



It's Raining Rogues

Author: *Aubrey Wynne, Dawn Brower, Jane Charles, Christina Diane, et al*

Category: Historical

Description: Prepare to be swept away by a collection of Regency tales where love ignites amidst tempestuous storms, roaring thunder, and the seclusion of cozy hideaways. Eight captivating romances unfold as circumstances drive these gentlemen and ladies into the arms of unexpected passion.

In this enchanting anthology, storms rage, rain pours, and thunder rolls—bringing together souls destined to find one another and prove that while storms may force us into seclusion, they also bring hearts together when least expected.

Perfect for readers that love cozy firesides, whispered confessions, and love that blossoms in the shadows of a storm. Let the storms rage on—for within them lies the promise of unforgettable romance.

Total Pages (Source): 17

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:26 am

One

A ROMANTIC

A romantic, according to the Oxford English Dictionary:

A romantic, sentimental, or idealistic person.

December 1820

Kent, England

Weston Estates

“O h, Papa, he’s the most wonderful man in the world.” Miss Phoebe Weston knew she was gushing as she did a little pirouette.

Lord Weston clasped his hand to heart. “You wound me, Daughter.”

She threw her arms around him, happiness almost exploding in her chest. “Next to you, Papa, of course.”

“Of course.” Her father stepped back and cupped her cheeks in his hands as he kissed her forehead. “I’m happy for you. I hope Lord Kendall will make a fine husband.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind my going to London for Christmastide? I do want to get to know his mother better before we are wed.” Phoebe worried about him being

alone while she was in Town enjoying new people every night. “It will be our last holiday together.”

Papa shook his head. “Nonsense, I look forward to many holidays with my grandchildren about me.” He smiled at the blush now heating her face. “No, dear. Your aunt will be chaperone enough. I have plenty to occupy my time and...”

“And?” She gave him a sly grin, reaching up to tug on his cravat. “A lady friend, perhaps?”

He snorted. “No, but I did receive an invitation from an old friend in Suffolk. I might visit with him for a few days and catch up. He hasn’t taken his seat in the Lords for several years, and I’m not much for correspondence, as you know. So, we’ll have much to talk about.” He wagged his brows. “Lord Beecham met my brother at Oxford. Used to come home with Phillip since we lived in town. They both took care of me when I started university during their last year. Oh, the antics we’ll relive over some good brandy.”

Laughter threatened to bubble up her throat at the thought of her father acting silly. “Papa, I couldn’t imagine you being devilish. But I hope you change your mind, for I will miss you dreadfully.”

“You are a beautiful young woman about to start a new life with a family of your own. There won’t be time for thoughts of me.” When he hugged her, she saw him blinking rapidly and her heart swelled. “You know I will always be here whenever you need me.”

Phoebe almost skipped from the room, so excited at the thought of beginning her new life—her adult life. How would Papa get along without her? She halted mid step and bit her lip. Guilt twisted her belly, and she turned around. She had forgotten to kiss his cheek. Knowing that their future time together was precious, Phoebe would not

miss one peck. But as she neared the open door of the library, his voice broke the silence.

“I believe she’s made a good match, Aggie.”

Who was he talking to? She peeked into the room to see her father looking at the portrait of the late Lady Weston, before pouring himself a brandy from the side table. He stood tall and familiar against the dark paneling, surrounded by shelves of books and floor-to-ceiling windows flanked by blue damask drapes. It was his favorite room, decorated in masculine colors. A man’s space with a thick, patterned Turkish rug, large carved oak desk, and great wingback chairs. This is where her father relaxed and, it seemed, talked to her dead mother.

Her hand went to her chest as Papa spoke again.

“With our Phoebe leaving, I’ve been thinking about being alone.” A young Agnes smiled down at him from above the hearth. Phoebe had always envied her mother’s pale hair and golden eyes. She had inherited her father’s auburn hair and plain brown eyes.

With a sigh, he settled in one of the fine leather chairs, and propped his gleaming boots before the fire, swirling the amber liquid in the cut crystal glass. “I’m lonely, Aggie. What we had was... irreplaceable, but I’m no good on my own.”

Her father peered up at his wife, as if waiting for an answer. “I’m not looking for another love. Companionship, though, would be nice in my doddering years.” He chuckled. “Not that I’m old yet, but I need to look to the future. How will I deal with grandchildren without a woman by my side? You know how awkward I can be with youngsters.”

He puts on such a brave face. She wanted to cry out, “You were never awkward with

me. You made me feel loved and beautiful and clever.” She blinked back the hot tears burning her eyes.

He took another sip of the liquor and leaned his head back. Was he crying? Should she go to him? Then he spoke again, and his tone sounded of frustration rather than sadness.

“Funny thing, I don’t feel old. When the deuce did I make forty years? With a daughter grown? And how did I manage it without you?” He ran a hand through his still thick hair and blew out a breath. “But where does a man of my age find a wife who isn’t ancient or still half-child?”

A wife? He wants a wife? Phoebe stepped away from the doorway and leaned against the wall. Why hadn’t he told her? She should have known. They were as close as a parent and child could possibly be. But she had been so involved with her own life, she had paid no attention to her father’s needs. Perhaps he was just realizing he was lonely because she would be leaving him. That made sense.

When she returned from London, Phoebe would put together a plan to find the perfect woman for her father. Someone maternal, who would keep a tottering old Lord Weston company as they entered their dotage together. An older woman who could help Phoebe as she entered this new phase of wife and motherhood. Yes, she would speak to Aunt Lucinda about it.

December 19

London

The driver yelled an obscenity and shook his fist as their carriage cut him off. “Oh my, such language,” said Miss Lucinda. “Your father would give him a stern reprimand for using words like that in front of his daughter.”

Phoebe gave her aunt a side-glance and saw the smirk. “As if you’ve never heard any cursing.”

Aunt Lucy grinned, the feather on her traveling hat bouncing. “I love London. The raucous streets, the incessant fog that can hide a lover as well as a villain, the fine-looking gentlemen, the beautiful gowns.” She drew in a breath.

“I’m so glad you are my chaperone,” Phoebe said, reaching across the coach and squeezing the older woman’s hand. “You know this place so well. And don’t forget to look for a?—”

“A wife for your father.” Aunt Lucy rubbed her gloves together. “It’s been much too long. My sister would have hated him waiting all these years to find a companion.”

Phoebe leaned her head against the velvet squab and watched the commotion outside the window. The streets were crammed with conveyances of all sizes, from great coaches to a single horse pulling a wagon. Drivers called to their beasts, costermongers shouted out their wares, and the clip clop of hooves and the grind of wheels against the road created a cacophony that could only be heard in a city as crowded as London. The road was slick from rain and horse dung and the growing fog creeping and swirling along the cobblestones. It would soon envelop the occupants and make visibility difficult.

“It’s quite warm for December, don’t you think?” Phoebe asked. She had packed her warmest clothes, hoping for a lovely white snow. She caught a sniff of manure, wrinkled her nose, then the scent of tart cider. She closed the shutter of the carriage and turned back to her aunt.

“It could change by the end of the week,” her aunt said cheerily. “No matter. Rain will not cancel any of our activities. Well, perhaps a few that involve the outdoors. Lud, but this will be a whirlwind month!”

When Phoebe opened the shutters again, they were turning off Oxford toward Grosvenor Square and the townhouse in Mayfair. Do not bounce, she scolded herself when the excitement bubbled over. She was a woman grown, no longer a child but betrothed. Oh how different this trip was from last February. Her first Season had been a success, and the pressure of the previous spring had evaporated.

“I’m monstrous glad we won’t need to attend Almack’s this trip. Those patronesses are unbearable.” Aunt Lucy opened the shutter of her own window. “Your father’s house is in such a pretty neighborhood.

“Once we’re settled, I’ll send a note to Lord Kendall,” Phoebe said, spying the house on her right.

It was a small but lovely house with two white plaster pillars flanking the portico and a bay window. Narrow but three stories, it held wonderful memories of trips to Town with her father. Her first ice had been at Gunter’s, her first dance in the drawing room of this home with Papa. She had been adamant that he could teach her better than a professional instructor. In back, there was a modest garden and a mews for the horses. Phoebe had spent many hours in both while her father tended to business or sat in the House of Lords.

“Shall we invite him for tea or wait for an invitation from his mother?” asked Aunt Lucy. “I don’t see anything wrong with just a note to let him know we’ve arrived.”

“Yes, I agree. We don’t want Lady Kendall to think we seem too eager.” She chewed her bottom lip. “I do hope there is ample opportunity to speak with her alone.”

“I’m sure there will be. She must be just as eager to get to know you, dear.”

“You’re right, of course.” But Phoebe wasn’t so sure. Lady Kendall had always been polite but never very interested. Her father’s conversations with James had far

outnumbered her short conversations with the countess.

“She may be reluctant to become the Dowager Countess of Kendall. It must be difficult to pass the reins to another driver when you’ve held them for so long.” Aunt Lucy pulled the hood of her cape up as the driver opened the door. “One thing I’ve never had to worry about. Being a spinster has its benefits.”

Phoebe laughed. Her aunt was such a caricature of a spinster. The woman had helped raise her in between her many travels. A man had never been interesting enough to lure her into the parson’s trap. Though she suspected Aunt Lucy was not an innocent. Phoebe had learned about the intricacies of the marriage bed from her aunt, who seemed to know too many details and asides for the information to have come from a book.

One of the maids, Annie, acted as her lady’s maid when they stayed in Town. The redhead bustled around Phoebe’s chamber and had the trunks unpacked and her mistress dressed in fresh clothes in under an hour.

“Anything else, miss?” she asked.

Phoebe turned, smiling at Annie. “No, you’re as efficient as ever. Please ask Mrs. Grayson to have tea prepared and sent to the parlor.”

Phoebe met her aunt in the hallway, and they both descended to the ground floor together. They entered the parlor to find Mrs. Grayson, the housekeeper, already setting up the tea. She looked up with a smile. “Good afternoon, ladies,” she said. “The usual?”

They both nodded. “It’s been too long,” said Aunt Lucy before nodding at the tea tray. “Of course, you are one step ahead of us as always.”

Mrs. Grayson beamed. “Let me know if there is anything further I can do. Will you be here for dinner?”

“Yes, I believe we will stay in tonight, then have plenty of energy tomorrow.” Phoebe settled in a plush velvet and brocade wingback chair. The fire crackled and popped with a cheerful warmth, and she leaned back with a cup of tea.

“Lud, but I tire more easily than I used to,” complained Aunt Lucy. “I remember a day when a day of travel would have never kept me from the theater or a dinner party. But here I am, glad to be relaxing in front of the hearth.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m also exhausted. However,” Phoebe said with a sly smile, “I could still beat you at whist.”

“Not on your best day with me blindfolded,” retorted her aunt, hazel eyes gleaming with the thought of competition. “After dinner, we’ll have some port and play cards.”

Phoebe chuckled. If people knew some of the activities she participated in with her aunt, it could cause a scandal among the ton. “Fine, but no cheroots this time. I thought I would cast up my accounts the last time.”

“I really don’t see why the men enjoy smoking so much. But I’m always of a mind to try something new and see what all the fuss is about.”

The butler knocked at the door, his face stern and bald pate shining. “A letter arrived for you, Miss Weston.” He approached and held out the silver platter with an ivory envelope.

“Thank you, Mr. Harper.” Phoebe frowned, not recognizing the handwriting. She’d assumed it would be from James, but this was not a masculine scrawl. She opened it and began reading. “It must be an invitation.”

But her stomach tightened in a knot, and she struggled to breathe as she read the words swimming before her eyes.

“Heavens, girl, what has happened?” Aunt Lucy was out of her chair and beside her in less than a breath. She took the paper from Phoebe’s hand and read it out loud, making it all the more terrifying to hear the words said recited.

Dear Miss Weston,

I wanted to tell you as a friend that your fiancé has been enjoying the company of others in your absence. In particular, a certain actress, known for her beauty and charm, has been on his arm at least once a week. In public.

It has also been rumored that he is marrying you only for the dowry you will bring into the family. I thought you should know of his roguish ways before the leg shackles were snapped shut rather than after. We ladies must look out for one another.

An anonymous friend

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:26 am

Two

DENIAL

Denial, according to the Oxford English Dictionary:

The asserting (of anything) to be untrue or untenable; contradiction of a statement or allegation as untrue or invalid; also, the denying of the existence or reality of a thing.

“The devil if this doesn’t sound like a jealous rival,” exclaimed Aunt Lucy. “Though, I did feel he was the type who would find monogamy a trial.”

“And you’re just now saying something?” Phoebe’s mouth fell open for the second time. “Are you serious?”

“About the infidelity or the jealous rival?”

“Both!”

Aunt Lucy patted her niece’s shoulder. “I did say something, and you turned a deaf ear. He’ll give all that up once he marries me, you said. Are you worried now that he won’t?”

Phoebe glared at the fire, realizing her aunt was correct. She had waved away those concerns. “He’s a man. It’s what they do until they marry. Papa would never have had a mistress after he married Mama.”

“Of course not! But Lord Kendall is not cut from the same cloth as your father.” She dropped the note in Phoebe’s lap and resumed her seat and her tea. “Who was the chit with the raven hair and snub nose who followed him around like a lost puppy?”

“Lady Margaret?” Phoebe’s eyes narrowed as she remembered the girl. “Yes, she did pursue James with a fierce obstinance.”

“If you are angry with Lord Kendall, she will have another chance to win his favor,” said Aunt Lucy. “So I wouldn’t take much stock in the note, especially without a signature. Anonymous friend, indeed.”

Phoebe took a deep breath and counted to five. The weight lifted from her shoulders. Of course, these words were motivated by jealousy. She leaned forward and tossed the paper in the fire, watching the ends curl and turn black. “I will not give it any credence.”

“Hmph!” Aunt Lucy reached for a biscuit. “It doesn’t end the issue of whether your fiancé will be faithful. It’s an unpleasant conversation you must have—before your vows—if it’s an important issue to you.”

“Wouldn’t you expect your husband to be faithful?” Didn’t all women expect it? Perhaps not. She’d always been a romantic, seeing the brightest point of a situation.

“I don’t know if I could have been true to one man, so I never married. But the hard truth is women don’t have a say in the matter. The man will do what he wants, and the wife will accept it.” Aunt Lucy finished her cookie. “So, if you cannot tolerate your husband with other women after the nuptials, I would make sure you are both of the same mind.”

Yes, Phoebe thought, I will do that. We shall have an intimate conversation about life after the wedding. With that, she put it from her mind and enjoyed one of Cook’s

delicious biscuits.

December 20

Hyde Park, London

Mr. Charles Wilkens bowed to his cousins, Evie, now Lady Brecken, and Mrs. Fenella MacNaughton. “It’s been a pleasure, ladies.”

“Just like old times,” Fenella said, her flaxen blonde hair brighter than his own light-brown, glinting in the mid-afternoon light. “We used to come to Hyde Park every week. Remember the last time we skated on the Serpentine?” His cousin had married a Scot and lived in Glasgow now.

“Oh, yes,” added Evie, who was the complete opposite of her sister. She was petite, with curves rather than willowy, and auburn hair. “You introduced your friend to us?—”

“Who turned out to be our half-brother,” finished Fenella. “He stole your lady interest, who happens to be my sister-in-law.”

“It’s a small world,” concluded Evie. “Are you coming to the house? Papa said he needed to talk to you.”

His cousin’s voice faded as Charles spied two ladies walking toward them. One was older—her mother?—but the other was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. She was of a medium height, with deep chestnut curls escaping beneath her hat. She wore a simple but well-made redingote of deep-blue that matched her hat. As she drew nearer, he saw chocolate brown eyes that he thought he would gladly drown in.

To his dismay, the pair passed him without a glance. So he studied the hind view,

which was almost as pleasing as the front.

“Charles, what are you looking...” Evie’s voice interrupted his perusal, bringing him back to the conversation.

“Oh, nothing,” he said quickly. Heat spilled across his cheeks, knowing Evie would call him out on the lie. “I thought I knew someone.”

“You were looking at that woman,” Fenella said with a grin. “Oh, we must find out who she is for our dear cousin.”

Charles shook his head. “Oh no. I don’t need a matchmaker.”

“Because you’re doing so well on your own.” Evie stared at him, daring him to argue. Then she focused on the two ladies who had passed them, tapping a gloved finger against her mouth. “She looks familiar.”

“If you remember, we could invite her for dinner.” Fenella batted her pale lashes at her cousin in mock innocence. “And let nature take its course.”

Charles groaned. The last thing he needed was for two of his closest family members to turn on him, insisting he let them find a match for their poor cousin. Yes, he was lonely. Yes, he was a tad jealous of Evie and Fenella. Yes, he longed for a family and children to laugh and cry and drive him mad. But he would find his own mate.

“Phoebe!” cried Evie. “Miss Phoebe Weston. I believe her father is a widow—and a viscount. Lord Weston.”

“You’re like an elephant. Papa says they never forget anything.” Fenella laughed, turning to Charles. “I’d run quickly if you truly don’t want to meet the lovely Miss Weston, for we know Evie will find a way.”

He scrubbed his face with a gloved hand and groaned. Then a little voice whispered in his ear, Does it matter how you meet her? Charles grinned. No, it didn't.

“Very well, Cousin, if you can arrange it, I would love to meet her.” He paused, a thought smacking him in the head. “You do mean the younger lady?”

Evie laughed. “Of course, you nodcock.”

Charles escorted the ladies back to their townhouse and found their father, Sir Horace Franklin, in the library. “You wanted to see me, Uncle?”

The baronet had the same features as Fenella, tall with faded blond hair and gray eyes. He was still well built and stayed active, insisting that sitting at a desk too much would sap your strength.

