it was apropos for her to repay him in kind.

She found little relief when she discovered he was not at home. But his aunts were well in attendance, and there were never two more welcoming souls that she could ever remember.

"Thank you," Sunshine said again as the aunt named Nora gave her a cup of brimming hot tea, and the one called Vada laid a napkin in her lap with two biscuits. The tea was a difficult matter alone until she took a scalding sip so she could more easily place it without spilling it on the sofa table in front of her. When she did, the biscuits shifted on her lap, and she had to raise her knees to keep them from rolling to the floor. The smile she gave the two older women was as unbalanced as the tea and biscuits had been in her company.

They both sat opposite the table in matching, pink-striped chintz chairs. Pink seemed to be a theme throughout the house, and she remembered that her guest room had also

been pink. It was highly apparent that the women ran the household.

“Lord Davies isn’t quite here.”

“And neither is Phineas,” the one called Nora announced. The relationship between the ladies was as if they were, each one, half of a complete set.

“Which brings us to a question,” Vada said. “What name did our nephew give you?”

“It might be better if you asked him that, I’m afraid.”

“But we can’t,” Nora said. “He isn’t here. I believe he went to check on his ship.”

Vada shook her head with a sigh. “His shipping, Nora. Not his ship. His ship is planted somewhere beyond the ice storm.”

Nora nodded her agreement as if Vada’s comment was a repeat of what she’d just said. “Exactly.”

Sunshine wanted to laugh. She could have listened to these two all day for the entertainment alone, but if the viscount was not in attendance, then she would need to turn back before the sun went down. “As I told you, I came to retrieve something from your nephew, but if he is not here, I should be on my way.”

“What did you have in mind?” The question was almost curt, and it came from the open doorway from the man of the hour.

Sunshine turned in her seat to see Phineas standing with his arms crossed. He wore brown breeches with cuffed boots and a white linen shirt held in by a gold embroidered turquoise waistcoat, along with a pirate’s smile that neither conveyed joy nor surrender. He was dashinglly veiled by attitude alone, and she supposed that

was fair under the circumstances.

Vada walked forward and took Phineas's arm, guiding him into the room, patting his hand, as if he needed help. "We thought you would be away longer checking on your business prospects."

"Among other things," he said, directing the full extent of his gaze at Sunshine.

Her heart did a little flip, but except for the day he came to see her, she had not seen a shadow of him anywhere.

"If you'd excuse me, Aunt Vada and Aunt Nora, I need a word with your houseguest."

"I'm not a houseguest."

"You are now. There's a bluster of a storm coming in."

"We can't leave you with an unchaperoned young woman," Aunt Vada said.

"Yes, you can," he said, his gaze still locked with Sunshine's.

The woman looked to Sunshine, but she wasn't sure what to do. If she agreed with Phineas, she might be deemed fast and look a harlot. Nora saved her from it all.

"She's as lovely as your mother, Phineas. Our input is not needed here, Vada. Let's leave the children alone." She whispered the last part like a matchmaking conspiracy, as if they had planned his arrival.

"I guess I look as innocent as your mother and not likely to fall victim to a handsome pirate rogue."

He threw out a hard chuckle. “One could only imagine. I don’t remember her, but my aunts like to regale me with stories.”

* * *

Phineas didn’t know whether he should be pleasantly surprised by Sunshine’s unexpected visit or if he should be on guard. She looked beautifully innocent and refreshingly dressed in a copper-colored traveling suit. If it were possible, he was more confused now than he’d been on Christmas morning, waking to an empty bed.

He regarded her with a gaze that swept her face and stopped at her shoulders. “Should I assume to know what you came for?” If the woman believed him to be less surly than the last time they were together—in her foyer—she was sorely mistaken. Not that he wasn’t glad to see her despite his current mood. Mostly, he was surprised.

“I believe assumptions are generally unreliable.”

“And dangerous,” he said under his breath. “Do you mind?” He gestured toward one of the chairs his aunts had vacated.

She shook her head. “Why do you always ask for common permission?”

“Are you serious? Or daft?”

“It just seems odd. I’m sitting. It’s not as if we don’t know each other. So why always the formality?”

He glanced her way, considering himself respectably civil. “What’s odd is that I pursued to know you better. And you pursued the accusation that I shouldn’t know you at all. So, I’m to shed what little gentlemanly traits I’ve hung on to because it’s now convenient for you to suggest we know each other well enough to ignore good

manners?” And there went the civil part.

Her eyebrows shot up as she shifted in her seat until her body was at an angle to him. She clutched her skirt with one hand, so he at least knew he had hit some mark. “Good manners?” She frosted him with a disdainful look.

His answer was abrupt. “Are you suggesting I have no manners? Really?” He paused, nostrils flaring. “I did not coerce you to show up at my coach. I did not coerce you to follow me to my room.”

That remark pained her. He could see it in her eyes, the way she lowered them as if she were ashamed. He regretted the words immediately. Civil, indeed. He was acting like a child but couldn’t seem to stop the unbridled idiocy.

“You’re right, Lord Davies. I don’t know you, and I’m not sure I’d like to.”

“Good Lord. Can we at least agree on Phineas and Sunshine? Otherwise, this argument will be wasted on extra words that may take all night.” He was as inconsistent as the storms this winter.

“I apparently have the time. Do you?” She was in high cheek today.

He bit the inside curve of his mouth and simply stared at her.

She took a fortifying breath. “On one condition. I want my feather back. That’s what I came for.”

He propped an elbow on the arm of the chair and rubbed his eyebrow. As angry and hurt as he was after the information he’d procured in the last two days, he could not give up the damn feather. At least not until he heard the truth from her own mouth.

A mouth he had kissed and enjoyed thoroughly.

A mouth her husband had kissed, which was difficult enough for him to think about. Even under understandable circumstances, it was clear his heart was jealous of a ghost.

But worst of all, it was a mouth that had been kissed by at least one other man. He couldn't be sure how many there had been, and he couldn't shake the nauseous anger he had now for a benefactor twice her age. Why should it surprise him when he'd wondered that night whether his aunts had invited a courtesan? Except in his heart, he couldn't imagine the woman seated across from him engaging in such a scheme.

His need to know intensified, clashing with the internal inability to remain civil. He'd hit the boiling point of a stormy sea. "So, is it that you're used to ill-mannered treatment? Is this... is it," he practically stuttered. "Is it normal for you to expect less from a man?"

To her credit, she looked more confused than appalled at his outburst, which even to his own ears was uncalled for.

"Did you study buffoonery as a trade, or is it something inherent in the title? How could I have missed that during our one night together? You act as if I owe you something. For what I cannot imagine. But I will have that feather now, if you don't mind, because I do plan on leaving, rain or shine."

"You won't."

"Do you know what the best part of being me is?"

Oh, she was good at this game. He wanted to answer with something crass but couldn't bring himself to do it. He gave a lazy blink.

“I get to make the choices. I get to be whomever I wish, whenever I wish. And right now, I wish to be a person taking my leave. But—and I would listen clearly were I you—I will not be leaving without the damn feather.” She folded her arms, giving her shoulders a little shake, straightening her spine, and setting the world right by making a point to use language only men used in public.

“Lovely. Let’s play this game, shall we? You want the feather, and I want an answer.”

Her arms fell. “To what? Am I supposed to guess why you walked in here with an attitude? I am not one of your crew if, in fact, you truly are a ship’s captain. I’m not certain what to believe anymore. My instincts have been buried by five years of grief.”

That was a dig. He couldn’t win against grief or the way she wielded the edge of guilt like a dueling swordsman. But he couldn’t go on without answers either because, despite the truth, he still wanted to know her. He still liked her. He gave a relenting sigh. “You’re good at this. When was the last time you had an argument this heated?”

“Never,” she said far too quickly for it not to be true.

The inward eye roll was for himself because, again, here he was comparing himself to a ghost of a perfect man. “Never?”

“You think me a shrew? Perhaps you’re the only one who could bring that out in me. That sounds more like a flaw in your façade than mine.”

“Indeed.” She was right, of course. He bit the pad of his thumb, arguing with himself and barely able to maintain his seat.

“Well? Are you going to tell me what I’m answering for? And if you say it was

because I didn't tell you about Richard?—”

“No,” he shouted, sitting forward, interrupting her probably for the last time. “I’m not concerned with your husband. I want to know who Arthur Wallace is to you. That man is still alive. He was your benefactor long before I met you.”

She looked truly affronted. Indignantly furious and also near to tears. Were they angry tears or tears of pain? She rubbed her lips together, her nostrils flaring with an angry sigh. “Are you offering to pay more? I’d be careful with your answer. Arthur’s a wealthy man and pays me far more than I ever ask.”

“So, he is your benefactor?”

“Is this your affair or mine, Lord Davies?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I thought it was mine.” Before he could say something equally awful, she interrupted him.

“You don’t deserve an answer for that remark.” Her voice thickened, and she swallowed more than anger. He had hurt her. “But I’ll answer you anyway, not for myself but for him .”

His body relaxed. He was already sorry. So very sorry.

“I don’t care what people say about me, but he does, so let me be the first to share the truth with you.”

“That’s all I ever wanted.” His calm response was too late.

“No, it isn’t. You wanted one night with no ties. And the truth is, so did I. So, I’ll answer your question, but then you’ll tell me why on earth you came to find me.”

He could only nod.

Her chest shuddered with a calming breath. Her shoulders fell with her final answer. “He is not my benefactor. At least not in the way you’re thinking. I am not a courtesan, or mistress, or paramour. I am the widow of his son’s best friend.”

His gaze skated over her with care. “Richard’s friend.”

“Yes.”

He could see there was more, and she was ready to give it; of that much, he was sure.

“Phineas?” Vada barged in without a knock or a warning. The two lovely birds were not unknown for their eavesdropping shenanigans. “There’s a dog.”

He stood out of courtesy but had no intention of following their trail of obviously deceitful breadcrumbs.

“And it’s rabid,” came Aunt Nora’s high-pitched response, her head peeking from around Vada.

“Call the steward.”

“He’s detained,” Vada said.

“By the cook,” Nora put in.

Phineas shook his head. He’d laugh if he weren’t in the middle of the most important conversation of his life. The conversation that choked his heart, causing a pain of his own making.

“He is growling.” Vada obviously thought he needed more pressing.

He couldn’t resist answering, “Who? The steward or the cook?”

He turned to excuse himself and was arrested by the sly smile Sunshine quickly buried behind a pulled brow. It gave him hope, and he realized his aunts had done him a kindness. “If you’ll excuse me, Mrs. Price.”