“I have a favor, Charles, as my solicitor.” He motioned for Charles to join him in front of the hearth and poured them both a small amount of scotch. “Fine Scottish whisky from my son-in-law. Fenella's done well, marrying into the MacNaughtons.”

“As did your son. Have you heard from Frank? I received a letter last October, telling me that the harvest had been a success.” Frank was the illegitimate son of the baronet, whose mother had hidden the pregnancy to marry a titled man. His uncle had only met his son after the woman died, telling Frank her secret—who his real father was.

“He's staying up north for the holiday. I don't think he'll venture to London until spring. He and his new wife are still enjoying their solitude.” Horace laughed. “Speaking of going north...”

“Were we?” Charles asked, amused. It wasn't like his uncle to hedge a subject.

“You know I've been trying to purchase those Welsh mines from the widowed

countess.”

“Yes, for almost a year now.” Uncle Horace had been more than generous in his offers, but the lady hadn’t seemed interested.

“I received an invitation for Christmas. She is inviting those individuals who are interested in purchasing her property. Some kind of competition to decide who she will sell what to.” Sir Horace paused, rubbing the back of his neck. “I thought you might take my place.”

“You want me to spend Christmastide with Lady Winfield and charm her into selling you the mines?” This was an interesting turn of events. “How long do I have to stay?” His mother would have an apoplexy.

“I’ll take care of my sister. She won’t give you any trouble.” His uncle chuckled. “My wife would have my head if I tried to leave when both my daughters were home. For a bit of enticement, I thought we might be partners in the venture. Build your investments a bit more before you decide to marry.

Charles liked the idea. Sir Horace Franklin was a master merchant. He began trading in imports and exports before the war and had expanded into several other areas over the years. As solicitor, Charles was often able to invest in some lucrative ventures with his uncle. He’d done quite well for himself, though he wasn’t nearly as wealthy as his uncle.

“You’re young,” his uncle said as if reading his mind. “A few more years, and your investments should be fairly impressive. I’d say you were quite the catch.”

Charles snorted. “Someone needs to tell the ladies that.”

Sir Horace stood and slapped Charles on the shoulder. “Evie says you are too nice. A

lady enjoys battling with a man, winning an argument, or a bit of independence.”

“I always seem to end up a ‘friend’ rather than...” He shrugged. “I am who I am. Arguing with a female for the sport of it seems counterproductive. I don’t enjoy the silly games debutantes seem to think are part of the Season. I want a woman who is honest with her feelings and words.”

Sir Horace snorted this time. “A deuced na?ve attitude, Charles. Women love secrets and intrigue more than flummery and gewgaws. Would you like some advice?”

With a nod, Charles threw back the whisky. It was smooth with a slow burn down his throat. “Sure, why not?”

“The next one, tell her no once in a while. Being too agreeable will grate on your nerves eventually and the lady’s. Let her see you lose your temper on occasion, see the fire and passion inside. That’s what will attract the good ones.” He replaced the cork of the crystal decanter. “If you saw a bland meal set before you, would you have high hopes for the dessert?”

Charles grinned. “Not that I’m bland, of course.”

“Of course. You get my meaning?”

“Give the woman a glimpse of what’s inside rather than the proper, mannered solicitor I present to clients.” Charles ruminated on his uncle’s advice as he took a hackney to the club. Had. he been treating the opposite sex with the same courtesy he extended to his clients? Did he appear as a pleasant but lackluster solicitor who would bore his wife to death? Perhaps he’d try this new personality with the young widow. He’d heard she was quite beautiful.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:26 am

Three

A FAVOR

A favor, according to the Oxford English Dictionary:

An instance of this; something conceded, conferred, or done out of special grace or goodwill; an act of exceptional kindness, as opposed to one of duty or justice.

“You won’t be in London for the holiday?” asked William Page, another solicitor Charles had grown close to. They were in Boodles, enjoying a good brandy in the library after supper. “That’s quite a favor, but also quite a boon. Those mines are productive.”

Charles sighed. “Yes, that’s why I agreed. She lives farther north than your father’s estate.”

“When are you leaving?” asked William. “I’m going home to Beecham Manor in a couple of days. We could ride together, and you could stay a night with us.”

William was the youngest son of the Earl of Beecham. Charles had studied at the Inns of Court with Will. He’d met most of the Page family. “I have to be at the widow’s sometime Christmas Day. It would be nice to be with familiar faces on Christmas Eve.”

“It’s settled then. I was supposed to bring another suitor for my sister, but he’s unable to attend.” William said, amusement in his voice. “I hate to arrive empty handed.”

“The sister with the wicked left punch?” asked Charles. “You aren’t thinking?—”

“No, no. Not that I would object to having you as a brother-in-law. There are already several eligible gentlemen invited.” Will shook his head. “We still blame ourselves for her ruin. Brothers should not teach their little sister how to box.”

“The cad should never have pinched her. He deserved it.” Charles had missed the debacle but had heard about it from Will, several broadsheets, and the gossipmongers of London.

When their decanter of brandy was empty, they made plans to meet on the 23 of December and travel together as far as Beecham Manor. Charles headed home, now excited about the journey to come. The Pages were a boisterous, fun-loving family, and he might have a Welsh mine for a Christmas present. He found himself humming “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” with a smile curving his lips.

December 22

Phoebe couldn’t understand why she hadn’t been seated next to James. They had barely been alone, and she had not been able to speak with him about the nasty note she had received. She watched him smiling at Lady Margaret who sat next to him. The lady had given Phoebe a sly side-look when Lord Kendall had whispered something in ear, making her laugh.

She sent a withering glance across the wide table, her fingers tightening around the stem of her wine glass.

“I’m certainly glad I’m not on the receiving end of that glare,” commented the man next to her. “May I distract you from whatever is causing you distress?”

Phoebe turned to look at her ignored dinner companion. “I am sorry, but I don’t

remember your name.” His hair was a sandy-blond, and his amber eyes sparkled with humor. When he cast an infectious smile upon her, she liked him immediately. “I’ve been distracted this evening and usually much more attentive.”

“My name is Charles Wilkens. The host is a friend and client of my uncle.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you?—”

“Miss Phoebe Weston,” he finished for her.

“Now I’m certainly embarrassed, for you remembered my name.”

“I could never forget the name of something so beautiful,” Mr. Wilkens replied, then averted his gaze as she blushed.

Phoebe smiled. “Thank you, kind sir. I was in need of a compliment.”

“If I were your fiancé, you would need a parasol, for I would shower you with compliments.”

“Flummery, more like,” she quipped, suddenly enjoying the man and the conversation.

His hand went to his heart. Large strong hands with long slender fingers, she noted. “My heart and pride are wounded, Miss Weston.”

“I shall fetch a surgeon.” Phoebe held up her glass while he poured her more wine. He was a handsome man in a quiet, subtle way. When he grinned, she saw a little crease in one cheek. Not quite a dimple, but it made his smile all the more inviting.

As she studied him, their gaze locked, and an odd flutter tickled her chest. Mr.

Wilkens made her feel beautiful and comfortable at the same time. “Do you have exciting plans for the holiday?” she asked, noting James was now watching her.

“Alas, I will be on a business trip,” Mr. Wilkens replied. “A favor for my favorite uncle.”

“Do you have many?”

“Only one.”

They both laughed, and she found her earlier frustration dissipating. This mild-mannered gentleman put her at ease, making the rest of the meal quite enjoyable. And Phoebe realized the more she interacted with her dinner partners, the less James flirted with Lady Margaret. Good! It was badly done of him to flirt with another woman in front of her. She also realized she’d drunk a bit too much wine when she heard herself giggle . Giggle!

As the women retired after dinner, James met Phoebe at the door. “Interesting game you’re playing, my dear,” he whispered in her ear. “Don’t let it go any further.”

She slapped his arm with her fan. “I’m only following your lead, my lord.” Phoebe’s smile faded as she saw the glint of anger in his eyes. His fingers curled around her arm, squeezing tightly. “You are hurting me, James,” she snapped.

“Don’t try to play my game, sweetness. You will not win.” He pinched the inside of her arm before walking away.

Phoebe blinked. What just happened? She rubbed the tender spot as she followed the other women out of the dining room. Lady Margaret appeared at her side.

“It’s never a tit for tat, you know,” she said with a chuckle. “Men will do what they

want, and we must behave. It's the way of things, though I suppose you've been quite spoiled by your father."

She caught her breath. "Pardon me? I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Lord Kendall was quite perturbed with your behavior at dinner," she said. "I told him it was not your fault. You were raised by a doting father and an outrageous aunt."

"There is nothing wrong with my behavior." Phoebe raked her gaze up and down Lady Margaret. "If you were raised more properly than me, then why are you flirting like a doxie with a man who is betrothed? Oh wait, I suppose you must since the anonymous letter didn't work. You need to look elsewhere for a husband."

Lady Margaret gasped, and Phoebe continued into the drawing room. Aunt Lucy waved at her from a cluster of ladies, and she joined them, her fan moving furiously. She'd had quite enough of the woman. "You were right, Aunt Lucy. It was definitely that woman."

Phoebe was shaken. Her fiancé had shown a side of himself she'd never seen previously. It made her consider how little she really knew of him. His lineage, of course, was public knowledge and from an old family peerage. He was an earl—eventually becoming a marquess—and handsome with raven hair, ocean-blue eyes, a charming personality, and one of the most sought-after men of last Season.

Now she wondered how she'd never noticed the coldness in his eyes. Had she never looked past the smile? Why did a man from such a family choose the daughter of a viscount to marry? Phoebe closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Because he loves you, just as you love him. Perhaps the wine had gone to her head, and these were only thoughts from an inebriated imagination. Papa always said she was a touch dramatic.

When the men entered the room, James found her and asked if she'd like to partner in

a game of whist. “I feel as though I’ve neglected you this evening, my sweet.”

“I would really appreciate some fresh air. Too much wine, I’m afraid. Could we go out on the balcony?” she asked, needing to speak with him alone.

“Certainly. Would you like me to fetch your pelisse?”

She shook her head. “No, I believe my shawl will be enough. We won’t stay long.”

When they were leaning against the rail, Phoebe filled her lungs with the crisp air. It did clear her head. They looked out over the wintry garden and dry fountain. “Did you know Lady Margaret has a tendre for you?”

James laughed. “Since she was twelve, I believe.”

“Do you not try to discourage her?” How cruel to tease her with flirtations. Guilt twisted in her gut at the unkind words she’d thrown at the woman.

“I enjoy her company well enough,” he said, then slipped an arm around her waist. “Not as much as I enjoy yours, of course.”

“Of course,” she murmured. “I received an anonymous note I believe was written by her.”

“Oh? What did it say?” His tone turned frosty. “Something you’d like to reprimand me for?”

“You have a mistress, an actress. And you have been quite open about it.” There she’d said it. As Aunt Lucy said, they needed to be of the same mind before they married. “I-I do not approve.”

“She’s nothing to me. It’s an affair, that’s all. You will be my wife,” he said, stoking her cheek with his knuckles. “A wife always takes precedence over a mistress.”

“But I cannot allow... When we are married?—”

“Allow? I am the Earl of Kendall, and a woman does not allow me anything.” He bent his head and pressed his lips to hers. “However, I promise to be discreet. She knows I will soon be married. You must not be jealous of someone so far below you.”

Between the words and his kiss, Phoebe was mollified. “No more flirting with Lady Margaret?”

“No, not if it upsets you, my sweet.” He kissed her again, and Phoebe knew she’d been mistaken.

“Aunt Lucy said it was best to talk this out. I’m glad we straightened this out.” Now she was tired. Another effect of too much wine.

He raised an eyebrow. “Shall we join the others?”

“Actually, I’m done to a thumb. Would you mind terribly if I went home?”

“I’ll call for your carriage.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:26 am

Four

A RASCAL

A rascal, according to the Oxford English Dictionary:

An unprincipled or dishonest person; a rogue, a scoundrel.

December 23

Charles climbed into the coach and removed his beaver hat. “Happy Christmas, Will.”

“And to you, my friend.” Will leaned back against the squab, digging his fingers into his light-brown hair and massaging his scalp. “I believe I overindulged last night.”

“Thank you for the warning. I shall endeavor to sing in my loudest voice as we leave London behind.” Charles opened his mouth wide, then laughed when Will clamped his hands over his ears.

“Please, if you have ever considered me a friend, do not.” Will swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “A little nap and I’ll be fine.”

“Or a hair of the dog, as my father always said.” Charles shook his head. “I’m glad I didn’t accept your invitation last night. I don’t enjoy a belligerent stomach when I travel.”

While Will slept, Charles's mind wandered to the dinner party the other night. When Miss Weston had entered the drawing room, he'd felt like a green boy smitten. He had watched her with the other ladies, seen how at ease she was, how accepted she was in their company. Charles had come with a friend, who said they needed an even number after another guest had cancelled. He had hoped to make a few connections, maybe find a new client or two.

Instead, he'd found the woman who had taken the wind from his sails. Or put the wind in his sails. He wasn't sure which way suited him at the time. He only knew the woman affected him like no other. But when Miss Phoebe Weston had been introduced to him, she'd been polite and never looked at him again. Until dinner.

She was betrothed to the rascal Kendall. He was a notorious womanizer, and Charles wondered about the match. During dinner, Miss Weston had watched her betrothed and another woman flirt outrageously. Charles had seen his chance and stepped in to help her save face. She had been thankful and the following two hours had been... Well, she was exactly what he was looking for. It irked him that a beautiful and intelligent lady would be shackled to such a rogue.

When he'd asked Will and another friend about the pair, he learned her father hadn't spent much time in London the past few years. Her chaperone during her first Season had been her aunt. A woman who had a reputation of her own and traveled often. So her guardians might not have been aware of Kendall's character. If one only referenced Debrett's, the man would be a standup cove.

Does she love him? he wondered. Was it arranged or a mutual agreement? She deserved so much more. Miss Phoebe Weston should be loved to distraction, not used as a pretty accessory on a man's arm.

"Did I tell you what I found out about Kendall?"

Charles's head snapped up. "It's as if you read my mind. And no, you didn't."

"Rumor has it that his father is cutting him off until he marries and produces an heir. He likes to gamble, and his mistress is expensive. So he's marrying for the dowry, which is quite generous." Will sneered, disgust in his hazel eyes. "The blaggard told me that her blunt would tide him over until he gets her with child."

"His family name may demand respect, but Kendall certainly hasn't earned it." Charles blew out a long breath. "It's a shame. She's a lovely woman."

"Who he will neglect and let wither away." Will leaned his head back again. "I'm almost recovered. By the time we reach the inn, I should be my old self."

"Saints preserve us," Charles mumbled as Will began softly snoring again.

"Are you sure about this marriage?" asked Aunt Lucy on their way to dinner. "He was deplorable the other night."

"I think I surprised him by not allowing, er, by calling him out for his behavior. He promised to be discreet while he was ending the affair with the actress." Phoebe had decided to forgive him for his conduct. It was true they weren't married yet, and many men had mistresses. She would close her eyes to his past and concentrate on their future. "Besides, we're betrothed. I can't change my mind now."

"Humdudgeon. Of course you can. If he demands satisfaction, Andrew will pay him off."

She was right, of course. Her father would make restitution if she didn't want to go through with it. Phoebe was not some helpless girl being forced into a marriage, which was all the more reason she couldn't forfeit. It would be a scandal of huge proportions. She silenced the ugly whispering in her head. All would be well.

She had chosen a pale-blue silk dress with an indigo beaded bodice. Paste sapphires adorned her upswept hair, and authentic sapphires hung from her ears and neck. Aunt Lucy wore a turban with rose feathers poking from the top to match her light-rose dress with a sheer overlay, adorned with paste diamonds.

Dinner went well. Her fiancé was handsome in his black coat tails, gray-and-white striped waistcoat, and perfectly tied cravat. He was not a tall man but fit, and he was his usual charming self while the courses were served.

Seated next to James, Phoebe had several conversations with his mother. Short ones. The marchioness was easily distracted and often left one conversation to join another. The marquess consumed a great deal of liquor and grew louder with each drink. Phoebe had never noticed before, but the married couple didn't seem to like each other. In fact, they rarely spoke to one another.

After dinner, she played the pianoforte but noticed James leaving the room. The guests clapped as the song ended, and James's mother asked her to play another. When she finished, she saw her fiancé had not returned. Excusing herself to the retiring room, Phoebe made her way down the hall. As she passed a door, she heard a thud . Then a giggle. Then a growl. A growl that sounded familiar.

“Such rosy petals.”

James!

Phoebe threw open the door, hands on her hips, to find a maid with her chest bare and her fiancé's head bent over it. “How could you?”

She slammed the door closed again, picked up her skirts, and ran for the drawing room. When she reached the door, dragging in deep breaths after her lengthy dash, she paused to calm herself. She was a Weston and would not look like a hysterical

female. Digging deep to find her calm, she walked to her aunt and whispered in ear. “We must go. Now.”

Aunt Lucy took one look at her niece’s face and stood, whipping her fan back and forth in front of her face. “Oh my. I feel a monstrous megrim coming up.” She turned to Phoebe. “Would you mind dreadfully if we went home early?”

Phoebe closed her eyes, silently thanking her intuitive aunt. “Of course.”

The butler was at the door and bowed. “I shall call for your carriage, ma’am.”

A few moments later, she and Aunt Lucy made their way to the carriage, the driver already holding the door open, ready to help them up the stairs. Just as she took the offered hand to follow her aunt inside, she heard James behind her.

“Phoebe, don’t be ridiculous!” he yelled from the portico, hurrying down the steps. “It was nothing. You’re overreacting.”

She turned, eyes wide, indignation dripping from her words. “I’m overreacting? My fiancé is in a closet with a maid who is half dressed. I believe you are under reacting, Lord Kendall.” She turned to climb into the carriage, but his hand on her arm made her pause.

“Phoebe, boys will be boys, eh? My antics don’t reflect upon you.” He grinned and wagged his dark brows. “Or are you jealous?”

Fat drops of rain plopped onto Phoebe’s hat, as if the weather taunted her too.

“You promised to be discreet. Tuppung a maid in a closet—during a dinner party where your betrothed is playing the pianoforte—is miles away from subtle.” The rain began a steady pummel, seeping into her pelisse, running down her neck.

“I promised to be discreet after we were married,” he said, tipping his head, confusion in his green eyes. His hair glistened wet, and he wiped a tiny rivulet of rain tracking down his forehead. “That won’t be until after Twelfth Night.”

She gasped. “You will continue your affairs after we’ve said our vows?” She raised her face to the rain, letting the droplets cool her burning face.

“Why would our arrangement change that?” James snorted. “I’m not arguing with you out here in the rain. Come inside while we sort this out.”

“Arrangement?” Phoebe’s eyes snapped open as nausea spread through her belly. Her curls had become sodden strands clinging to her skin, and she pushed them from her cheeks. “You said... you said you loved me.”

“Well—of course—yes, I love you, my sweet.” He bent his head and pressed his mouth to hers, the slick rain turning the kiss into a slippery slide of lips. “See? Now come with me?—”

James grabbed her hand and tried to pull her back toward his house. Phoebe shook her head and dug in her heels. “No! I won’t go. I cannot marry you.”

He stopped, the water soaking through his suit coat, his trousers clinging to his legs, and turned slowly. His eyes were cold, and an even chillier smile curved his lips. “You what?” His fingers gripped hers tightly, refusing to let loose her hand. He pulled her against his hard form and kissed her again. A hard and brutal kiss. “You are mine, Miss Phoebe Kendall. You must learn your place.”

Phoebe leaned back and, with her free hand, slapped his cheek as hard as she could, then wiped her mouth. Disgust boiled up inside her and spewed out her mouth. “Don’t touch me, you scoundrel. I release you from this betrothal. Never speak to me again.” She yanked her hand from his, turned on her heel, pulled her skirts up with all

the dignity she had left, and climbed into the carriage.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:26 am

Five

SECRETS

Secret, according to the Oxford English Dictionary:

Predicatively (esp. into keep secret): Kept from public knowledge, or from the knowledge of persons specified; not allowed to be known, or only by selected persons.

December 24

Beecham Manor

“I should tell you something before we arrive,” Will said as the carriage stopped at the black iron gates, opening to a long drive. Beecham Manor was a sprawling four-story house of limestone with multiple gables. “About the widow you are going to see...”

Charles tipped his head, studying Will. His friend seemed uncomfortable all at once, totally at odds with his usual easygoing persona. “A concern you have about Lady Winfield?”

“Not so much her as my brother, Lucius.” Will ran a hand through his thick brown waves. “He’s been in love with her for years. He may try to take your place.”

“If he can secure those mines for Uncle, I’d let him. Staying here with old friends,

then returning home to my family, sounds like a much better plan.” Charles thought about the viscount and the widow. “Didn’t she marry a good friend of his?”

Will nodded. “More like stole her while he was away.”

“The woman had to be willing.”

“She was duped, but it’s water under the bridge.” Will nodded at the coach door. “We’ve arrived. I haven’t told them yet that the last suitor wasn’t able to come. There may be a bit of confusion concerning your presence at first.”

“You’re sure you aren’t trying to match me with your sister?”

Will laughed. “Absolutely not. She’s a gem to be sure, but I don’t think the two of you would be compatible.”

That was a relief. Charles heard his stomach rumble. They had skipped breakfast at the inn in order to reach their destination by late morning. Will had assured him there would be plenty of food once they arrived. As their boots crunched on the gravel, Annette, Will’s sister, came running from the side of the house, a blur of claret wool as she threw herself at her brother.

“Willy!” She was a pretty girl, er, woman, with dark-brown hair and sparkling green eyes. “Don’t you dare stay away so long again.”

“You could always visit me in London, Sister dear.” He kissed her cheek and twirled her about. “You look wonderful. The suitors must be agreeable?”

Her blush told him something was afoot. It would be the mystery of the day to figure out which one had taken her fancy.

“We’re getting ready to collect the greenery and mistletoe. Would you like to come?” she asked, her cheeks red from the cold.

“First, I’ve brought you a surprise,” he said. “Charles, come meet my sister.”

“Mr. Charles Wilkens, solicitor, associate, and friend. Lady Annette Page, my little sister.”

Charles bowed and removed his hat. “It’s a pleasure, my lady.”

“I thought you were bringing... What was the man’s name?” asked Lady Annette.

“It didn’t work out. We’ll say it’s for the best and leave it at that for now.” Will put an arm around his sister’s shoulders, and the trio made their way toward the portico steps.

“This is the surprise?” She looked with curiosity at Charles.

“I thought you would be happy I didn’t bring another suitor.”

Her smile was bright. A fitting reward. “I am, indeed.” She turned to Charles. “I’m sorry you are not able to be with family this Christmastide.”

“I shall return before the new year. I’ve been invited to another party. A widow sent a unique invitation to my uncle. She owns a coal mine he has been trying to purchase for years. We are hoping to convince her to sell.”

William grinned. “The widow happens to be Lady Winfield.”

Lady Annette gasped. “Does Lucius know?”

“He will soon enough.”

Charles was amused by Annette’s sly grin.

“Good day, gentlemen,” called another older man stepping onto the portico. “Just in time to help us collect pine boughs and such.”

William shook his head and held out his hand. “It’s good to see you again, Lord Weston. Have you enjoyed your visit so far?”

Lord Weston? Miss Phoebe Weston’s father? And the blaggard of a friend hadn’t mentioned it. Maybe Will hadn’t known.

The viscount beamed. “I don’t believe I’ve enjoyed myself so much in years.” Lord Weston may have responded to Will, but his eyes never left Lady Annette’s face.

Annette’s cheeks burned, and William arched a brow at her, glanced at Weston, then back at his sister. She shook her head ever so slightly, signaling, Charles assumed, to William to keep silent.

“Ah, yes. That’s... good,” William said, frowning at his sister. “Lord Weston, have you met Mr. Charles Wilkens? He’s a solicitor, and we’ve worked together often.”

“It’s a pleasure,” said the viscount, holding out his hand. He turned back to Annette. “Lady Henney ordered a wagon to be brought round. Shall we go ourselves?”

“Yes, please. I had thought to ride Domino and follow the wagon, but I find I’m a bit sore after this morning.”

At William’s insistence, she told him of her earlier fall. “No injuries, I just don’t feel up to the saddle today.”

“Of course,” all three agreed at once.

“Besides, it won’t be hard work.” William added, “Father pays some of the older tenants’ boys to collect plenty of pine boughs and mistletoe. We only go out ourselves and gather a bit to continue with tradition. It’s something we always did as children growing up.”

After Lady Annette and Lord Weston left, the butler arranged for their trunks to be unloaded. Both men handed off their hats and coats, and Charles followed Will to the breakfast room. His mouth watered when he saw Lucius filling a plate with eggs and ham. The scent of hot coffee tickled his nostrils. The temperatures had taken a dip the past couple of days, and the farther north they went, the colder it got. A hot drink with a little nip of brandy and food in his belly would be just the thing after a day and a half of travel.

Will’s brother looked at them over his shoulder as he added toast to his heaping plate.

“Brother,” cried William, “it’s good to see you again. My apologies for not being able to meet you at White’s before you left London.”

“Happy Christmas,” Lucius said as they thumped one another on the back. “Have you just arrived?”

“Yes. We ran into Nettie and Weston outside.” Will turned to Charles. “You remember Charles Wilkens, whom I work with in London? If your friends ever need a solicitor, he’s your man.” William was a barrister, and Charles often referred Will to present a legal action for a client.

“Mr. Wilkens.” Lucius inclined his head. “Where is the other...”

“The gentleman was unable to make it. However, I ran into Charles on his way to

another house party. So, I convinced him to stay with us a night before he continued on to Falcon Hall ." Will grinned, his hazel eyes twinkling as he mentioned the location.

Charles saw an immediate spark of interest in Lord Page's green eyes. The viscount's head snapped up. "Are you well acquainted with Lady Winfield?" he asked.

"No, my lord. My uncle, Sir Horace Franklin, has been trying to buy two slate mines from her. They are located in Wales, next to two that he owns. She has put him off for over two years, and then he received an invitation of sorts to her estate over Christmastide." Charles shrugged. "As his solicitor, I was tasked to go in his stead."

"It seems one must have a personal invite to be admitted. The wording is quite cryptic." Will grinned at Charles. "Would you mind showing it to him?"

Charles set down the satchel he'd brought from the coach, opened it, and pulled out a thick lavender card with holly and ivy entwined around the edges. He handed it to Lucius.

Admits bearer to the private house party

Of the Countess of Winfield at Falcon Hall.

Guests shall arrive 24 December.

The competition for the desired prize begins 25 December thru 6 January.

Lady Winfield will only accept the proposal of the gentleman

Claiming victory of three or more challenges.

The favor of an answer is requested.

Lord Page's mouth fell open. "Mr. Wilkens, I have questions and a proposition for you."

Within the hour, the viscount had convinced Charles that not only would he secure the mines for his uncle, but make sure there was a generous stipend for Charles. "I can also recommend you in London and the surrounding area. Unless you have too much business already?" Lord Page raised a dark brow.

"I'm always happy to take on another client," Charles admitted. "However, I am concerned..."

"That I will make matters worse?" asked Lord Page. "Because I was not invited personally?"

Charles, embarrassed by the situation, nodded. "My uncle entrusted me with this task?—"

"I will not disappoint you or your uncle," the viscount assured him. "The widow will be surprised to see me but not unhappy."

For some reason, Charles believed him. The earnest and determined look in the man's green eyes was the final push. "Fine, then. Please send me word as soon as you know something."

With that, Lord Page dashed from the room, his full plate forgotten. Will sat down in front of it and poured himself a cup of coffee. "Don't stand on ceremony, my friend. Get yourself some breakfast."

Later that afternoon, as Charles was getting to know the other three suitors for Lady

Annette, he noticed the easy dialogue between Will's sister and Lord Weston. What would Miss Weston think about her father cozying up with a woman closer to her age than her father's? Charles decided he certainly wouldn't be the one to tell her.

With that thought, the vision of said woman appeared in the doorway, auburn curls in disarray, brown eyes flashing with anger. He blinked. Too much brandy? Then the full-figured beauty stomped across the room to stand before her father. When she spoke, Charles realized Miss Phoebe Weston had truly appeared at Beecham Manor.

"Please pardon this untimely interruption," she announced as all the men hurried to stand at the unexpected intrusion, "but I must speak to my father." With that, she spun on her heel and returned to the hallway.

Lord Weston rose from his chair, cheeks stained with embarrassment, and made his apologies as he followed his daughter from the room.

Six

SERENDIPITY

Serendipity, according to the Oxford English Dictionary:

The faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident.

Phoebe bit her lip, wondering if she'd made the correct decision. After the fiasco the night before last, her only thought had been to see her father. He always made everything better. Her anger—and Aunt Lucy's continued chatter—had kept her steadfast on the way north.

"I feel you made the right choice," Aunt Lucy had said as she left Phoebe at the coaching inn. "You'll be fine on your own from here. The driver assured me it is only a ten-minute drive to Beecham Manor. I've hired a coach to bring me as far as the border, then I'll get another coach from there."

Aunt Lucy gave Phoebe a tight hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Remember, this was a learning experience. Write to me. I want to know how this debacle ends."

Now she stood in the hallway of a family she didn't know, blinking back tears at her own behavior a few moments earlier. Why did she behave so rashly at times? How would she face these people later? Even if her father agreed to accompany her back to London, she would still need to attend dinner tonight.

"Confound it, Phoebe. What has happened?" her father demanded, not in an angry

tone but frustrated at least. “Why are you not in Town?”

“I caught my fiancé in the linen closet with a maid. He... he...” She let out a growl, letting the anger push back the hot tears. “I can’t even say it. He’s a scoundrel of the lowest lot, an obsequious lecher, a?—”

“And you are sounding like a scorned termagant. Your aunt would be appalled.” Her father took her by the shoulders, turned her around, and gently pushed her into the parlor down the hall. “Now, sit and start at the beginning without the language used in the hallway.”

She poured out her story: catching Kendall with a servant, confronting him with his infidelity, his excuse she was only a distraction, and men had needs (emphasized with a sneer), and the fact he would not promise to bed another woman once married.

“Papa, how did I not know him? We’ve been courting for six months, and he’s a stranger to me.” Phoebe threw herself against the back of the rocking chair, and her father had to grab her ankle to keep it from falling backwards. She would have a broken engagement and a broken head for Christmas Day. “I’ve ended our betrothal.”

“Does he want to cancel the wedding? Are you sure there was no misunderstanding?” Her father squeezed her calf and gave her a half smile. “I love you, but you can be a tiny bit overbearing, though your heart is always in the right place.”

Her heart... Why did she seem more angry than heartbroken?

“Of course he doesn’t want to end it. With a beautiful, respectable wife and a generous dowry? If only I was a malleable, shy wallflower, he would be ecstatic. But I won’t be leg-shackled to a man who does not see me as enough woman to keep his bed warm.”

At the mention of “bed,” Phoebe blushed, knowing pink now overlaid the angry spots on her cheeks.

“You do not have to marry if you do not want to. However, keep in mind that many men keep mistresses and do not consider it an affront to their wives.”

“Papa, you are siding with him?” No, not her own father.

“Absolutely not. You are my only child. After the holiday, I intend to invite him to Jackson’s. A friendly boxing match might remind him how to treat a lady.” He sighed. “Matrimony is a serious endeavor, and one which I consider should always be a monogamous state. He doesn’t deserve you.”

“It’s insulting.” Phoebe crossed her arms over her chest and let out a deep growl. “I wanted to punch him in the nose, but I’ll settle for you doing it.”

Andrew couldn’t help the chuckle that slipped out.

“That’s humorous?” She glared at him. “The scandal this will cause!”

“No, not your situation. But the host’s daughter, Lady Annette, was disgraced her first Season when she did exactly that. She might give you a lesson.”

Phoebe’s head jerked up, interested. She opened her mouth to comment.

“I’m only jesting about a lesson.”

Phoebe’s frown deepened. “It would make me feel better.”

“About that.” Andrew moved his chair closer to his daughter. “I can understand the anger at first, but after time spent in a carriage, with the opportunity to take in the

significance of this incident... I admit I'm surprised you haven't shed any tears. Or have you?"

Phoebe stared at him, wide-eyed, shaking her head slowly, brows furrowed in thought. Had she shed any? "Not one," she admitted, looking at her father with trepidation. "What does that mean?"

"I'm not an expert, but either the sadness hasn't quite caught up with you, or you never truly loved him. I'm praying for the latter." Her father's hand covered hers.

"I-I'm not sure." What was wrong with her? How could she have accepted James's proposal if she didn't care for him? "I thought I loved him. We were the perfect match. He and his family had everything on my list. How could I not love him?"

"A list does not create love. A list is tangible where love... is ethereal. A feeling that comes over you, and you understand instinctively there is no denying it. Love is knowing that life without that person will never be as magical, as rewarding, as blissful as it might have been with them."

Phoebe pondered this, picking at an invisible thread on her spencer that she hadn't yet removed in her haste. The knot in her stomach tightened. The wretched tears threatened, then fell. "Could I have imagined myself in love?"

"You wouldn't be the first," her father said quietly, rising and pulling her into his embrace.

She cried against his chest for a while, letting out her disappointment of a broken betrothal, her shame of not knowing her own feelings. Thankful she had such a wonderful papa who understood her and would always be there to comfort her.

When the sobs subsided, he cupped her face in his hands. "Perhaps this was fate

intervening, saving you from an unhappy future with an undeserving man. You are destined for real love, my sweet Phoebe. You deserve it.”

She nodded and gave him a watery smile. “I’ve made a fool of myself in front of Lord Beecham and his family. I’m so sorry.”

“They will understand if you don’t mind me sharing your story.”

“It will be all over the broadsheets by tomorrow, anyway.” Phoebe sniffed, wondering how she would face everyone. “Please, could we go home?”

“I’m afraid we’d miss all of Christmas Day if we left now. There’s plenty of room for you here. I think you’ll like my friends.”

Phoebe’s bags were sent to the Green Room, her father’s chamber, until a room was readied for her. Lady Annette had sent a tray up for her since she hadn’t been ready to join so many strangers for dinner.

An hour later, her father appeared with a footman, who showed her to her sleeping quarters. It was a lovely space, appropriately named the Yellow Room. The buttercup drapes were pulled back to allow the sunlight. The counterpane and bed curtains were a creamy butter color. Papa tucked her hand inside his arm, and they entered the drawing room together. Introductions were made, and the warm reception eased the tension in her shoulders.

One gentleman, who looked very familiar, towered over the other men. He had sandy-brown hair and eyes almost the same color. Not quite brown, not quite gold. When he smiled at her, she knew. The dinner party!

“Mr. Wilkens, I am surprised to see you again,” she said as he bowed over her hand. Her stomach released the final knot. “It’s nice to see a familiar face other than my

father's.”

“I am here to please and at your service,” Mr. Wilkens said jovially, exchanging an odd look with Mr. William Page. “We’re sorry you missed a splendid breakfast, but you have arrived in time for the afternoon festivities and the wassail.” He held out his arm, and Phoebe took it with a grateful smile.

Wassail was passed around, then the group splintered off. Charles silently cursed himself when he agreed to play whist with Lady Annette against Lord Beecham and his fiancée. William had promptly engaged Miss Weston in a game of chess. After losing the first set, he gave his place to Lord Weston.