She nodded, a solemn gleam in her eye.

“Don’t leave.”

“Not without the feather.” Her mouth twitched in a half smile. It was the best thing he’d seen all day.

CHAPTER 8

Phineas couldn't come to grips with his own behavior, but he was thankful for the timely interruption by his wily aunts. After the wild chase concerning one non-existent, rabid dog, he did what he should have done. He took a break. He sat down and gave his brain something else to focus on because he had clearly lost all focus the minute he woke to an empty bed Christmas morning.

He never dreamed it was his behavior that needed checking. Had it not been for the solicitor who made the guest list in the first place, Phineas would have never discovered the Widows' League, never had a conversation with Lady Fairchild, a kindly young widow, and perhaps, never located Sunshine's residence.

The house itself was not registered under her name, which should have come as no surprise, except the name on the deed was not Richard Price, her husband. It was the name of a wealthy landowner, a Mr. Arthur Wallace. As a result, the information led to his not-so-brilliant detective work that turned up Mr. Wallace as Mrs. Richard Price's benefactor for five years.

For a brief moment, he couldn't blame her for taking such an offer, not if she had been left with nothing, if she had had no means. But then, after realizing the man was old enough to be her father, Phineas could no longer hold back his jealousy.

Jealousy?

He shook his head, having thrown himself into a chair after brandishing a glass of hard spirits from a decanter in his grandfather's study. He was driven by the irrational

inability to accept that she might have preferred Mr. Wallace over him.

In light of a much-needed sanity reclaiming hour, he could see how ridiculous he had become. He held no position of authority over Sunshine. In fact, he would guess that no man had ever held that.

They needed to talk. From her delightful mouth, he needed to hear how she felt. He wasn't surprised to find that she'd retired, but she wasn't in the guestroom where she had stayed during the party.

Outside the room they had shared, he leaned against the frame with his palms on either side of the door, his forehead pressed to the cold paneled oak. No one need tell him she was in there. He at least knew her that well. Did she think it was his room? Or did she come back to feel something visceral that would prove their night had been something more than either of them expected?

Pausing his knuckles an inch from the door, ready for a quick staccato, he took a steadying breath and slowly turned the doorknob, happy that it wasn't locked. He closed his eyes against the scene of her lying in a coiled position on the bedspread, her back to the door, her luscious red hair fanned out on the pillow she'd vacated Christmas morning. She'd left her traveling jacket over the back of a chair.

She didn't say anything. She didn't move, and he found himself just as frozen.

After shutting the door with a soft click, he bit his lip and wondered if he should go.

But the bed was too close, and he was too overwhelmed to abandon her. He placed a knee on the counterpane, sinking into his inability to stand by and do nothing, then quietly rolled up beside her. Guarding her body with his, he chanced an arm around her. He didn't pull her in close, he didn't do anything but rub a hand down her white muslin-covered arm and felt the first pang of hope in his throat when her hand

covered his. The scent of her was so familiar. The lemon, mingled with the smell of the coming storm, intoxicated him as he nuzzled her hair.

He wanted to ask if she had been looking for him, but the question was a selfish one.

“I am so sorry, Sunshine,” he said simply, his head bowed against the back of hers.

“Your aunts have a knack for disarming a loaded situation just at the right moment.”

“My aunts listen at doors.”

She half turned, her gaze stretching over her shoulder in disbelief. “They do not.”

He tried to smile. “I promise that they do.”

She turned her face away and snuggled back against him, coaxing a low wistful sigh from him. Did she forgive him? He certainly hoped so, but he wasn’t about to tempt fate. Not yet.

“Do you think it was for your benefit or mine?” she asked.

“A week ago, I would have said it was for mine. Today, however, I think they recognized the words of an idiot sooner than I did.”

“You should have asked me.”

He gave her a squeeze. “I should have never believed the lies in the first place.”

Now, she turned in his arms, lying on her back, holding his arm over her stomach. “Not that. You should have asked me if you were being an idiot. I would have been happy to tell you the truth.”

“I don’t deserve your kindness, but I’ll take it.” He kissed her nose, then leaned on his propped elbow with his head against his fist.

“If you must know, I’m a little flattered, though I think it’s sad of me to be flattered by the jealousy of my lover for my benefactor, who happens to be my father’s age.”

“Am I your lover?” He smiled softly. “Not your former lover?”

“Depends.”

“What are the grounds? Besides silence, of course.” He chanced a little banter, hoping her cheeky responses would continue—a sure sign that everything would be all right.

“I’m all about the money.” She shifted her head on the pillow, her hair a seductive glow surrounding her.

“Do I at least get a hint of his offer so I can properly counter?”

She shook her head. “I’ll never tell except to say he did provide the house. That gift he gave to me even if the bank does not recognize it outright.”

He watched her, his gaze falling to her mouth. He’d give her anything, but he didn’t want to scare her with his ardent plea that she never leave him. Tracing the back of her hand and wishing to touch her, he said, “I am a man of honor, and I do not step on another man’s property.” He meant that more for the memory of her husband than the jest she made about Mr. Wallace and his offer.

“Well, have no fear there. I’ve never been another man’s property.” Her eyes shined like her name, and her smile was forgiveness itself.

“Can we be candid?” The question was serious, but his reasoning was not as it had been before, and he hoped she saw that.

She swallowed and gave a little nod.