“I hope you will do better than me,” Charles said, noting Lady Annette’s beaming smile when Lord Weston took his place. “I’m afraid I’ve been a disappointing partner.”

Charles couldn’t believe his luck. Lord Weston had explained his daughter had sustained a terrible shock, not going into details. He did say, however, that she had broken off a betrothal. If Charles had not switched places with Will’s brother, he wouldn’t be spending Christmas with this stunning creature.

Serendipity.

Charles had agreed to a last-minute invitation from his cousins to Hyde Park, where he first saw Miss Phoebe Weston. He had also agreed to attend a dinner party as a favor to a friend. He had been miraculously placed next to the same beauty at the table.

Miss Weston had learned of, or found out on her own, that Kendall was a rake. She had immediately sought out her father. Lord Weston happened to be staying at Beecham Manor.

Charles had agreed to help his uncle and, by chance, had mentioned his trip to Will. In turn, Will had suggested traveling together and staying one night at Beecham Manor. The widow who Charles was to see happened to be the woman Will's brother was in love with. By swapping places with Lord Page, Charles was now staying—hopefully for more than one night—in the same house as Miss Weston.

If either he or Miss Weston had changed their plans slightly at any point along the way, they may never have arrived at this point. Fate, luck, or serendipity? The deuce if he cared. It was the final results that mattered. Charles was now enjoying the company of a woman who had dazzled him from first sight. First sight! Ridiculous, he would have said prior to meeting her. But after that chance encounter, his life had changed.

“You have a lovely voice,” Charles told Miss Weston after they had sung some carols, accompanied by the pianoforte.

“Thank you,” she replied quietly.

The sudden shyness in her sent a bolt of ire through his body. The woman he had dined with in London was amusing, clever, and bold. How dare that rascal take that from her. Even if it was only temporary. Charles realized he had a new goal—to restore the authentic Phoebe Weston. Oh, how he longed to plant a facer on that beast Kendall.

“Charles, how about a game of billiards?” asked Will.

“I'd love a chance to even the odds. You beat me soundly the last game.” He turned to Miss Weston. “Would you like to join us?”

“Oh, thank you, but I think I'll rest a bit before dinner. It's been quite a day already.”

When she cast those dark-chocolate eyes on him, he would have handed her the world if she'd asked. You're smitten, you green boy!

"Of course." From the corner of his eye, he saw Will lean against the door frame, a smile on his face.

Mistletoe! That devil.

William plucked a berry and held it up. "A toll, my lady," he said with a grin, offering his cheek. Miss Weston obliged with a smile and repeated the kiss for Mr. Wilkens. But oh, how he longed for more than a peck on the cheek. He wanted to taste those plump lips, smell the scent of lavender in her hair, pull her curves against his lean frame.

Instead, he bade her a good rest and followed Will to the billiard room.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:26 am

Seven

OVERWHELMED

Overwhelmed, according to the Oxford English Dictionary:

Of a person's heart, etc.: overflowing with emotion.

Phoebe was halfway up the stairs when she realized she'd forgotten her shawl. It was a precious piece of material, having belonged to her mother, and she always took it with her when she traveled. Walking back into the drawing room, she froze.

Before the hearth stood her father and Lady Annette—in a passionate embrace.

“What are you doing?” Phoebe heard the terrible screech of her own voice. Her breath came in pants, shock rolling through her body.

They both turned to her, alarm in her father's deep-brown eyes, embarrassment in Lady Annette's.

“Papa, she's only a few years older than me. How could you?” The weight of betrayal descended upon her. How had he neglected to mention this... this... affair? No, Lady Annette was decent and sweet. This was much more serious. But why pursue another woman after all this time? Companionship would not lead him to a younger woman. Had his constant words of reassurance and denial of regret for not having a boy been all lies?

“Phoebe, considering your arrival, I didn’t think it prudent to tell you of our courtship. We were?—”

“Prudent? Prudent is not wooing someone half your age. It’s about an heir, isn’t it? You said you didn’t care if you had a son. I-I filled your heart, and you didn’t have room for another child. But it isn’t true, is it?” Overwhelmed from the past few days, Phoebe once again picked up her skirts and ran, the shawl forgotten.

“Phoebe!” shouted Papa.

She paid no heed. Tears blurred her vision. First betrayed by her fiancé and now her own father. She fumbled at the yellow door of her room before pushing it open and throwing herself on the bed.

Rap, rap, rap . “Phoebe! Let me in, please.”

“Go away!” She wasn’t ready for another intimate talk with her father.

“Phoebe, stop acting like a child and open the door.”

“If I’m acting like one, then you are courting one,” she quipped, knowing how petulant she sounded. She hated the tone of her voice, how she’d run like a coward—twice.

“If you don’t open the door, I won’t be able to explain how your mother approved of this.”

That caught her attention. Mama? She rose from the bed, her satin slippers silent on the Aubusson carpet. She cracked the door open, one eye at the slit. She tossed in a glare for good measure, wanting to be mature but just not having the energy for it. “How could that be?”

He sighed. His daughter could be difficult; he freely admitted he had indulged her throughout her childhood. But she was also fiercely loyal, and once given, she was an ally for perpetuity.

“You know I talk to her.”

“Her portrait, yes. But it’s at home above the hearth.” She opened the door wider.

“It was in a dream.”

Dreams fascinated Phoebe. She loved interpreting them, whether it was hers, a friend, or one of the maids. She opened the door wide enough for her father to enter.

He stepped into the room, following her to the huge tester bed. She threw herself across it, her slippers hanging over the edge. “First, I was sincere about not needing a son. How could you think such a thing? Second, Nettie and I haven’t even discussed children. I have a great affection for the lady, not her womb.”

Phoebe giggled into the counterpane. He always knew what to say. She could never stay angry at him. “How did it happen?”

“I came here to see my friend, my tether to my brother—your Uncle Phillip. I had no idea I would meet someone who made me remember.”

“Remember what?” she asked, lifting her head from the counterpane.

“How the right person can make you feel whole, as if you’ve found a piece of yourself that’s been missing. I wish I could explain it better.” He ran a hand through his auburn hair, so like her own brown and gold waves.

“I thought you would love Mama until the day you died.” She sniffed but sat up.

“I will, sweetheart. Just as I will love you with all my heart. But this”—he patted his chest just above his heart—“is an amazing organ that can stretch as large as is needed. So, I’m able to hold on to my love for your mother and allow someone else into my heart again.”

“Tell me about your dream,” she demanded, feeling her spunky self finally reemerge.

He told her most of it, but Phoebe had the impression he left out the more intimate details. He had been chasing Mama, and she had called for him, telling him to hurry, and that he was not too old. Never too old. Then when he caught her, he had kissed her, but her face had turned into Lady Annette’s image. He had whispered he was sorry to Mama, but Lady Annette had said Mama wasn’t sorry. She was happy for him.

“Oh, Papa, she is telling you that she’s fine with it. I don’t want you to be alone when I do find an honorable and trustworthy man.” Phoebe wiped her eyes, the guilt enveloping her. “I’m sorry. I will try to like her. For you. She really does seem to be a lovely woman. The past few days have been so horrid.”

“I know,” he said, hugging her tightly. “I get lonely. I realized with your betrothal that I didn’t want to be alone the rest of my life. Nor did I want my only conversation at the end of the day to be with a painting that cannot respond.”

She giggled, then stopped, solemnity replacing the guilt. “It seems I’ve made another scene.”

“Only witnessed by myself and Lady Annette. I promise she won’t tell anyone,” he said, patting her cheek. “Why don’t you get some rest? We have a grand evening planned.”

Her father closed the door, and Phoebe once more flopped back onto the bed. Outside

it had begun to snow, the wind whipping flakes against the pane. She swallowed back the self-pity and whispered, “What about me, Mama? Do you want me to be happy too?”

“You beat me again, you ragged cur,” Charles said with a laugh.

“Your mind is not on the game,” agreed Will. “Could your thoughts be on someone upstairs in the Yellow Room?”

“Is that where she is?” he asked, realizing he’d essentially acknowledged Will’s assumption. He sighed. “The chit stole my heart with one look. I’ll never enjoy another walk in Hyde Park if I don’t win her.”

“She’s not the spoils of war.”

“My heart thinks she is.” What would happen if he ever kissed her? He was afraid he’d be tempted to sell his soul to the devil for a chance to find out.

“Love seems to be contagious.” Will shivered dramatically. “Perhaps I should return to London or stay locked in my room, so I don’t become the next victim to catch the dreaded disease.”

Charles chuckled. “You had parents happy in their marriage. I wouldn’t think you’d be so against it.”

“Oh, I’m in favor of the institution. Just not for myself. I like coming and going as I please and not answering to anyone.” Will pulled his arm back and hit the ball. A clack, and then the wooden ball landed in a side pocket. “One more victory and we’ll dress for dinner.”

A shout in the hall interrupted their match. “Lord Beecham,” the voice called

urgently. "It's Lady Annette. Lord Beecham!"

Will ran from the billiard room and stopped the stable boy pacing the hall and looking nervously up the stairs. "Is there a problem, Joseph?"

"Lady Annette went for a ride, and the weather turned. Lord Weston has gone after her, and he told me to fetch the earl." The lad stepped from foot to foot, wringing his cap in his hands. "She insisted she would only be gone a short while and didn't want me to accompany her."

"My sister can be headstrong. It's not your fault, Joseph. No one can predict the weather," Will said as he took the stairs two at a time. "Saddle three horses and we'll meet you at the stable."

Eight

CONFESSION

Confession, according to the Oxford English Dictionary:

The disclosing of something the knowledge of which by others is considered humiliating or prejudicial to the person confessing; a making known or acknowledging of one's fault, wrong, crime, weakness, etc.

Charles retrieved his riding coat and stood on the portico, waiting for Lord Beecham and Will. The icy snow pelted his skin, and he pulled his collar tighter around his neck. That poor woman was out in this abominable weather.

“What’s happening?” He jumped at Miss Weston’s voice. “What is the commotion about?”

Charles turned to her. “Lady Annette went for a ride and was caught in the snowstorm. Your father has gone after her and sent for the reserves.” He tried to make light of the situation so she wouldn’t worry.

“Oh no. It’s all my fault!” Her fingers gripped his arm, the panic in her words making his gut twist. “I was so selfish, so rude.” She took in a quick breath and covered her mouth with her other hand. “Please let them both be fine.”

He saw a tear slip down her cheek and wiped it away with a thumb. “People go for rides every day. It is not your fault.”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand?—”

Charles faced her, placing both hands on her arms. “Stop. You’ve been through enough this week. Let’s go inside and get you settled. We’ll be back with them in no time.” He turned her toward the door.

She resisted and shouted, “Look!” and pointed.

Lord Weston had come around the corner of the house, carrying Lady Annette, whose arms were around his neck. “Call a physician,” he ordered as took the steps two at a time, holding the woman as if she weighed nothing. “I’m taking her to her chamber. She has a fever and is shaking uncontrollably.”

They watched as Lord Weston moved inside the entrance hall and went upstairs, again two at a time. He met Lord Beecham and Will halfway up. The earl’s bellow for a doctor could have been heard across the district.

Charles led Miss Weston into the parlor. “Let me get you something to drink,” he said, wondering if he should offer a lady wine or brandy in this particular situation.

“If she dies, I will be to blame.”

Definitely brandy.

He sat next to her and handed her the amber liquid. “Now, without more tears—and I know you can do it—why would Lady Annette’s health have anything to do with you?”

The words poured out in a rush. How she’d come across them kissing, the selfish fit she’d thrown. “And I haven’t been able to apologize. I’m sure she ran out after the scene I made.”

Without thinking, Charles put an arm around her shaking shoulders. Her cheeks were wet with tears, and he struggled with how to help her. “Hush, now. All will be well. She’s young and strong and a chill won’t be the death of her.”

That caused another sob, and Charles inwardly berated himself. Try again. “Think of how the two of you will laugh about this when you bring the grandchildren to visit. Lady Annette is a Page. The family is full of heart and a forgiving nature.”

She sniffed and peeked up at him from beneath her dark lashes. “Do you really think so?”

“I’m sure of it.” Then she surprised him by tossing back the brandy without a grimace.

Miss Weston handed him the glass. “Thank you, Mr. Wilkens. You are a good man.”

Charles pried his gaze from her lips. You have no idea how wicked I am, he thought. “There is nothing we can do until the physician arrives. We would only be in the way right now.”

She nodded and leaned her head against his shoulder.

The devil. Does she think I’m made of stone? Conversation. It would keep her mind off the sickbed and his mind off of her... everything.

“Was it lonely growing up with no siblings?” he asked.

She seemed surprised by the question but shook her head. “Papa was a constant source of entertainment. He and Aunt Lucy were devoted to me. Do you have brothers or sisters?”

“Three sisters, I’m afraid. Like your father and aunt, I am devoted to them too, but they are devoted to embarrassing me every chance they get.” He laughed. “Little sisters are not for the faint of heart.”

“I’m glad I had none. Papa always said a son would never equal the sunshine provided by his daughter.” She dabbed at her eyes, recovering both her demeanor and her voice. “I thought he wanted a younger wife to finally get the son he supposedly never wanted. I should have trusted him more.”

“As I said before, you’ve had quite the week.” The warmth of her cheek seeped through his jacket. And it felt so... right. Sitting next to him, head on his shoulder, pouring out her heart. With a certainty he’d never felt before, Charles knew this woman had been made for him. It didn’t matter if her father was a viscount. It would take some persuasion, but he would convince Miss and Lord Weston that she would not be happier with anyone else. He smiled and kissed the top of head, then caught his breath. The scent of lavender floated to his nose, and he fought the desire to sigh in satisfaction.

“Maybe I would have been a better person if I’d been raised in a big family.” She peeked up at him, her brown eyes glistening like the melted sweet. “I wouldn’t be so self-absorbed.”

“Nonsense. By questioning yourself, you question your father and aunt’s part in raising you. Would you insult them?” he asked. “The fact you are even asking the question shows you cannot be as selfish as you think.”

Her smile was a better reward than he could imagine.

“Thank you,” she said. Leaning up, she kissed him on the cheek.

Before he could stop himself, his hand slipped to cup her face. He gently pressed his

lips to hers. Lightning struck, but it wasn't outside. If Charles had thought there was a possibility of walking away from this woman, now he knew it was impossible. When his eyes locked with hers, he saw fear in the depths.

Nodcock!

Will stuck his head in the door, eyes widening at the couple seated together. "There you are. They are working to bring the fever down. The physician is examining her now." Then he was gone.

"Miss Weston, forgive me. You have only recently broken your troth, and I am acting most ungallant." He stood, realizing he still wore his riding coat. "I shall leave you."

"No," she said, grabbing his fingers and pulling him back. "No, I don't want you to leave."

He sat down reluctantly. "It was fear I saw in your eyes. I did not mean to frighten you."

"I'm glad you did." She smiled, her fingertips touching her lips. "I've never felt like that before."

"Like what?" His curiosity might lead him into a very inappropriate conversation.

"Tingly. Like a shiver but in a good way. And here," she said, touching her stomach, "there's a fluttering. Like wings."

"Yes, I have the same reaction." And more, but he wouldn't go into that.

"Papa was right, of course. He always is." With her forefinger, she traced his knuckles. "He said if I was only angry about James, not sad or heartbroken, then I

never really loved him.”

Charles thought his heart would leap from his chest. She hadn’t loved another man. And here he was in the right place at the right time. “So you do not feel as if you are in mourning?”

She shook her head. “No, I feel as if I’m exactly where I’m meant to be.” Leaning forward, she brushed her lips against his, then withdrew, smiling up at him. “Yes, I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.”

“I suppose you’ve kissed hundreds of women,” she said, her lips forming a pout. “You’ll find my reaction quite provincial.”

He tipped her chin and looked straight into her eyes. “There is nothing provincial about you, Miss Weston.”

“I think,” she said with a sly smile, “you should call me Phoebe.” She reached up and tentatively brushed back a strand of hair from his forehead, rubbed it between her fingers as if she’d never felt a man’s hair before.

He closed his eyes and groaned. May the saints help him. As wonderful as this scene was, he needed to be the gentleman and end it. “Miss Weston, er, Phoebe, I cannot profess to have kissed hundreds of women, but I’ve kissed my share. This desire rushing through me is unique to your kiss. No other. But we must stop now or risk yet another scandal.”

Once again, he stood, but this time held his hand out to her. “Shall we find out how our hostess fares?”

When they walked below the mistletoe, Phoebe jumped up and snatched a berry from the plant. Charles, with all the restraint he never knew he had, took the berry from her

and dropped it in his pocket.

“No more kisses until you’ve had time to sort out of your feelings.” He grinned at her disappointed look. “I want you to get a good night’s rest, and we shall talk more tomorrow.”

“You are giving me the opportunity to take back my kiss?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

He shook his head. “Never. It will be a cherished memory until I die an old man. I am giving you the chance to change your mind about giving me another.”

And time to figure out, if the lady didn’t change her mind, how to broach the subject to Lord Weston. How would the viscount take a proposal for his only daughter from a solicitor?

Nine

THE KISS

Kiss, according to the Oxford English Dictionary:

To press or touch with the lips (at the same time compressing and then separating them), in token of affection or greeting, or as an act of reverence; to salute or caress with the lips; to give a kiss to .

December 25

Phoebe woke with a start, grabbing the bedcovers to her chin and looking around the room wildly. Then the last few days came rushing back. James, the trip from London, her father courting someone, that someone catching a chill because of her, and the kiss.

Oh my. James had never kissed her the way Charles had last night. Her body strummed with just the thought. To think she might have married him and never had the experience of a real kiss. And she wanted more.

Was it Charles in particular or just a man other than James? Her instinct told her it was Charles in particular. Fortunately, it was Christmastide with an abundance of mistletoe, and Phoebe was determined to find out.