“If you didn’t want me to find you, then why did you give me your name? The party registrar was under Mrs. Richard Price.”

She looked away, unwittingly exposing the most delicious part of her neck. “I gave my name because your proximity made all wisdom flee, and I couldn’t think fast enough.” She turned her gaze back to him. “You must understand I had not been to a party in years. And I promise you that when I did attend parties, I never dressed as I did that night. The mask made it work. It wasn’t me. You went in search of someone who does not exist.”

He grazed a finger across her brow, over a loose strand of hair, sliding it over her ear, then traced her jawline until his hand lay on her chest. He gently rubbed a finger along her breastbone. “You’re in there, Sunshine Price. Don’t lose a wonderful memory over should have. Besides, you came back here. Why do you think that is?”

“I came to retrieve my feather,” she said with such conviction, but her eyes were the tell. They were round, big enough for the truth, but she couldn’t look him in the eye when she said it.

“You came for the feather, or you came for me?”

“For the feather,” she said with mocking defiance, her eyes wandering to his mouth. “And maybe for a kiss.”

He almost smiled but decided to steal the moment before he broke it again. He curled his fingers around her nape, holding her head while he bent and kissed her. It was a

tentative kiss, a question, but she tasted like freedom and redemption. He was as drawn to her mouth as he had been to the sea. If he had to fight for one or the other, he would pick her, and he knew in that moment that he would never see his ship again. Not as its captain, anyhow, because he'd never let her go. Bully to her benefactor. He'd pay for her with his life.

She kissed him back but soon pressed her hands to his chest. "Tell me something."

"Anything."

"You thought I was a courtesan when you met me, didn't you?"

He rubbed his eyes shut, falling back on his pillow. He felt a feminine half-hearted thump of a fist on his chest. He lifted his head enough to see her leaning over him.

"For the love of God, Sunshine, can you blame me?"

She flared her laughing green eyes at him.

"No, no, no. That's not what I mean. Not because of the way you were dressed or your actions."

"Then I'm not as good as a courtesan?" She shot back that question with the training of every female who ever purposed to snare a man.

"Am I digging a hole?"

"I'm helping you. But yes, you're digging a hole."

"You're enjoying this," he accused playfully. "Can you lend me a rope, at least?"

"Not yet." Her smile was the only lifeline he needed.

“What I meant was how could you blame me when all I wanted to do was skip the niceties and tumble you right there? A courtesan might have expected that.”

“So, you fancied all this.” She looked down, rolling her wrist to emphasize her body.

“And this.” He swiped up a rebellious spiral of red hair, giving the silk strand a little tug.

“Hm.” She shrugged her eyebrows and fell back on her pillow beside him. “I should be insulted, but I believe I am more flattered than I’d care to admit.”

He leaned on his elbow again, staring down at her. “And this.” He pointed to her lips.

“I get the idea.”

“Ah, but I don’t think you do. Not completely.” He closed the gap, his mouth an inch from hers, and he got the reaction he wanted. Her pupils spread out like passion warms the body. “You came for a kiss.”

She nodded, then swallowed hard. “And to find out if there was something between us.”

“Other than our clothes?”

She sighed, and the luster in her eyes sparked. “And the feather,” she dared to comment.

He started to laugh. “I may have wanted to kiss you that night, but it was you and our conversation, the ease of being in your presence that drew me to stand behind a plant at my own party, ignoring all the boring butterflies. It was not your mask that ignited the banter between us. It was you. I wanted to talk to you. And that, my love, is what

I meant when I pointed to your mouth.”

“But you also wanted a courtesan.”

“I wanted to make love to you, and gentlemen do not seduce young ladies. Not even widows.”

She pulled her mouth to the side, shifting closer to him. “I wanted for once in my life to be free. I imagined I was your mistress.”

“I imagined you were my wife.”

A quick knock interrupted his confession. His Aunt Vada barged through the door, taking one step into the room before she halted. “I thought we lost you both.”

“One could only hope,” he said, pulling himself into a sitting position. Sunshine did the same, curling her legs underneath her dress, but neither one of them left the bed.

“I’ve little doubt I could ever shock you, Phineas. But your lovely lady has a fine blush about her.”

He didn’t bother looking at Sunshine, just ignored his aunt's comment. Vada was generally the more proper one of the two, so he could only imagine what his aunts had been up to. He didn’t have long to wait.

Nora stuck her head out from behind Vada. “Does she need a fainting couch? Women of leisure get the vapors often in this house.”

“She doesn’t have the vapors.” He stole a glance over his shoulder. “Do you?” To his amazement Sunshine was biting back a chuckle.

“No.” She shook her head. “I do not get the vapors.”

Nora sighed, almost sounding disappointed. “Well, if you do, I suppose the bed is as good a place as any.”

Vada chimed in unnecessarily, “His mother got the vapors often.”

“She passed out for two days once,” Nora said.

Phineas turned to Sunshine again. “Two hours, not two days.”

“Yes,” Vada said. “Until Phin’s father rescued her as if she were Sleeping Beauty.”

“She was so beautiful, the dear.” Nora moved to stand beside Vada, clucking her tongue and shaking her head soulfully.

Sunshine made to move. “I should find my room.”

“Isn’t this the one you stayed in during the party?” Vada was astute.

Sunshine stuttered, unsure what to do. “No. Not exactly.”

“You see, Vada, she did have the vapors. I knew it.” Nora turned her innocent eyes on Phineas. “Sweet as your mother. Take care of that one. If she needs the physician, let us know.”

Phineas was speechless as the older ladies left the room. Vada stopped to poke her head in again. “Should I lock it for you this time?”

“Yes,” Sunshine quickly replied, and Phineas knew then that he had fallen into the greatest luck and perhaps the greatest love he’d ever share. The door clicked into its

frame, then opened again. A thin hand appeared with a key on a string, looped it around the inside doorknob, and this time left them alone for good.

CHAPTER 9

Sunshine burst into laughter the minute Phineas's aunts left the room, only to be stifled two more times by the door opening and closing for one last suggestion to lock the door, and then when his Aunt Vada snuck a hand around the opening with a key on a string, well, Sunshine could no longer contain herself.

"They are gems, Phineas. Truly, gems."

He rolled his eyes at her, but his laughing smile told her everything. He loved them. And perhaps he loved her too. It was too soon to tell.

"If you knew what they referenced, I'm afraid you might change your mind."

"What?" The question chuckled out of her. "I cannot believe they left us here when just downstairs they insisted on a chaperone."

"They were testing you. Or me." He raised a brow, then stretched his legs out on the bed, and leaned against the pillows."

Sunshine drew closer, fighting her skirts under her knees from trapping her. "They obviously loved your mother and comparing me to her has to be a good sign."

"It is, I'm afraid."

She scrunched her brow. Phineas slipped his hands behind his head, a man of leisure and contentment.

“My mother was found on a fainting couch.”

“The poor dear.” Sunshine sat straight, ready with a heartfelt reply.

“My mother,” he enunciated, “feigned the vapors, pretended to pass out on a fainting couch, where she laid in a most provocative position for two hours until my father arrived to kiss her into a lifelong commitment.”

“You’re lying.” She started to chuckle again.

“Aunt Nora calls her a tart, but only in the best way. If that makes any sense.”

Sunshine looked at the door, replaying all they had said. “A tart? They think I’m a tart?”

“But only in the best way, as I said.” His inflection was unconcerned and matter-of-fact.”

“Do you think I’m a tart?”

He nodded his head once with finality. “In the best way,” he repeated.

She fell on him, causing a grunt when her head bucked his stomach, and she laughed herself right into living again. “I adore them.”

“So do I.” He stroked her hair. “They don’t always mean well. They are loyal to a fault, but I can tell they like you.”

“And will I win you over as easily?”

“You already have.” He pulled her up for a kiss, her arms on either side of him.

With a surrendering groan from her lover, Sunshine began to untie his cravat, loosen his collar, and then proceeded to undo the buttons of his waistcoat.

“Are you trying to seduce me, you little tart?”

“Uh, huh,” she said as she shifted her hand lower, her tapered finger running over a fully capable cock. She heard him sigh as she undid the buttons of his trousers. “I’m working for that feather. It’s worth the ransom of my virtue.”

“Please, continue then.”

She stole a glance. With his hands behind his head, a smile on his face, and his eyes closed, she couldn’t resist. She pulled his shirt free, kissing his hip, his stomach. She moved to his feet and removed his shoes, then tugged hard on his trousers from the legs up.

“Do you want some help? Because I’m not sure how long I can wait if the end result is you on top of me.”

She sat back on her haunches. “Please”—she waved toward his long legs and his groin—“continue then.”

He bit his lip, sitting up. He pulled the waist of his trousers down under his bum and chuckled when she fixated on his overeager manly parts, saluting the afternoon in the manner of a sundial. She could have told time by the shadow alone. When his feet were free, she brushed his trousers aside until they fell onto the floor.

“The last time I saw you it was dark.”

“I believe I like you looking at me.”

“Do you?” she asked slyly, moving her hand up his leg, over his knee, and along his inner thigh. His breath caught when she wrapped her palm around him.

“You’re killing me. But I like it.” He lay back with a groan.

Sunshine took her time getting to know him, a touch here and there, memorizing when he groaned and tucking away the information for later. Her need for him was as great as his for her, though, and it couldn’t be said that she wasn’t a tart. Not that afternoon. She ran her palm over his hard shaft in a rhythm that pleased him and made her pantingly ready. Before she could pull off her own skirts, his hand gripped hers, and he growled with pleasure as he helped her understand that this game was for them both.

He felt hard and full, and Sunshine knew instinctively that he wouldn’t last much longer. But it didn’t matter. If he finished in her hands, she would have been just as fulfilled knowing she could do that to him. Not the act, but the part of him that was too out of control to worry about anything else.

He pulled her hand down over him and held it there while the warmth of his pleasure surrounded them, and he lay back breathing hard. She watched him in wonder. She’d never done that before, not with her husband, not with him. In the light of day, she saw her future. Mistress, courtesan, wife, mother. She saw all of that with him.

His hand slipped away. Before she could do anything else, he sat up, removing his shirt with ease. He wrapped it around her hand, looked into her eyes. For a moment, she thought he might apologize, but it wasn’t regret she saw. He was grinning, stalking her with that smile. He pulled her onto her back and teased her until she was writhing. Until she did what he’d done to her, holding his hand, his fingers inside her, until she found her own pleasure, something that had been forbidden by proper ladies.

As she relaxed, he kissed her hip.

“Phineas,” she barely breathed.

“Hm.”