She took her deep-green velvet dress with a cream lace overlay from the wardrobe where it had been unpacked. A maid knocked on the door.

“Good morning,” she said, popping her head around the door. The girl had a round face and soft brown eyes. “My name is Jenny and I’m to help you with your morning dress.”

“How is Lady Annette?” she asked, praying the hostess was doing better.

“The fever has broken. She is tired but will recover,” Jenny told her. “We had quite a scare.”

“Yes,” agreed Phoebe. “Is my father up, do you know?”

“Yes, miss, he’s in the breakfast room.”

After Jenny combed and wrapped Phoebe’s hair into a loose chignon, pulling strands of curls to frame her face, she walked Phoebe to the breakfast room. Her father’s eyes were puffy from lack of sleep, she assumed, and the lines of his face seemed deeper. He, Mr. Page, and Mr. Wilkens stood as she entered and ran to her father.

“Papa, she is better?” Phoebe hugged him tightly, blinking back the tears as his arms wrapped her in a warm embrace. “I’m so sorry. So, so sorry.”

“Nonsense, it wasn’t your fault. And Nettie, er, Lady Annette would never blame you. She only wants to be your friend.” He kissed her on the forehead. “Do you think that is possible?”

“Of course, Papa. I only want you to be happy. If she is the one who can do that, how can I not grow to love her as you do?” Phoebe meant every word. Her father had made so many sacrifices for her. She would do whatever needed to ensure his happiness. If he loved this woman, she had to be wonderful.

“I must see if she’s awake,” Papa said, kissing her forehead once more. “Enjoy your

breakfast. We shall spend Christmas Day together after all.”

Phoebe realized he was right. They would be together for the holiday. She turned to Will and Charles with her best smile. “Good morning.”

They both returned the greeting, and Charles hurried to pull out a chair for her. “Would you like coffee or tea? I’ll pour you a cup.”

She gave him another grateful smile. “Tea, thank you.”

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Fitfully. And you? And Mr. Page?” Would Lady Annette’s brother be as understanding as his sister?

“Like a rock,” said Mr. Page, his hazel eyes bright. “I knew she was out of danger before I went to bed. As did Charles. And today, you shall take Nettie’s place for the activities. Swapping one beauty for another.”

She looked up at Charles, who had just set down a plate in front of her laden with a small amount of eggs, ham, and two slices of toast. “Thank you. You are too kind.”

He stared at her for a full moment, his eyes not straying from her face. She resisted the urge to squirm. “Are you feeling better about the... incident?” He reached across the table and pulled his coffee cup next to her, took a seat, and waited for her answer.

“Now that I know she will be well, yes.” Phoebe glanced at Mr. Page. “Do you think she will forgive me?”

He snorted. “My sister doesn’t carry a grudge and is one of the sweetest people I’ve ever known. If you are willing to be her friend, she will be more than happy to do the

same.”

Relief swept over Phoebe. She dug into her eggs with gusto, realizing how hungry she was. Lord Beecham entered. “Happy Christmas to all,” he said jovially.

“Happy Christmas,” all three replied.

“My lord,” Phoebe began, “do you think Lady Annette will join us today?”

Beecham shrugged. “Don’t know. She’s mostly worried about tomorrow. Nettie has always passed out the gifts on Boxing Day.”

“May I take her place? It seems we may soon be related, so I wouldn’t mind helping.” Perhaps it would show Lady Annette that she was a good person, not just a spoiled daughter.

“I think that would be a wonderful idea,” Lord Beecham said. “I’ll let Alice know she will have assistance.”

“His fiancée,” Charles whispered in her ear.

She shivered at his warm breath against her neck. A delicious shiver. “Thank you,” she whispered back.

The rest of the day went too quickly. There were parlor games and a magnificent feast with roast goose, venison, root vegetables, a clear broth, and white soup. The plum pudding was the best she’d ever had. And the company was warm and welcoming. Only Aunt Lucy was missing to make the celebration complete.

At the end of the evening, everyone but Charles and Mr. Page had made their excuses and left the drawing room. The three of them sat before the hearth, enjoying the

boughs of greenery, holly, and ivy.

It had begun to snow again, and Phoebe went to the window, watching the fat flakes drift down against the midnight sky. Behind her, Will said, “I believe I shall call it a night.”

He rose, came over to her, and bowed. “It is kind of you to help with Boxing Day tomorrow. I hope you will become a regular visitor at Beecham Manor.”

“Thank you, Mr. Page. I hope so too.” Phoebe was touched that he was letting her know she would be accepted.

“Please, if I heard my father correctly, we will soon be brother and sister. Call me Will.” As he neared the door, she rushed behind him. Charles was stoking the fire, so she tapped Will on the shoulder. When he turned around, she hopped up, snatched a berry, and grinned at him.

He laughed and bent to kiss her cheek, but she moved her face so their lips met. She closed her eyes, not moving for a moment, waiting for that rush of heat, the excitement of the intimate touch.

Nothing.

She pulled away and opened her eyes. Will was chuckling. “If you meant to make him jealous, I think it worked,” he said with a wink.

Phoebe shook her head. “No, it was an experiment.”

“What kind of experiment?” he asked, looking over her shoulder at Charles.

“I wanted to see if I felt anything like I did with...” Phoebe covered her hand with

her mouth, appalled she almost said her thoughts aloud.

“And?” he asked, tapping her nose. “Was it a success?”

“I think it was,” she whispered, seeing Charles glare at them both over her shoulder.

Will left them alone. Phoebe turned to Charles and walked slowly toward him, her mind whirling with thoughts of another kiss. Her palms were sweaty, and her stomach was fluttering like a hundred butterfly wings.

“What secrets were you sharing with Will?” Charles asked with a serious face.

“I needed to see if I was affected by only your kiss, or any man who wasn’t James,” she said truthfully. “It seems fate knew I was making a mistake, picked me up, and tossed me in your path.”

He stepped forward and laid his hands lightly on her waist, urging her closer. Her arms went around his neck without thought, as if it were the most natural action, one she’d done a hundred times before and would do a hundred more. A hundred million, a laughing voice whispered in her head.

“And?” he asked, his voice husky, his amber eyes pinning her.

Instead of answering him, she pulled his head to hers and pressed her mouth against his. She smiled against his lips when he groaned, wondering where this man had been all her life. A pulse began in her throat and descended to her core, strumming and stroking her insides until she couldn’t breathe. He tasted of coffee and marmalade, and she wanted the kiss to never end.

When Charles pulled back, both were breathing heavily. Her chest rose and fell, and emotion threatened to overwhelm her. She was at home in his arms. Yes, there was so

much she didn't know about this man. So much she wanted to learn. But nothing he could say would change her mind. When they parted, a piece of her heart would go with him.

"Does that answer your question?" she managed, then looked up at him shyly.

He nodded and bent to feather kisses along her jaw, then resumed the delicious assault on her mouth again. When his tongue tickled the seam of her lips, her eyes popped open. Charles pressed against her lower back, melding her body with his. When his tongue asked for entrance again, she opened her mouth slightly.

It gets better? she thought as her head began to spin. Oh, so much better.

"Happy Christmas, Phoebe," he rasped in her ear. "Do you know how long I've been waiting for you?"

She shook her head. "Happy Christmas to you too. Thank you."

"For what?" he asked, pulling back, curiosity turning his eyes to a dark gold.

"For finding me." Then on tiptoes, she kissed him again and knew no other man would ever, ever make her feel this way except Mr. Charles Wilkens.

Ten

HAPPY EVER AFTER

Happy ever after, according to the Oxford English Dictionary:

Senses relating principally to good fortune; Of an event or period: favored by good fortune, lucky, fortunate; That happens or presents itself by chance, fortuitously.

March 1821

Weston Estates, England

Phoebe held the letter to her chest. He was coming. At long last, she would see him again. It had been the longest three months of her life. When they had parted before the new year, he had made her cry. After a week of being together, learning one another's likes and dislikes, facial expressions, and senses of humor, her heart had shown no hesitation. Fate had sent this man to her and saved her from a horrible mistake.

"Are you afraid you will change your mind?" she asked, silently cursing the hot tears threatening behind her closed lids.

She heard him chuckle, then he tipped her chin up. "Open your eyes, Phoebe."

She did, wanting to lose herself in the honey-colored depths. "We will write every week?"

He nodded. "I realize you dislike the word no, but I will give no quarter on our future. By spring, we will know one another better. Then when we meet again, if you still wish to do so, then I will ask Lord Weston for your hand."

"And he will give it. But why so long?" She hated the whine in her voice. And who told him she hated the word no?

"Your father requested a long engagement when you were betrothed to James. Do you agree he was wise to do so?"

Her heart hurt at the thought she might have been Lady Kendall and never have known Charles as she did now. Her life would have been desolate, waiting for her husband to leave another woman's bed, thankful for crumbs of affection—or hating her husband with all the ferocity of a Weston—and never knowing true love.

"Yes," she said reluctantly, her chin tingling at his touch.

"By waiting, he will recognize our self-imposed delay. If he approves of me, there will be nothing to stand in our way." Charles emphasized the word if.

Did he think Papa would turn him down? She knew better of course. Lord Weston cared little for the wagging tongues of the ton. He only cared about her happiness. And she knew without doubt that it revolved around Mr. Charles Wilkens.

"Then we will get to know each other better through letters and meet in April. I can wait that long." She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "I'm warning you, though, I am steadfast when my mind is made up."

As if those words spurred him on, Charles pulled her roughly against his lean length and kissed her soundly, ravishing her mouth, their tongues clashing. When he finally leaned back, Phoebe was out of breath and knew there was no turning back.

Over the past weeks, letters had brought their personalities to light. She found him to be diligent in his work and well-respected, according to her father. Phoebe had long talks with Nettie, who was now her stepmother.

Another unexpected relationship. Phoebe had found Lady Annette, now Lady Weston, to be warm and kind with a wicked sense of humor. She'd also (without asking her new husband) given Phoebe several boxing lessons. They had become friends. The viscountess had established immediately that "stepmother" was only a formal term. It had surprised Phoebe that Nettie had craved female companionship. It seems being raised by men and her past scandal had robbed her of female friends. The scandal that had sent her running from London had involved the son of a marquess pinching her arse and ending up with a broken nose. At Almack's of all places. Oh, how they had laughed together when Nettie had retold the story.

Phoebe smoothed the latest letter on her lap and reread it.

Dearest Phoebe,

April has arrived at long last. I shall be on your doorstep in one week unless I hear from you sooner. This is your last chance to be rid of me before our courtship begins.

I had a dream that I'm sure you will interpret for me as you have before. I was at a grand ball, looking for the woman of my dreams (pun intended), and told to dance with as many women as I could in order to find her. Yet, each time I chose a partner, by the time the dance ended, my partner was always you.

My interpretation is this: Fate knew before I did that there was only one woman for me. Miss Phoebe Weston, soon to be (hopefully) Mrs. Wilkens.

I admit I am a bit nervous to speak with your father about courting his only child, though you've been adamant he is fine with our match. I don't seem to be affected by

insecurity unless it pertains to not being with you. Then I find myself quaking like a boy about to be punished for stealing the pie from the kitchen. It's ridiculous, yet there it is.

Will and I met at Jackson's for a few rounds. He's becoming quite the pugilist but insists my height gives me an advantage. We met his brother Lucius at Boodles afterwards. He's a man of his word. Besides procuring mines from the widow—sorry, Lady Winfield—for me and Uncle, he has been responsible for three new clients since the new year began. Do you know if they have set a wedding date yet?

I will pray each day that an envelope does not appear with your handwriting. In the meantime, I will think of our last kiss and dream of your sweet scent until then.

Your doting and ridiculous fian friend,

Charles

If the imp inside got her way, she would write just to tease him. Fill the letter with words of love and joy. Phoebe tapped her bottom lip for a few minutes, then made her decision. With a sly grin, she went to the desk and procured paper, pen, and ink.

Dearest Charles,

I hope seeing my handwriting didn't frighten you too much, but I couldn't help myself. Besides, how could I not respond to such a precious letter? I have added to my bundle, wrapped with a red ribbon of love.

You are becoming skilled at interpreting dreams. Of course, it meant that we should be together. Remember when you brought up serendipity at Christmastide? I've decided it is my new favorite word. I have made a beautiful needlepoint with SERENDIPITY sewn in the center. It will adorn our entry hall when we are married,

so everyone will know how lucky we are.

Yes, I think you're doting and ridiculous just as you signed your last letter. But friend? Really, Charles. At least best friend, wouldn't you say? Though I will admit, Nettie is fast becoming that. We chat and gossip, and I feel as if I have a true friend in her. Papa can't seem to wipe the grin off his face. I swear he wears it in his sleep.

Oh, my. Did I tell you the news? Nettie is with child. I shall have a brother this year. Or I hope it will be a boy, for Papa deserves a son. And Nettie, being raised by men, will know exactly how to deal with the babe.

There is no way on this side of heaven that Papa could refuse you. He wants the entire world to be as happy as he is with Nettie. I admit she has put a light in his eyes that I've never seen before. I truly hope I am able to put such a light in your eyes. You are a man of rare intelligence when it comes to me. Demanding yet not forceful, understanding yet not gullible, passionate yet not ardent. A rarity, to be sure.

I dream of your kisses every night. More than that, I dream of your deep tenor, your laughing eyes, and calming presence. I told Nettie I woke up hugging my pillow the other day, kissing the soft covering. Now who's ridiculous?

Please hurry. My heart and lips need you.

Your loving and impatient fian sweetheart,

Phoebe

It had been a successful Christmas party at Beecham Manor. Her father and Nettie already married, Lord Beecham was to marry in two weeks, Lucius (how strange it felt to have brothers) was courting his widow, and she and Charles would soon be betrothed. Or she would start attending the events of the Season and dance with any

man who asked her. She giggled at the thought of Charles's face, seeing her waltz with another man.

The next week

Weston Estates

Charles aimed his mallet and cracked the ball, sending it down the lawn's gentle slope. Much too far for him to win the game now. He and Andrew—his future father-in-law—had challenged the women. Phoebe's laughter floated behind him.

"What did you say about men being superior?" she taunted.

Heat surged up Charles's neck. "I was only teasing Phoebe, although I did consider myself quite good at this. Yesterday." He bowed his head in defeat.

Phoebe put an arm around Lady Weston. "Nettie and I are a force to be reckoned with when we combine our strength. You'd best remember that. Both of you."

"Oh, I learned that lesson long ago." Andrew winked at his wife, then concern filled his eyes as he watched her rub her belly. "Time for a nap, my dear. Tell the children good day."

"Good day, children," she giggled.

Phoebe rolled her eyes but wiggled her brows at Charles. What did the wicked woman have in mind? A kiss? He would most certainly oblige. He was known to be very accommodating. He took Phoebe's hand and led her to a grouping of sculptured bushes. Once inside and hidden away, he pulled her close. "I can't believe we have not yet been alone."

Lavender tickled his nose. Her lips tickled his neck. And Miss Phoebe Weston in general tickled his fancy. He buried his face in her hair. “You were right about your father.”

She gasped and looked at him. “And?”

“We are officially courting. If I had my way, we’d read the banns at the end of the week,” he said, then bent his head and captured her lips. It was everything he had remembered and dreamed of for months. More. He wondered vaguely if his uncle’s advice had helped him in catching this beauty. He had put his foot down on several points, and she had accepted that. Yet he was not arrogant enough to think Phoebe would always be so pliant. He loved her feisty, he loved her sweet, he loved her angry... He loved her, plain and simple.

“We cannot marry so soon after Lord Beecham’s ceremony. I shall meet my last brother-in-law. Did I tell you they will arrive from India tomorrow? It will be May before Aunt Lucy is back from... wherever she is right now.”

He shook his head. “As long as we find a way for stolen kisses, I don’t care who is here or who is not.”

This time, his kiss was long and deep and loving. Her fingers curled into the hair at his nape, and he thought he would explode with desire and happiness. He would ask Will to stand with him when they said their vows. Charles would be forever grateful for his friend’s invitation last Christmas Eve. Of course, his uncle would claim credit also since Sir Horace had sent him on the widow errand. His cousins Evie and Fenella had said, if they hadn’t asked him to join them at Hyde Park, he would never have met Miss Weston. True. So in the end, his happiness had been the result of all their actions.

Thank you Will, Uncle, Evie, and Fenella.

And serendipity.

Reviews are the lifeblood of every author. If you enjoyed this story's please consider leaving a review at your favorite retailer.

If you would like to know more about Lord Weston and Lady Annette's romance, read: A Wallflower's Wassail Punch (Once Upon a Widow #8).

If you are interested in what happened between Lord Page and the widow Lady Winfield, read: A Scoundrel's Christmas Challenge (Once Upon a Widow #9) .

Prologue

The large gates of Whitmore Hall opened with a creak as the carriage rolled through, the sound mingling with the rustling of leaves in the wind. The sweeping grounds of the estate stretched out on either side, the majestic trees casting long shadows as the late afternoon sun began to dip lower in the sky. Inside the carriage, Christopher Wright, the Duke of Haverleigh sat across from his only friend, James Hartwell, Viscount Landowne as they discussed what they would do over their upcoming break from Eton.

Christopher leaned against the seat while keeping his posture perfectly dignified as he gazed out of the window. At fourteen, he was already an imposing figure, his features sharp and his demeanor that of a young man well aware of his position in society. He kept his golden blond hair in a tangle of curls that fell just below his neck—even though the haircut was not the height of fashion. What did he care about fashion? He was still too young to bother with such things. His friend, James sat beside him, more relaxed but still every inch the gentleman. The two had spent their childhood together at Eton, and their bond had only grown stronger over the years. This was his first time visiting Whitmore Hall. He had no reason to visit before this. His father had always insisted he return to Haverleigh—he had ducal training to see to when he was not at school.