“We forgot to lock the door.” She had to laugh when he bolted up as if he might see his aunts standing there. “I suppose it’s pointless now. Do you think they’re listening?”

“I should hope not. You’re not going to ask me to look, are you?”

“No.” She couldn’t help the bubble of happiness that crept out of her. “I’d rather not know.”

“Agreed.” He crawled up over her and kissed her before falling in beside her, both of them completely naked, completely sated, and thoroughly exhausted.

“Did I tell you I was sorry for the way I treated you when you came to see me?”

“Darling, if that was your apology, then I would be happy to vex you at any time of the day or night for the rest of my life.”

She slid her hand down his arm, lacing her fingers with his while they both looked at the rich blue canopy overhead. There was more to say between them, but it could wait. In that moment she was making a memory to last forever.

* * *

Sunshine woke to darkness. She could not decipher the time. Someone had placed a sheet over her and pillow under her head while she slept, but she still lay in the same position, sideways across the bed. Phineas was not there. Her heart sank for a moment to think how he must have felt when he woke to find her gone. She knew he

was in the house. For one thing, outside she could hear the wind howl while sleet pounded the glass, sounding like sharp tacks tossed against the windowpane. The fire Phineas had built glowed.

She pulled the sheet around her and found that a pitcher of water had been left for her. All she had was her traveling suit, so she donned the skirt and the white muslin blouse but left the jacket over the chair.

“Let’s refrain from the word tart, shall we?” She heard Phineas’s voice when she came within earshot of the family drawing room.

“Have we misbehaved?” Nora’s voice was a whimper of regret.

Sunshine wasn’t the kind to listen at doors. “You have not,” Sunshine said, announcing herself effectively into the conversation.

“Oh, my dear.” Vada stood. “Phineas said we should apologize. We never meant to embarrass you. Your blush was so candidly refreshing, we couldn’t help but say something.”

Both of his aunts looked distraught, wringing their hands, Vada standing, and Nora sitting. Phineas shrugged his mouth, shaking his head almost imperceptibly. Confused was the word to describe it.

“You owe me no such thing. I came here. I... stayed in that room. Those were my decisions.”

“And good ones,” Nora chirped quickly, “I hope.”

“They were very good ones.” She looked at Phineas, beaming a smile at him.

Vada sighed, relief sending her back to her seat. “I hope you’ll stay longer than the storms.”

She wasn’t sure what to say to that. “Lord Davies and I have some things to work out first.”

Oddly throwing a pillow over something beside him on the settee, Phineas stood. “Please come sit with us.” He followed that request by escorting her to the opposite end of the sofa. He helped her take a seat, but she couldn’t read him.

She couldn’t read the room.

Self-consciously, she patted her hair in place, checking the pins and wondering if she should have added another.

“Phineas tells us that you wore the loveliest red gown for the Christmas affair.”

Nora stretched a hand across the little table and patted Vada’s arm. She whispered, “You shouldn’t say affair.” Then she turned back to the room at large, a glowing smile on her face as if no one but Vada had heard her.

Sunshine looked to Phineas to steady her rocking boat of feelings. She did enjoy these ladies, but she didn’t know them as Phineas did, and she wasn’t always certain whether she should comment or pretend she hadn’t heard.

“They’re trying to apologize,” he explained.

She nodded. “I gathered as much. I think.” She turned a wobbly smile on the older ladies, who returned it with a collective nod as if they worked in tandem.

Phineas cleared his throat. “In as much as you’re stuck here, for a few days at least, I

thought I'd clear some things up with my aunts. I hope you don't mind." He spared a look to his aunts, nodding at them both. "They're not in the habit of gossiping. They simply elect to speak their minds with me."

"Oh, yes," Vada said. "It's easier that way. He's not home enough to waste time on frivolously empty conversations."

"Which brings me to my point." Phineas took her hand. "I'm not going back to the Gallant . I'll appoint another captain and consider selling the ship. It's only one. It's not as if I own a fleet."

"You don't have to do that."

"There are good reasons why I stayed working with my crew after the wars with Napoleon were over. I felt responsible for those who suffered the tariffs and low wages. People are hungry, and I wanted to feed them the best way I knew how. We were but one ship, but we sold merchandise, including food at cost."

"How did you pay the salaries?"

"This estate did. My grandfather was never one to flout wealth. He'd rather use it to help than hinder."

"That's noble and very progressive."

"It's human kindness and shouldn't be so surprising. But I realize that in order to do good, I need to make sure this estate stands. My aunts need a home, and my children deserve one too. It's time to take care of my family. And I want to stay."

Sunshine would be lying if she wasn't relieved to hear that, but she also wouldn't wish him to change what he loved for her. "I didn't know mistresses had such a pull

on their benefactors.” At this point, nothing she could say would be more scandalous than what his aunts had already observed.

Nora, of all people, gasped, and Vada threw a hand to her chest.

“It was a jest,” she quickly amended.

“That was for me,” Phineas said. “They’re not used to me falling in love.” His eyes were warm, and she hardly noticed what he said. “Did you hear me?”

“I... Phineas, you don’t have to say that.”

“I do have to say that when I’m trying very hard with such an audience to declare myself.”

She put a hand to her mouth, unable to stop a hiccup of laughter. His aunts looked solemnly concerned. “I don’t know what to say.”

He reached behind him. “I have what you came for.”