Oh, how his father had insisted... Neither of them had believed that his training would be put to use so soon. Christopher certainly hadn't. He had thought his father larger than life. So, when he had fell over and died suddenly it had come to a shock. He was not that old. How could a man so young just keel over from chest pain? It was a terrifying thing to witness, and one he would not soon forget. He should have

stayed home and remained in mourning, but he could not do that. He could not stay in that house knowing that his father would no longer be there. His mother, well that was another story altogether. Christopher wasn't exactly close with her either, and she had not seemed to care one bit that her husband had died.

So, no, going home was not something he could do. It held too many haunting memories he could not escape. He would much rather stay with his dear friend and his family.

"Whitmore Hall," Christopher said as the carriage finally came to a stop. "It doesn't seem as dismal as Haverleigh."

James chuckled, leaning back in his seat. "I am not so certain what to make of that statement, though father will be pleased that you do not think it is dismal. He does love our ancestral home."

Christopher raised an eyebrow. "I did not mean...."

"Do not try to explain. I do understand." James waved a hand dismissively. "You cannot go back there right now. So, you are welcome here. Always, and my family will agree."

The door of the carriage opened, and the footman helped them both down, their boots crunching against the gravel as they stepped onto the driveway of Whitmore Hall. The sprawling estate loomed before them; its stone facade bathed in the soft glow of the setting sun. The air was rich with the scent of roses and fresh grass, a welcome change the seriousness of Haverleigh.

The moment they set foot on the grounds, a young voice rang out, light and high-pitched, though undeniably full of mischief. "James!" a young girl approximately nine years old, bounded down the stairs from the house, her golden curls bouncing

with each step and smiled at Viscount Landowne with clear adoration. Her wide, curious eyes landed on Christopher, and a mischievous grin spread across her face. "Mother said you were bringing home a friend," she said with a quick curtsy, her tone laced with mock reverence. "Is it true that you're a duke?" Ah...this must be his friend's little sister, Lady Phillipa...

Christopher's lips tightened into a thin line, though he fought to keep the annoyance from his expression. His gaze swept over her, and he had to admit, she was certainly a feisty little thing. But that didn't mean he had to like her. "Hello," he said coolly, his voice polished and formal. "Yes. I am a duke."

The girl's grin grew wider, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "Do I have to address you as Your Grace," she teased.

Christopher's lips tightened, his patience already beginning to wear thin. This —this girl—was a handful. He was accustomed to well-behaved young ladies who were respectful and composed, not children who saw it as their duty to mock him the moment they laid eyes on him. He was a duke, for heaven's sake, and she, by all accounts, was the younger sister of his dear friend James. Shouldn't she be more in awe of him? Most would be...

"No, Lady Phillipa," he replied stiffly, his tone edged with formality, "You need not address me as 'Your Grace.' A simple 'sir' will do." James had spoken at length about his little sister. It was the only reason Christopher even knew the little hellion's name. He should have been prepared for her gregarious nature, but he still couldn't help being taken aback by it. Her personality would take some time to become accustomed to, and he feared it might take him longer than most.

Pippa tilted her head, clearly enjoying the tension in the air. "A simple 'sir,'" she repeated, with an exaggerated sigh. "That does sound dreadfully dull, doesn't it? You are a duke, after all." She gave him a pointed look, clearly waiting for some response,

as though her jest was a witticism for the ages.

James chuckled softly from behind him, clearly aware of the impromptu battle brewing between them. "Pippa," he began, though his tone was more amused than admonishing, "Do try to behave. His Grace has only just arrived. It would be most unkind to torment him so soon."

Pippa stuck her tongue out at James, but then turned her attention back to Christopher, her smile unwavering. "Oh, but James," she said brightly, "It is just so tempting to tease him. He looks so serious, like he has something stuck up his?—"

"Enough!" Christopher snapped, his sharp tone cutting through the air. His patience was slipping. A duke was never supposed to be the subject of such childish jest. He squared his shoulders and turned to face her fully, his gaze colder. "Lady Phillipa, perhaps you would like to return to your lessons in the house? I'm sure you have many books to entertain you." He glanced past her. "Or a governess that is surely looking for you."

Pippa raised her brows in mock surprise, clearly delighted by his discomfort. "Oh, I've read all of the books that interest me in that stuffy library," she said, her voice turning mockingly sweet. "But if you'd like me to go, I suppose I shall. You are correct that my governess is probably in search of me."

James, sensing that Christopher was not enjoying the situation, stepped forward. "Pippa, come now. We are both tired from the journey. Let's leave His Grace to settle in." He gave Christopher an apologetic look, but the tension in the air was palpable.

Pippa folded her arms over her chest, pouting slightly as if she was a much older woman trying to hold onto her dignity. "Fine," she huffed, giving Christopher one last pointed look. "But don't think I won't remember this, sir." She turned on her heel, storming back up the stairs to the house.

Christopher stood there for a moment, watching her retreating figure with an expression of disbelief. How could it be possible that someone so young could be so irritating? He turned back to James, who was still smirking. "She's insufferable," he muttered under his breath, his jaw tight.

James let out a low laugh. "You'll get used to her, I'm sure. She's a spirited one, our Pippa. But she means well." His tone softened as he regarded his friend. "I'm sure you'll find your visit here... interesting."

Christopher's mood didn't improve. "A tiny part of me wishes I could just go back to Haverleigh," he muttered, shaking his head. "Bu this place feels... welcome. I know that sounds a little crazy. Haverleigh is do dreary in comparison."

James's smile faded as he stepped closer, his voice dropping to a more serious tone. "You know, Christopher," he began, "You don't have to do this. You don't have to stay. If Whitmore is weighing on you—if you can't bear being there—then there's no shame in leaving."

Christopher looked out across the grand grounds of Whitmore Hall, the vast expanse of green stretching beneath a dimming sky. The trees swayed in the breeze, and the grandeur of it all felt as if it was suffocating him. He exhaled slowly, his frustration growing. "I can't leave because I cannot go home, not now." He wondered if he would ever feel comfortable at Haverleigh again. Not after watching his father die in front of him.

James nodded, as though he understood better than anyone else the deep, unspoken turmoil plaguing his friend. "I know," he said softly. "But you must know, no matter what... you don't have to bear it alone."

For a moment, Christopher was silent, a storm of thoughts clouding his mind. He didn't belong in this place. He didn't belong among these people. His world was at

Haverleigh, and here he felt like an outsider. Yet, in the back of his mind, there was one thing that gnawed at him—one voice that persisted in his thoughts, one presence he couldn't ignore.

He could not deny the strange reaction Lady Phillipa had stirred in him. She was insolent, brash, and utterly impossible. And yet, there was something about her—a fire in her eyes, an impish grin that he knew would haunt him until the day he left Whitmore Hall and probably long after that as well. The more she teased him, the more he had become drawn to her—it was rather perverse.

He didn't know whether it was her mockery of him or the way she spoke to him like no one else did, but something about the way she pushed his buttons made him feel alive in a way he hadn't felt since his father's death. He wasn't sure if he was relieved to see her go or looking forward to the next time they would clash. Either way, he knew something had been set in motion. Something he hadn't planned, nor did he fully understand. Christopher sighed, glancing back at James. "What have you gotten me into?"

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," James said, his tone light. "You always do."

But Christopher wasn't so sure about that. And as the evening drew on, with Pippa's words echoing in his mind, he realized that perhaps he had underestimated her—and that he might soon find himself tangled in something far more complicated than he had ever anticipated. He sighed. She was but a child. Why did she bother him so bloody much?

One

The morning mist lingered over the grounds of Whitmore Hall as the carriage wheels crunched along the gravel path, heralding the arrival of the Duke of Haverleigh. Ten years had passed since he had last set foot on this estate—ten years since he had been here with his dear friend, James Hartwell, then Viscount Landowne. But with the death of James' father, the Earl of Whitmore, a loss that had shaken their family to the core, James was now the Earl of Whitmore, and no one understood how difficult assuming a title could be more than Christopher. His friend had to be hurting, and badly.

Christopher had returned to Whitmore to be at his friend's side and aid him in any way he could. He had received a summons a few days earlier, explaining that his father had died suddenly in his sleep. His death had been unexpected and swift leaving James any number of countless responsibilities to handle. So, Christopher had come to offer his condolences and to be the friend James needed in his time of grief.

Stepping from the carriage, Christopher surveyed the sprawling estate with a mixture of nostalgia and sorrow. The grand stone walls of Whitmore Hall loomed before him, their timeless elegance hiding the sorrow within. He had often visited the estate as a during his Eton years. Before his father's death he had been full of life and expectations. Now as he returned to Whitmore it was with the heavy knowledge that the past, no matter how cherished, could not be recaptured, and in some ways he did not wish to.

The heavy wooden doors of the manor opened as he approached, and the butler ushered him inside with little fanfare. The house was quiet and still, as though

mourning the loss of its master. The echoes of past laughter seemed distant now, drowned beneath the weight of the present. He went in search of his friend immediately to ensure that how he was faring.

He found James seated at his father's old desk in the study, a room that had seen countless decisions made and letters written, and yet, it was now the room of a man burdened with an impossible task. He sat hunched over the accounts, his brow furrowed with concentration, though his posture spoke of exhaustion. The papers in front of him were likely a blur of numbers and figures, all foreign to the new earl. Responsibilities he had never expected to handle so soon and a family estate that could not be left unattended.

Christopher knocked softly on the door frame, his voice low but firm. "James?"

James glanced up; his eyes tired but brightened slightly when his gaze landed on him. "Christopher," he said hoarsely, setting aside the accounts. "Thank you for coming."

Christopher stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. He could see the weight on his friend's shoulders, the grief that had already sunk deep into his soul. "You're doing the best you can," he said, his voice steady and reassuring. "I know it feels impossible now, but you'll find your footing."

James rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I don't know how to do this. I wasn't prepared for this yet. I've always been beside him, helping with the land and the tenants, but never like this. Never with all these damn accounts. I feel so... alone." His voice faltered, as though the emotions he had been holding back were threatening to spill over.

Christopher placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "You're not alone, James. You have me, and you'll have everyone in this household. You've done so much already. You don't have to handle it all at once."

James nodded, but the deep exhaustion in his eyes remained. “Thank you. I just... I don’t know how to fill his shoes. I never expected him to leave us so soon.”

Christopher sat in the chair opposite him, his gaze sympathetic. “I know,” he murmured. “I lost my father when I was young, if you’ll recall. I watched him die in front of me. It was... devastating. But we learn to carry on, little by little. You’ll find your way.”

Though Christopher had yet to return to Haverleigh... He remained in London at the townhouse there all year long. He left the running of his country estate to his steward and made decisions by way of missives and messengers. He could not go there still. In his mind, that was his father’s home, not his, and it was there that his father had taken his last breath.

There was a long silence, both men lost in the gravity of their own thoughts. It wasn’t easy, this transition from the world of carefree youth to the heavy mantle of responsibility. Christopher, despite his stoic demeanor, could not help but empathize with James. He had been through it himself, though it had been a different kind of loss. No loss was ever easy.

James cleared his throat, breaking the silence. “I’ll manage. I just wish I had more time to... adjust.”

Christopher gave him a wry smile. “Time is something none of us can afford, I’m afraid.”

James chuckled weakly, his gaze returning to the papers on his desk. “No, I suppose not.”

He would remain at Whitmore as long as he was needed. Christopher had only one true friend, and he remained loyal to him. If James needed him there was no question

about it. He would be there for him. Even if it was just sitting in a room filled with silent grief and frustration. Which is what they did for another hour until James gave up and said he needed to go for a walk—by himself. Leaving Christopher alone with his own thoughts and nothing to do with them.

After James left, Christopher decided he needed some air as well. The confines of the study had seemed too small, too heavy, and he could not sit in that room any longer. Especially as a good majority of the time he had spent in the room consisted of watching as his friend crumbled under the weight of his new title. He exited the study and started to wander through the halls of Whitmore Hall, the place that had once been so familiar, yet now seemed foreign. The estate had an almost eerie quietness about it, as if the walls held the grief of the family within them. He passed a few servants who nodded respectfully but said nothing, and he eventually found himself outside, in the courtyard, where he could take in the cool afternoon air.

That's when he saw her. Lady Phillipa—Pippa—Hartwell. Her golden hair had fallen loose from a chignon and tumbled around her angelic face. He was suddenly struck a little stupid as he stared at her from the edge of the courtyard. She was standing near the garden, her back to him as she surveyed the sprawling grounds of the estate. Those golden curls were enticing and gorgeous as sunlight streamed over them. Pippa stared up at the sky, her face set in a scowl of concentration. She had grown into a beautiful young woman and there was no mistaking the fire remained in her blue eyes. It had always been there when she was a young girl. Some things never changed... The same fiery spirit that had gotten under his skin all those years ago had not disappeared, and he found he was glad for that.

As if sensing him, she turned her gaze to meet his, her lips parted in surprise. But then those blue eyes turned to a flame that suggested trouble and he braced himself for her biting tongue. "You," she said, the word dripping with disdain.

Christopher's lips twisted into a wry grin. It may be perverse of him, but he had

missed this. “Good to see you as well, Lady Phillipa.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m sure it is.” Pippa rolled her eyes. “It’s always a pleasure to cross paths with you, Your Grace,” she added, the mockery clear in her tone.

“I do apologize for not offering the usual pleasantries,” Christopher replied smoothly, stepping closer, “as I didn’t realize you had such a fondness for me. Allow me to rectify that now.”

Her eyes flashed with irritation. “Fondness is far too kind a word for someone who has only ever treated me with the utmost arrogance,” she said, her voice sharp. “You’re as insufferable now as you were then.”

He leaned closer, enjoying the way she bristled at his mere presence. “Then I shall consider it a compliment, Lady Phillipa. After all, I can’t be too insufferable if you’re still so willing to use that deliciously barbed tongue against me.”

“You’ll never truly know how delicious my tongue can be,” she snapped, taking a step back. Her cheeks pinkened into a delightful blush as if she realized what she had just said. He couldn’t help thinking about those words and wondering something a man should never consider about his best friend’s little sister. He inwardly cursed as he imagined holding her in his arms and tasting that tongue of hers. “I have far better things to do than bicker with you,” she said dragging him out of his own fantasies.

Her words startled him, and he shook his head to dislodge the imagery that had seemed to stay firmly in his mind—what the blazes was that? Fortunately, he knew how to distract her—sharing barbs always worked. Besides she clearly still bristled with resentment toward him—and perhaps something else, something deeper that he wasn’t quite ready to admit. Did she feel this sudden, unshakeable passion that seemed to spring out of nowhere as well? He would examine whatever it was later when she was not near clouding his thoughts. “Then perhaps you should return to

your ‘better things,’” he said, voice low but laced with something unspoken, something that hovered in the air between them like a dangerous promise.

Pippa hesitated, her eyes narrowing as if she were debating whether to say something cutting. Finally, she muttered under her breath, “You may be a duke, but you’re still a pompous arse.”

Christopher’s smile was slow to spread across his face. “And yet,” he said quietly, “you’re still speaking to me.”

Pippa’s cheeks flushed even brighter, and then she turned sharply, leaving him standing there in the courtyard, feeling as if something had shifted in the very air between them. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he knew one thing for certain—this was far from over. Christopher stood there, watching Pippa walk away, her golden curls bouncing with each step as if to mock him. Her sharp words still lingered in the air, but beneath that thinly veiled irritation, something else simmered. He had always known that there was fire in her, but he hadn’t realized how dangerously close that fire was to igniting something in him. The thought unsettled him more than it should.

For years, he had seen Pippa as nothing more than James’ younger sister—a playful child with a sharp tongue and a knack for getting under his skin. But now, standing in the courtyard, watching her leave with that defiant swing in her step, he couldn’t deny the undeniable pull that thrummed between them. It wasn’t just the physical attraction—though that was certainly there—it was something deeper, something he had never imagined before.

He cursed under his breath and rubbed a hand over his face. What was he doing? He was a duke, after all, and she was James’ sister. This was absurd, and yet... he couldn’t shake the feeling that something had shifted. He was no longer the same young boy who had first met Pippa all those years ago and she was no little girl. She had grown into a woman of striking beauty, sharp wit, and a mind of her own, though the latter

she had always shown him. Gone was the little girl he had thought of as nothing more than an annoyance. A part of him wondered if she had noticed it too. The way their words had tangled, and their gazes had held for just a moment longer than was appropriate. Was that why she had fled?

With a deep breath, Christopher turned and walked toward the manor, his mind still swirling with the aftermath of his encounter with Pippa. He had to put it aside for now. He had come to Whitmore Hall for a reason, and that reason was James. But he couldn't deny that, as the minutes passed by, thoughts of Lady Pippa Hartwell persisted, lingering like a stubborn ember in the back of his mind, burning images in his mind that kept him enraptured.

Two

The day had started with a brisk but pleasant breeze, the sky clear and bright as Pippa set out for a ride across Whitmore Hall's vast estate. The crisp air filled her lungs, and for a few moments, she could forget the tension that had lingered between her and that infernal duke ever since their encounter in the courtyard. She had thought of little else, his words, the strange fire in her chest, the way his smile had seemed to promise something more—though she had been careful to dismiss it all as nothing more than irritation.

Then there was the loss of her father... She could barely refrain from becoming an emotional mess. The last thing she needed was to have these unexpected and unexplainable feelings for a man she despised on a good day. She could not allow herself to fall into something that she could not crawl her way out of, and that man would take advantage of any weakness she showed him.

She rode easily through the winding paths that threaded their way around the sprawling estate. Her mount, a spirited chestnut mare, trotted gracefully over the well-worn trails. The rhythmic sound of hooves against the earth brought a measure of peace, and for a while, she was content to be lost in the quiet of the woods, with only the occasional birdcall and the rustle of leaves to break the stillness.