“Are you sure?” It was the feather. It couldn’t be anything else. “Because what I really wanted to know was if the memory we made was enough. That’s the real reason I came.”

“It will never be enough, love.”

“I agree.”

With the ease of a magician, he revealed the red ostrich feather, offering it to her on his forearm in the grand style of a waiter. “Sunshine Price, would you accept this feather as a very odd proposal of marriage because I don’t want to wait for the perfect

moment? I believe we have many more memories to make.”

Vada cleared her voice, and Phineas held up a hand to keep her from speaking.

“And heirs,” Nora was not so put off.

He never took his gaze from Sunshine. His smile bloomed into a chuckle, a welcome affectation and the hazard of this place. A wonderful hazard. Even with a subject so serious as to be lifelong, the atmosphere was simple, direct, and charming.

“Even if I haven’t yet said I love you?” she asked.

“You have.”

She licked her lips. For the first time in two days, she thought about Richard. She thought about the conversation with Mr. Wallace. She thought she knew the answer but was still afraid.

Vada levered herself from her chair. Both Sunshine and Phineas, confused, watched her round the tea table. His aunt snatched the feather from his arm. “There, I told you to sweeten the deal. She’s a lady, Phineas. For heaven’s sake.”

The feather was handed back to Phineas with a gold band and a winking ruby that could not be missed.

“Well, then. Let me take another look at that feather.” She gave a conspiratorial smile at Phineas and returned one of apology and a raised brow. “This is considerable. My current benefactor, I’m afraid, has never offered me anything so lovely and very expensive,” she said the last part, dipping her head toward his aunts. “I must consider it.”

Both women nodded again in perfect unison.

“Phineas,” she said seriously. “I must love you if I can sit in a room with all my secrets laid bare and not be ashamed.”

He scooted close to her, and taking her hand, he placed the ring on her finger. “If you love me any more than you do today, I should not be able to contain it. I see you Sunshine, so clearly.”

“It was but a month ago when I felt as if no one ever saw me and had wondered if anyone would ever see me again. I was the widow, too young, too sad, too much sorrow that I became the burden. And perhaps I didn’t give others the chance to expect anything else from me. But I never felt like a burden to you. I felt light. I didn’t want to be at that party. I was scared, and you made me forget who I thought I was, except it was just the fa?ade of who I’d become.” She turned to his aunts. “Did you know that my father was a painter? He named me Sunshine because he loved the sunrise.”

“Isn’t that lovely,” Nora said. “You could name your son Moonbeam in honor of your father.”

“That sounds perfect,” Phineas said, an outrageous smile on his face.

“Or Sunset,” Vada chimed in.

She gazed into Phineas’s laughing eyes, his remarkable good nature, and nodded. “How can I not marry you now? How can I not love you?” She stopped smiling. The emotion finally hit her that she’d never said those words to another man. It had taken her months to say them to Richard. It had taken her one day to know they were real for Phineas. “It scares me.”

“I know, love.”

At that, his aunts silently left the room. Phineas was right. It would seem they were more astute than they appeared. As soon as the door to the drawing room slid into place, Sunshine fell into his arms.

“The ring was their idea. It was my mother’s. I want you to choose what you wish.”

“A ring from a tart, for a tart.” She turned the band over so the ruby sat balanced. It was too big for her finger. “It’s beautiful.”

“But?”

“But I want something new. I need new in my life.”

“And that’s why I gave you the feather.”

“The feather is mine.”

“The feather belongs to me, and you may borrow it if you promise to wear that mask again and let me make love to the courtesan who showed up unexpectedly at my party.”

“It will cost you,” she warned with a coy smile and gleam.

“You have bankrupted me for life, my precious Sunshine.”

“I only need you to be the keeper of my memories.”

“I have two very good ones. If we invest well, we’ll make a lifetime of them.”

“Do you think this storm might last until our wedding day? Because I don’t intend to leave you, Phineas Blackmore.”

“You’ll be a viscountess to the world, but you’ll always be my Sunshine. The woman in red that I fell in love with behind a potted plant.”

“Do you know what day it is?”

“The day you said I love you?”

“Indeed.” Her heart was full of joy that had little to do with Christmas. “But it’s also the twelfth day of Christmas.”

“On the first day of Christmas, you gave me a feather. How, I wonder, will you top that?” Phineas caressed her cheek.

“On the twelfth day of Christmas, I give you my heart.”

“And to think it took only twelve days.”

“Not really. There’s every chance I lost it to you behind that potted plant.”

“You little tart.” He cradled her face and kissed her.

Sunshine never felt her name more than at that moment. “Moonbeam?” she asked, laughing between kisses.

“I cannot wait to make that memory.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:18 am

Their wedding had been a small affair, unlike the very real affair they'd had for a month prior to the blessing of a minister. Phineas had insisted that Sunshine return to her townhouse, not only for the sake of scandal, but also because she'd told him how much she cared for her servants. He arranged for them to move to Willow Manor after the wedding. While Sunshine was busy making plans, he was busy closing a deal on the Gallant .

He helped Sunshine into the closed carriage, a cozy seat for two.

"I don't want to hurt Mr. Wallace's feelings, but I can't keep the townhouse. Not now. He'll have to see reason."

"He sounds very reasonable to me. When I asked for his blessing, he almost cried."

"Did he?"

"Actually, yes. I believe he did. But he wants you to keep the house. And I agree."