It allowed her the time she needed to clear her mind and just enjoy the day. She did not want to think about loss or grief, and she did not want to think about a duke she loathed. Pippa wanted to be free of any responsibility and just...breathe. Was that too much to ask? But as Pippa guided her mare further into the forest, the sky darkened suddenly, the pleasant warmth of the afternoon was replaced by a creeping chill. A

sense of foreboding slid over her like a dark shroud. She frowned as the wind picked up, stirring the trees above her. It had been a fine day earlier, but now the air carried the sharp scent of rain. A storm was moving in quickly, far faster than she could have anticipated. There would be no way to avoid it, but she would have to try.

With a sigh, Pippa pulled her reins and steered her horse toward the nearest path that would lead her back to the house, but it was too late. The first drop of rain fell, followed by another, then another, until the clouds hovering nearby opened in full force. The rain lashed down in sheets, and the wind howled around her, whipping her hair and dampening her gown. “Blast it,” she muttered, urging her mare to gallop toward the shelter of the trees. But even as she rode, the storm seemed to intensify, the gusts of wind driving the rain sideways, making it nearly impossible to see clearly.

She soon became soaked to the bone within moments, the cold seeping into her skin, the chill cutting straight through her riding habit. The forest seemed to close in around her, the storm growing more violent by the second. She needed shelter and fast. It occurred to her that there should be an old hunting lodge nearby. She had often played there as a girl when she wanted to avoid going home or rather avoid the lessons her governess wished to teach her. She pulled on the reins to guide her horse in that direction. The wind continued to whip around her and rain impaired her vision. But then, through the rolling fog and the rain, she saw it—the small, ancient hunting lodge nestled against the trees, its stone walls hidden beneath layers of ivy, the thatched roof sagging slightly but still standing firm.

Pippa urged her mare toward it, relief flooding through her as she guided the horse beneath the small overhang at the door. She slid down from the saddle, her legs unsteady from the cold. She quickly tied the horse’s reins to the nearby post, but it was a difficult task. Her fingers were numb from the cold, and she fumbled to tie it properly. She glanced around, trying to see through the pouring rain, but the storm had already reduced visibility to little more than a blur. As she stepped toward the

door, she heard a familiar voice.

“Well, well, Lady Phillipa. Fancy meeting you here.”

Pippa froze at the sound of Haverleigh’s voice. She turned sharply, her heart sinking as she saw him standing beneath the eaves of the lodge, looking equally drenched, but no less poised. His golden hair clung to his forehead, his dark coat heavy with rainwater.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, her voice sharp. Her temper flared almost immediately. Why couldn’t she escape him?

“I might ask you the same question,” Haverleigh replied, stepping closer, his eyes glinting with amusement. It pleased her to notice that he was as drenched as she was, but did he even have to look good soaked through? His shirt clung to his chest in the most delicious way... She blinked several times before his words started to register in her dazed mind. He tilted his head to the side and said, “Though it seems we’re both in the same unfortunate predicament. The storm caught me as well.”

Pippa’s teeth chattered as she shivered, her gown clinging to her like a second skin. The chill had set deep into her bones, and she shook uncontrollably from the cold. “I would have to say that is obvious don’t you think?” She glared at him.

“Perhaps we should take shelter inside,” Haverleigh suggested, nodding toward the door of the lodge. “Before we both catch our deaths.” Of course, he would try to be nice and pleasant when all she wanted to do was snap at him like an injured animal.

With little choice, Pippa nodded and followed him inside. The musty air of the lodge met her senses, but it was dry, and that was all she cared about. She moved to the corner of the room, trying to avoid his gaze. Her wet hair clung to her face, and she was too embarrassed to face him, especially in her sodden state. She had to look a

fright, and Pippa always hated being at a disadvantage. Especially with him so nearby.

“I’ll start a fire,” Haverleigh said, his tone softening slightly. Pippa did not trust it. What game was he playing? Why was he being so...nice. “We’ll get warm and dry quickly enough.”

Pippa stood in silence as he crouched by the hearth, gathering wood and setting it alight with a nearby tinderbox that had to be as ancient as the lodge. The flames crackled and popped as they began to burn, sending a welcome heat into the room. Pippa moved closer to the fire, allowing the warmth to wash over her, but the chill still remained in her limbs. Her teeth were chattered, and she tugged at the collar of her gown, trying to pull it tighter to stave off the cold. It proved to be useless, and she began to shiver even more.

When Haverleigh stood, he glanced at her with a thoughtful look. “Lady Phillipa,” he began, his voice quiet. “It would be best if you took off your wet gown. It’ll never dry on you.”

Pippa’s eyes widened in alarm. “I—what?” she stammered, her cheeks flushing. “Certainly not.” Why would he suggest such a thing? She could never disrobe before him or any male. That would be scandalous, and she would be ruined. Pippa wanted to slap him for suggesting it.

“It’s the only way to truly warm up,” he said, a hint of mischief in his eyes. Why he was taunting her now... He wanted her to be ruined, didn’t he? Perhaps that had been why he was being so nice, to lure her into trusting him. Well, he would be surprised at how colossally he failed. Then he added as if it mattered, “I’m afraid your gown won’t dry otherwise.”

Pippa crossed her arms over her chest, her face turning even redder. “I am not about

to strip in front of you, Your Grace,” she retorted, trying to sound indignant but failing miserably when another violent shiver wracked her body. She was so bloody cold.

Haverleigh sighed, but the smile on his lips softened his words. “Very well, Lady Phillipa. If you’re so determined to be stubborn about it, you can remain cold.” Haverleigh shrugged and then he turned back to the fire, adding more wood to it.

Pippa’s teeth continued to chatter, and for a moment, she almost considered it. The thought of warmth was too tempting to ignore. But her pride wouldn’t allow her to do it—not in front of him. “I’m fine,” she said, though her voice trembled slightly, betraying her. “It’s just a little cold.” Her teeth knocked together as she shook harder.

“Of course it is,” the duke replied, glancing at her over his shoulder. “But it’s not going to get any warmer unless you let the gown dry.”

He stoked the fire and left her in her misery. She narrowed her gaze on him and wished she had something to hit him with. It was perhaps a violent reaction, but she could not help it. He always brought out her worst impulses. Pippa opened her mouth to argue with him, but another violent shiver cut her off. She closed her eyes in frustration and pulled her arms tighter around her chest, knowing he was right. She hated to admit that even to herself.

He was quiet for a moment, and then, with a knowing glance, he stepped away from the fire and took off his own damp coat. “I’ll leave you to your dignity, but if you don’t warm up soon, I’ll have no choice but to intervene.”

Pippa stood still, the tension in her body palpable. She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of being right, but the room was growing colder by the second, and she knew he was correct. She needed to be warm, or she would never escape the storm unscathed. Finally, with a deep breath, she nodded. “I will... take off my gown,” she

muttered, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I will give you as much privacy as I can in such a small space.” Haverleigh gave her a small nod, as though he had known what would happen before she did. His expression softened, and for a moment, Pippa saw not the Duke of Haverleigh, but just a man trying to help. Still, she kept her gaze on him as she began to remove the wet gown, unsure of what he intended to do as she stripped before him. He reached for a nearby quilt and handed it to her. “Wrap yourself in this when you are done and let me know once you have it in place.” He smiled. “I will keep my back to you until then.”

Pippa undid the buttons of her riding habit as fast as she could, but it was slow work. There were a lot of tiny buttons, and her fingers were still numb from the cold. Once she had the gown off, she set it on a hook by the door—probably had been intended for a large overcoat that could be hastily donned as the previous inhabitant left. She took the quilt Haverleigh had given her and wrapped it around herself. She watched him warily as she made her way over to his side. The warmth from the fire began to creep through her limbs, the chill slowly fading away. She couldn’t deny that it felt better, though she would never admit it aloud. Her cheeks still burning with embarrassment at being nearly naked in his presence. “I am done,” she told him

Haverleigh glanced at her and gestured for her to move closer to the hearth. “You’ll be warm soon enough,” he said quietly, turning back to the fire.

Pippa couldn’t help but notice how different the air between them felt now—charged, alive with something neither of them seemed willing to admit. Now that she was not a shivering mess, she realized that they were entirely alone, and that feeling she had earlier had come to the surface again. That did not bode well for either of them...

Three

The warmth of the fire slowly began to spread throughout the small, musty hunting lodge, but despite the heat, Christopher still felt an uneasy chill settling deep within him. The storm raged outside, the wind howling through the trees, but here, in the warmth of the firelight, the reality of their situation was all too clear.

He glanced at Pippa, her back to him as she continued to stand by the fire, shivering with the cold. She had removed her gown in a bid to warm up as he had suggested, and though Christopher kept his gaze averted, he couldn't help but notice the delicate curve of her shoulders, the way her skin seemed to glow in the firelight. She was beautiful—there was no denying that, though he would never admit it to her. Not in a million years. But the truth was undeniable. She had grown into a woman, and not just any woman. A woman who had the ability to make his heart race with a single look.

Pippa was, without a doubt, the most infuriating woman he'd ever met. But there was something else, something he had never considered before, that was beginning to gnaw at his insides. He caught himself again, before he had started to lift his gaze toward her and glanced away. When had this shift happened? He had always thought of her as a silly little girl, someone to be dismissed—someone whose annoying tongue and fiery temper were nothing more than a minor nuisance. But now? Now, everything about her seemed to affect him in ways he could never have imagined. Desire flooded him in hot waves of need—this was unacceptable. He couldn't want her. Not her. Any other woman but her...

“Your Grace,” Pippa's voice broke through his thoughts, sharp and demanding as

always. “You should remove your wet clothes as well. You’ll never get warm if you remain in them. Is that not what you told me?” Her tone was full of mischief, and he should not take her bait, but he knew before he spoke what would happen. She always brought out the worst in him.

Christopher’s brow furrowed. He knew she was right. He had been standing there for far too long, still drenched from the rain, his coat was the only piece of clothing he had removed. His waistcoat did not go unscathed though as it was still heavy with rainwater. At the moment he considered removing his clothing, a wave of hesitation rushed over him. He knew that their situation was delicate. Too delicate. They were already in a precarious situation and one wrong move would ruin her reputation. Unfair perhaps, but it was the truth. He would weather this storm, so to speak, with little difficulty. But her... She would bear the brunt of this transgression even if nothing truly happened between them.

“No,” he said, his voice firm. “It would not be wise.” He met her gaze and held it. “We both know that if anyone discovered we were nearly naked together in this small, secluded hunting lodge, you would be ruined. The ton would never forgive you” He grinned. “And do not think I would do the honorable thing and offer for you if that should happen.” Though he would have every intention of doing the right thing, he did not tell her that. It was far better for her to believe that he was a cad and would allow her be disgraced. Because then she would not argue the point of him not removing his clothes. Though the idea of her being in such a compromising position gnawed at his conscience. He would never do her any harm.

Pippa turned, her eyes glinting with that fire he both loathed and admired. “You’re being foolish. The clothes will only make you more uncomfortable.” She stepped closer, her gaze steady and determined, as though she thought she could convince him with a look alone. “And we both know that it doesn’t matter how many clothes we leave on. Everyone will believe the worst regardless.” She lifted her chin in defiance. “And I wouldn’t have you even if you offered.”

“I am not foolish, Pippa,” he muttered, though the words lacked their usual bite. “But I am not willing to risk your reputation to save myself from a little discomfort.” He couldn’t bring himself to say more. The truth was, he didn’t know what he was willing to risk. Not anymore. The desire he felt for her was palpable, and what he truly feared... He swallowed hard. He feared that if they were both stripped bare he would no longer be able to deny the truth. That he wanted her almost desperately, and one touch, one look from her would undo him. He would give into the need to hold her, and if she allowed it, have her in every way possible.

There was a moment of silence between them, a heavy tension that seemed to settle over the room like a thick fog. Pippa hesitated, her gaze wandering over him as if she were weighing her options. “I still say you are being ridiculous,” she said softly, and rolled her eyes. She motioned toward another quilt. “But you should still get warm, don’t you think? You could remove some of your clothing and wrap yourself in that.”

Christopher’s gaze flicked to the quilt on a nearby trunk, and the temptation to simply wrap himself in it overwhelmed him. He moved toward it, shrugging off his waistcoat and his shirt still clinging to his damp skin. He quickly pulled them off and hung them near his coat. He intended to wrap himself in the quilt to warm himself. But as he reached for the quilt, he caught a glimpse of Pippa, her eyes flicking to his bare chest. He paused, his heart skipping a beat as he noticed how her gaze lingered—how it seemed to wander over him, tracing every inch of his exposed skin. His breath caught in his throat. What was this? Why the blazes did he have to be so aware of every inch of her? Did she like what she saw?

Her cheeks flushed a delicate pink, and she quickly turned away, but not before he saw the way her lips parted slightly, as though she had forgotten how to speak. He could see the faint shimmer of desire in her eyes, and it rattled him to his core. A realization crashed over him with the force of undeniable need: he wasn’t entirely opposed to the idea of her looking at him this way. The thought of her interest in him—of her wanting to see him, truly see him—both thrilled and terrified him.

Because it meant they were feeling the same heated need, and if he pushed just a little he could have her.

When had his feelings for her shifted? How long had they been building, unnoticed by him? It certainly had not happened when they were still nothing more than children. That first time they met he had despised her and he'd found her an annoying little girl. Over the years they had verbally sparred whenever they were near each other. So much so, it had become a habit he could not, nor wished to, break. He shook his head, desperately trying to regain some semblance of control. But it was too late. He had already seen it, and now it lingered between them like an unspoken truth. Pippa was not the same girl he had once dismissed. She had become a desirable woman—a woman who stirred something deep inside him that he could not ignore. Even if he wished to.

He couldn't allow himself forget the stakes though. He was far too aware of her, and what having her would mean. They did not get along on a good day. He frowned and turned away from the quilt, leaving it to the side. Instead, he stood tall, allowing the dampness of his breeches to remain, though it bothered him not one bit. He knew what was at risk now. What had always been at risk. "I think we are both foolish," Christopher muttered, finally breaking the silence that hung thick in the air. "But there is no helping our situation now. I am afraid we must live with whatever ramifications result from this little sojourn. The tempest outside will not allow anything else."

"We are fully entangled now," she agreed.

And that sent an image through his mind that nearly dropped him to his knees. Christopher wanted to be entangled with her, in every way possible. He very much feared that by the end of their time together that would happen. This tempest was much more than a storm that brewed outside—it stirred between them. Tangling them together until he didn't know if he ever wanted to be unraveled from her again. He

stared at her and that desire came to the surface. She held his gaze and did not move. He knew then she not only saw her own need reflected in his eyes, but she understood the desire building in him as well.

Her lips parted as if she was going to respond, but no words came. Instead, she turned toward the fire, her expression unreadable. Christopher couldn't tell what was going through her mind with any confidence, but one thing was certain: things had definitely shifted between them. And now, he could only wonder how much further they would choose to go.

Christopher's heart pounded in his chest, each beat echoing in his ears as the storm outside raged on. The wind howled and the rain lashed against the small hunting lodge, but the tempest within him was far more ferocious. He could barely recall the time before the cabin—when she had just been Pippa, his friend's annoying little sister, and now she had become someone entirely different to him. Someone who consumed his thoughts with an intensity he couldn't escape.

He caught himself again, watching her as she faced the fire, her golden hair catching the light of the flames, her figure still silhouetted against the warm glow. There was a quiet strength in her that had never been there when they were younger—something that had probably only deepened with time. He had always been able to dismiss her, to view her as an annoyance, but now? Now, every part of him ached to be near her. To hold her. To claim her.

And if they did not escape this cabin soon—he would attempt to do just that...

Four

The fire crackled softly in the hearth, casting a warm glow over the small, intimate space. Outside, the storm still howled, but within the confines of the hunting lodge, the heavy silence between Haverleigh and Pippa was palpable. Pippa sat near the window, her hands folded in her lap, staring at the flickering flames as if they held the answers to her mixed thoughts. She did not think of the rain, nor the wild wind. Instead her mind wandered to thoughts of her father, his sudden death, and the weight of sorrow that had descended upon her mother, her entire family, since that fateful day. Because his death was so recent she often returned to that loss, the pain ever present—even when other things held her attention. Sometimes she could push past it and forget, but those moments were infrequent. She supposed that in time, they would come less often, though even that was difficult for her to imagine. A time when it would hurt less to no longer have her father in her life—that seemed impossible to her now.

She exhaled slowly, as if trying to push the pain from her chest, but it remained—ever steady and present, a weight she could not remove for anything. The sharp ache of losing her father was a constant companion now, a heaviness that clung to her heart. “I still do not fully understand how it all happened,” she murmured softly, though she spoke to no one in particular. “Father was not an old man. His health was not failing...and yet, one moment he was there, and the next... nothing.” Her brother felt the brunt of that loss the most. Their father’s death left him with numerous responsibilities and almost no time left for him to grieve.

Haverleigh, standing by the fire, his back turned to her, glanced over his shoulder. He had never bothered to wrap that quilt around himself and he stood there with his bare

chest in front of her. His usually composed features were drawn with the solemn weight of understanding. He had experienced loss too—though years earlier—when his own father had passed suddenly. From what her brother had told her, the memory of that moment still haunted him. She had never discussed it with the duke herself. “I understand, Pippa,” he said quietly, his voice low but steady. “My own father died in a similar way. I was there when it happened. It was... devastating.” His tone softened with the words, a distant, painful recollection hidden within them.

Pippa looked at him then, her eyes softening with empathy. “You were there?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. She could not allow him to know the little that her brother had already told her. He had done so in an effort to help her understand the duke and why he could be so emotionally withdrawn at times. Though she did not know the full extent of his grief, only the distant air of a young man who had grown too accustomed to the responsibilities thrust upon him far too soon—Pippa wanted to understand it, understand him. “I did not know.” She had known a little of course, but she would continue to keep that to herself.