"How can you say that? We don't need it, Phineas. I can't believe you of all people would stoop to gain a dime from sorrow."

He chuckled because he knew things that she did not, and he took no offense. "What a strange thing to say to the man who stole the widow and made her his mistress."

"For a little while." She looked at him from under her lashes, giving his arm a little squeeze. "I cannot get used to the title of Lady Davies. I'd rather be simple Mrs. Phineas Blackmore."

“Well, I’m sorry I cannot change those rules for you. I can, however, help you keep stock of your assets.”

“We’re talking about the townhouse again.”

“In a way.” He gave her his smiling profile.

“You’re very short on words today.”

“Only the naughty ones are available, but only for you.”

“If you’re going to be so tight-lipped, at least tell me where we’re going?”

By the time he ran out of one-word answers, they had arrived at Corkspur Street. Their destination.

“Why have we stopped here?”

“I thought we’d do a little shopping.”

She watched him suspiciously. “I don’t imagine there is anything here I need.”

“Well, my dear, there is an art institute around the corner, and I thought it would be a nice place to visit.”

She looked out the window. “There’s nothing here but shops.” And then her mouth fell open. “An art studio.” She opened the door, and he allowed her the first view before helping her step into her new world. “Sunrise Art Museum.” She turned to him. “For me?”

He nodded. “Mr. Wallace and I came to an agreement. I hope you’ll forgive me for leaving you out, but I wanted to surprise you.”

“Help me,” she said, fluttering her hands toward the open carriage door.

He was only a little nervous that she might be angry because the men had left her out of the decision. They made the few steps in a silent thunder of awe. The door opened with the rattle of a little bell, and inside were all the people who loved them.

“Mr. Wallace,” she said with tears. She hugged him, and Phineas took a step back, allowing her all the feelings. She gasped. “Joseph. It’s so very good to see you.”

“And you look so happy and radiant,” Joseph replied, looking very much like a younger version of his father. According to Sunshine, this was the man who could not look her in the eye. He had not come to the small wedding affair, and Phineas could see this was a door that needed closing. For her and for Joseph Wallace.

Sunshine hugged her late husband’s friend for a long moment. Putting away all jealousy the moment she said I do , Phineas stood back while Joseph took care of her tears by handing her a handkerchief.

The museum was more than that. It was a shop, a studio, and a place for local artists. His aunts were there along with the Duchess of Justamere who, according to Sunshine, was another supporter from the Widows’ League. Of course, the Duke of Justamere stood beside his wife, and Phineas felt a camaraderie with the man. There were students who came from the institute, and some of the local owners welcomed their newest business owner.

Sunshine turned her gaze on Phineas. “You did this?”

“With the help of Mr. Wallace. He agreed to take the town house back on one condition.”

She looked to Mr. Wallace.

“Yes,” Mr. Wallace said. “The funds from the sale will pay for this place.”

“Phineas, is that true?”

“I hope it meets with your approval. I didn’t want to do something without your permission, but I thought you’d more than approve of this.”

“It’s everything. I used to help run my father’s store.”

“It’s more than that.” He took her hand and led her to the display in the front window.

“It’s my father’s sunset. Mr. Wallace, you want this here?”

“I thought others should see it, and your new husband, here, had a wonderful idea that I think your father would have liked.”

She pulled off her gloves and ran a loving hand down the side of the picture frame, careful not to touch the painting itself.

Aunt Vada and Aunt Nora sidled up beside him, their arms entwined. “Do you think she likes it?”

Sunshine turned. “It’s wonderful.”

Nora spoke. “It’s a place for thieves.”

“It’s a place for borrowing, not taking, Nora.”

“Thieves take things,” Nora said without a hitch. “What should make them return them?”

“I don’t understand,” Sunshine said. She looked from Phineas’s aunts, then to him.

“Along with the shop and the studio, it’s a lending museum. Local artists can lend out their art for special occasions or parties. The art will be seen and appreciated by those who cannot afford it. It will also bring in clients for the artists by providing added visibility.”

“That’s genius. It’s a library for art. Oh, Phineas, you could not have done a better thing.”

Champagne was served to celebrate. Local artists showed up thirty minutes after they arrived because Phineas had wished for her to have a more private, personal experience when he revealed the surprise. He couldn’t be sure how she would feel. Now his heart was full for her. His life had more meaning than he thought to ever have.

She pulled him up the stairs that led to the private studio over the storefront. “We lived in a place much the same as this. The memories are warm and familiar.”

“I hope so. I was worried I might have made a mistake.”

“No, not a mistake.” With her back to him, she pulled his arms around her waist, looking out over the bustling corner that teemed with London’s most sought-after socialites during the Season.

“I wanted you to feel alive again.”

“You saved me with a feather, Phineas. You helped me make a memory.”

“A good one, I hope.”

“The best, wicked kind.”

He nuzzled her neck. “My little tart.”

“My number one benefactor.” She turned in his arms. “I believe your offer has exceeded my expectations. Do you think we’d be missed if we disappeared for an hour?” She brandished the red feather which he had come to recognize as a request for a rendezvous.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a key. “This time, we’ll lock the door.”

The studio was scarce for furniture, but it did sport one leather chair which they thoroughly liberated. Shades of a pink and orange sunset was the last thing he saw before his beautiful tart of a wife made him forget everything but her and that damn red feather.

THE END