“I was in his study when it happened,” Christopher continued, turning fully now to face her. Her gaze drifted to the expanse of his chest. She wanted to run her hands over all those muscles, but that would be foolish. What would he think of her if she gave in to that desire? Instead she forced her gaze to meet his as he spoke, “I had just arrived from Eton, and he—well, he had called for me. He was having trouble breathing. I did not know anything ailed him.” His voice faltered briefly. “He held his hands over his chest as he struggled to breathe... I have never felt more helpless in my life.” He took a deep breath. “He stopped breathing and then... Well, you understand.”

Pippa’s heart clenched at the depth of his words, because she did understand, and for the first time since they had known each other, she saw him not as the insufferable duke who often made her blood boil, but as a man—one who had borne the burden of grief alone. “I’m sorry,” she said, her voice soft with a sincerity she had not known

she could offer him.

He nodded, his eyes momentarily meeting hers before he looked down at the floor, clearly struggling to find the right words. “Grief is a strange thing. It can make you feel lost, untethered, like you’re drifting through life without a true purpose. My mother...” He paused, swallowing hard before continuing. “My mother did not mourn him. She barely seemed to care. She simply moved on.”

The bitterness in his words was not lost on Pippa, who tilted her head as she studied him. “I’m sorry,” she said again, though she could not truly understand the isolation he must have felt, the abandonment of one parent in the face of such a tragic loss. “I have found that there are no words to express the grief in my own heart or the ones needed to comfort those I love. It is much the same here. Merely saying I am sorry doesn’t seem adequate.” She was silent a moment before she continued. “I don’t know how to help my mother,” she confessed softly, her voice trembling slightly. “She is so consumed with her own sorrow, I think she has forgotten how to live. How do I help her, when I can hardly help myself?”

For a moment, they were both quiet, each absorbed in their own thoughts, each grappling with the weight of their own grief. Then, without warning, Pippa stood and moved closer to him, almost as if pulled by an invisible force. She could not explain it—this sudden need to bridge the distance between them, to speak freely of their shared pain. “What would you do?”

Haverleigh’s gaze softened, and for the first time, he stepped toward her, closing the distance. “You don’t have to do it alone, Pippa,” he said gently. “We can’t even begin to know how to fix others. But being there for them, even in the silence, is enough.”

Their eyes locked for a moment, and in that instant, the walls that had always separated them—his aloofness, her annoyance—seemed to vanish. She realized that she had never truly seen him, not in the way that she saw him now. His chest bare

chest a temptation she could barely resist. She had thought seeing his drenched shirt stuck to him like a second skin distracting, but this...she couldn't tear her gaze away from the strength and grace of his form. It was impossible not to notice the way he stood before her, his presence overwhelming in a way that stirred something deep within her.

The duke stepped closer as heat filled her cheeks. His gaze flickered to her lips, and before she could stop him, he reached for her, his hand cupped her cheek gently. She didn't pull away. Instead, she tilted her face upward, their breaths mingling in the space between them. He reached out with his other hand, his fingers trembling slightly as he touched the side of her face, brushing a stray curl behind her ear. The moment those fingers, so gentle, touched her face, Pippa gasped, the sharp intake of breath only making his pulse quicken. He leaned in, the space between them closing faster than she could have anticipated.

The kiss came unexpectedly, but it was everything she had imagined—soft and tentative at first, as though they were both still testing the waters of this new dynamic between them. But then, as the fire crackled louder in the background and the storm howled against the cabin's stone walls, something inside them both snapped. The kiss deepened, and all the heat, all the longing, and the years of frustration and desire flooded through them.

Pippa's hands slid up to Haverleigh's chest and he responded by pulling her closer, wrapping his arms around her as though he could never get enough of her. He felt so warm, so right, like nothing had ever made more sense in her entire life. When he lifted his head and stared down at her it seemed as if something monumental had passed between them.

His fingers brushed against her cheek once more, and he looked at her with something new in his gaze. "Pippa..." His voice was thick, his desire evident, but there was something more there—something deeper, something that told her this

wasn't just about the storm, or the heat between them.

Pippa's pulse quickened, her heart racing in a way it had never done before. It was foolish. It was reckless. She wanted to launch herself into his arms and beg him to kiss her again. She knew she shouldn't but that did not mean that she would not do it. Pippa had never been one to act with caution. She wanted him. Perhaps a part of her had always believed it would lead to this. The fire crackled in the background, but the heat between them burned hotter. Pippa instinctively wrapped her arms around his neck and threaded her fingers through his damp hair. There was no going back now. She could feel his heart pounding against hers, a rhythm that matched her own.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers again. The kiss stole her breath and what little thoughts she had left in her mind. He continued to kiss her until she did not know where he ended, and she began. When they finally pulled apart, breathless and trembling, they stared at each other, both realizing in that moment that what had begun as a simple connection had turned into something much more. Something neither of them were prepared for, but neither could deny.

"I didn't mean for this to happen," Christopher whispered, his forehead resting against hers.

"I didn't either," Pippa murmured, but her lips curved into a hesitant smile. "But perhaps we were not meant to. No one plans of passion or anything deeper than that."

They both knew that this was only the beginning. They did not stop to discuss it. Instead, he kissed her again, and then lowered his head until he could trail kisses along her jawline, then down her neck. He pushed the quilt off of her shoulders until she let go and it tumbled to the floor.

Pippa's chest heaved with every breath. "I..." Her voice faltered a little bit as she said in a breathless whisper, "This isn't... we shouldn't?—"

Haverleigh kept trailing kisses over her shoulders leaving her with muddled thoughts “No. Don’t say it.” His voice was quiet, but firm, as though he was trying to hold her in place and stop her from pushing him away again. “I want you and I can’t pretend I don’t. I can’t fight this, and I find I do not want to. Please...”

Her lips parted as if she would protest, but instead of words, a soft, shaky breath escaped her. He kissed her again, but this time, there was no hesitation, no uncertainty. This was more than just passion—it was everything she never knew she wanted. Not until his lips first touched hers and that passion had been ignited. Pippa responded eagerly, her hands threading through his hair, pulling him closer still. His lips were warm, and the kiss was unrestrained—raw, hungry, full of all the emotions they had both been hiding.

Slowly, he stripped her shift off leaving her bare before him. He leaned down and sucked one taut nipple into his mouth. Pippa moaned at the pleasure. Then he moved his hand up and tweaked the other nipple between his thumb and forefinger. She became incessant with need. He moved down her body kissing her stomach and stopped at the juncture of her legs. He glanced up at her then with a wicked gleam in his eyes. “I am going to give you pleasure, Pippa, love. Something for you to always remember this night with fondness.” Then he kissed her core. He licked and sucked her tender flesh until she broke apart. Pippa had not even known such a thing was possible. It had been pleasurable all right and she damn well would never forget it.

When he lifted his gaze again Pippa was breathless and flushed. She could feel the weight of everything they had just shared pressing down on her, but there was also something lighter, something brighter. It was as if a cloud had lifted, and for the first time, she saw everything clearly.

“I need you, Pippa,” he said, his voice barely more than a whisper, but the intensity in his tone was unmistakable. “I want you. In every way. I know this—this is not just a passing moment. It’s you. Always you.” He smiled softly. “But this is not the time for

us to fully come together.” He moved up to lie beside her and kissed her cheek, before returning his gaze to meet hers. “This will have to be enough.”

She stared at him for a long moment, and for a heartbeat. But then, without saying a word, she leaned in, her lips brushing against his in a soft, lingering kiss. She wanted this too—wanted him. When she pulled away, she looked at him, her eyes shining with something he couldn’t name, but he knew. “We’re in this together,” she said softly, her words not just a promise but a declaration. “And this is enough.” She tilted her lips into a wanton smile. “For now.”

And in that moment, Pippa knew she had made the decision to give him her heart. She would love him forever, and she prayed he had spoken the truth. That this was not a passing fancy, and they did have a future together. Because no other man would do for her. He was it for her.

Five

The storm had begun to abate, the ferocious winds subsiding as the last of the rain began to taper off. The air was still thick with the remnants of the storm, the sky dark and brooding, but in the quiet warmth of the hunting lodge, a profound tension hung in the air. The crackling fire was the only sound that filled the space, its warmth a stark contrast to the chill that had taken over Christopher's chest.

He sat on the edge of the hearth, his gaze fixed on Pippa as she stood near the window, her silhouette framed by the waning light of the storm. She seemed lost in thought, her golden hair a halo in the firelight, her back to him as she stared out at the darkened landscape. He could feel the weight of the situation pressing down on him, heavy with the realization of just how much had changed in the span of a few short hours. And that was before he even allowed himself to consider the implications of what had transpired between them. The storm had ended, but the tempest inside him remained. The storm had not only changed the weather—it had changed everything between him and Pippa.

This situation would leave her with a tattered reputation. It did not matter that he had not taken her fully. Neither of them had intended to be trapped together, but it had happened, nonetheless. Even if they had not crossed that line and nothing more had occurred beyond their proximity, the world would see their interlude as the worst sort of transgression. Pippa's reputation would be in tatters, and for what? For a night spent with him in a place where no one would ever understand the truth, the circumstances, or the urgency of their situation. It had not been completely innocent. He had kissed her, and and given her pleasure. Damned if he hadn't wanted to do much more than he had. No one needed to know how far it had gone, or that he had

not completely ruined her. Because the truth was that Pippa would be ruined regardless.

His thoughts swirled as he stood, moving closer to her, the ache in his chest growing with each step. It wasn't just guilt that gnawed at him—it was something else entirely. Something deeper, more persistent. The truth came crashing over him, sudden and undeniable. He loved her. He had always loved her, even when she was the unruly child, the bratty little girl who had gotten under his skin. He had never recognized it for what it was, too proud, too focused on his own position to understand the subtle stirrings of affection that had grown into something far more powerful.

It had never been just irritation. It had always been more. And now, in the aftermath of it all, he saw it with perfect clarity. He took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the words he was about to say. There was no turning back. He was already too far gone, and there was only one thing left to do.

“Pippa,” he began, his voice low, carrying the weight of all the unspoken things he had never said to her before. She turned slowly, her expression a mixture of weariness and confusion as her blue eyes met his. “We need to talk,” he continued, stepping closer, his heart pounding in his chest. “What happened between us...”

Her brow furrowed as if she were not quite following him, but she said nothing, waiting for him to continue. “What of it?” She frowned. “We kissed.” Her lips twitched. “And you kissed me in places no proper lady should know about. It isn't the end of the world, Haverleigh.”

He sighed. “Considering that we did kiss,” he began, purposely not mentioning the places he had kissed her... “Don't you think you should call me by my given name?”

“You have one of those?” she replied cheekily, then sighed. “I suppose you may be

correct there. Your Grace.”

“And none of that either,” he chastised. “Call me Christopher, I beg you.”

Pippa giggled. “Now I have reduced you to begging.” She was utterly adorable, and he wanted to pull her back into his arms and kiss her senseless. If he did that though he might not stop at just a kiss, so he held himself back. “If that is your wish, then of course I shall call you Christopher. But I cannot do it out in society. It would not be proper.”

It would if she were his wife... That thought came almost out of nowhere, but that wasn’t entirely true. It had been in the forefront of his mind since well before his lips touched hers. “I hope that considering the passion between us you would consider something,” he said, his voice growing more intense, “I understand that you are in mourning. It is the reason I came to Whitmore, but I want the chance to court you properly.”

Her breath hitched, and for a moment, there was a silence between them, broken only by the crackling of the fire. Her gaze softened, uncertainty flickering across her face before she spoke. “You cannot be serious,” she whispered, but the disbelief in her voice was tinged with something else. Hope? Fear? He could not tell. “Is this because of what transpired between us? Because I do not expect...”

“I am more serious than I have ever been in my life,” he said, stepping closer still, his heart beating faster. “I love you, Pippa. I have loved you for longer than I care to admit. I cannot imagine my life without you.” He cupped her cheek in her hand. “I am not asking out of any sense of obligation. This is entirely because of what I feel for you. What has always been there. Give me the time to prove it to you.”

Her expression faltered as his admission sank in. He could see the battle in her eyes—her emotions warring with her reason. She opened her mouth to speak, but no

words came out. Instead, she took a step forward, her hand reaching out tentatively to touch his arm. “I... I don’t know what to say,” she murmured, her voice trembling slightly.

“Say yes,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “Say yes, and we’ll face whatever comes together. The past is behind us, Pippa. We can create something new. Something real. Something that no storm can break.” He fought the need to pull her close. “And if after your mourning period is up, if I am granted permission, I would like to marry you. But only if this is what you want to. I will not force anything on you.”

For a moment, she looked at him as if seeing him for the first time, really seeing him, the weight of her thoughts shifting. And then, slowly, hesitantly, she nodded. “Yes,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “Yes. I would like for you to court me, and I think I might even wish to marry you.” Pippa’s lips twitched. “But you should know, Christopher, darling, you will have to prove to me you are worth the effort. Because you can be quite difficult...”

Relief flooded him, and without another word, he closed the distance between them, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders. He pulled her gently into his arms, feeling the weight of everything that had transpired between them settle into a quiet sense of completeness. The world outside may still be in turmoil, but here, in this moment, they were together. And that was all that mattered.

As he kissed her, he knew there would be challenges ahead—society’s judgments, the whispers that would follow them. But in this moment, nothing else existed. They would face it all, side by side, because he had finally realized what he had always wanted. Pippa was his future.

The crackling fire illuminated their faces as the storm outside began to fade into the background. The warmth of the hearth seemed to thrum into Christopher’s chest, but

it did nothing to soothe the swirling emotions he felt. The quiet intensity of the moment filled him with both trepidation and hope as he gazed at Pippa, her face softened by the light, her features more stunning than ever before.

She had been a child when he had first met her, a fiery, stubborn little thing who had gotten under his skin. She had challenged him, frustrated him, and made him question everything he thought he knew about himself. And yet now, standing in front of him, she was all woman. A woman whose mere presence made his heart race, whose kiss had ignited something deep within him, something he couldn't push away, even if he tried.

And God, how he had tried. The last few years had been an exercise in avoidance, both of her and of the undeniable attraction that had always simmered beneath the surface. It was one of the reasons he had not visited Whitmore of late, but he could not completely avoid her when his friend was in London. She was always there, just out of reach. So he had kept his distance and told himself that it was only because of her youth, her inexperience, and the difference in their stations, that they did not suit. But none of that mattered now. He had kissed her, held her in his arms, and in that moment, the world had shifted. Nothing would ever be the same.

He stepped closer, taking a steadying breath, trying to keep the rawness of his feelings in check. "You must know, Pippa," he said, his voice a little unsteady but steadying with each word, "I would never have asked if I didn't mean it. I'm not one for games or empty promises. I've wanted you for so long, but I was too blind to see it."

Her eyes, still wide with disbelief, softened as she reached for his hand. "Christopher..." Her voice was a whisper, but the warmth in it made him want to pull her closer. Her fingers trembled against his skin, and he couldn't remember a time when he had felt more vulnerable than in this moment.

“I know,” he said, his thumb grazing over the back of her hand. “It’s madness, isn’t it? That we should find each other in this way, but I can’t help it. I cannot imagine my life without you, Pippa.”

Her eyes glistened with something deeper than mere emotion, something far more profound, but still uncertain. “I... I never thought I could feel this way,” she said softly, her voice catching as though the weight of her own words was almost too much to bear. “You’ve always been...there, but I must be honest. I never understood what I felt for you. Not until this time in the cabin and when I kissed you... It all seemed to fall in place and my heart leapt with joy.”

He smiled, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear, his heart pounding. “You were always here.” He tapped his chest. “Just beneath the surface, and I was too stubborn to see it. I adore you. Even when you are making me crazy.” His lips twitched. “I think in some perverse way I love you even more when you are making me insane.”

Pippa’s breath caught, and her lips parted slightly as if she was searching for the right words yet finding none. Her fingers tightened around his. “But we’ve spent so many years at odds, Christopher. Our differences...” She trailed off, the uncertainty in her voice unmistakable.

“Those differences do not matter,” he said firmly, stepping even closer, until there was no space left between them. “Not when we’ve found something worth fighting for. Pippa, you will not regret this time you’ve agreed to allow me to court you. I will prove to you that we can have it all—together.”

Pippa swallowed hard, and for a moment, her face tightened with conflicting emotions. She hesitated, and then, after what felt like an eternity, she spoke, her voice barely a whisper, “I do not believe I will regret this decision. My heart—it is already yours.”

Christopher leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. As he kissed her, he could feel the weight of their past dissolving, the future slowly unfurling in front of them. They would face the world together. To think it took a raging storm for them to realize they belonged together, and in that tempest they had finally become tangled together. As they should have always been...

Epilogue

One year later...

The warm glow of summer filled the air as Pippa and Christopher, the Duke and Duchess of Haverleigh, journeyed down the winding lanes of the countryside. The sun was low in the sky, casting golden hues over the fields and farms, while the soft clatter of their carriage wheels created a steady rhythm that matched the beating of Christopher's heart. They had married in the Whitmore chapel with her family there to watch them exchange their vows. Her mother had finally started to break free from her grief and helped her to plan their wedding. It was the happiest day of his life to make her his wife. Now there was one more thing he had to do.

He had planned an extensive wedding trip. She had mentioned how she had wanted to travel as he kept his promise to court her properly. So, Christopher had arranged a wedding trip where they could visit all the places she wished to go. He could not wait to share it all with her. But there was one stop left to make before they could continue on their journey to the continent.

Today as the familiar trees and fields of Haverleigh approached, it felt as though they were returning to something far more important. This was Christopher's home. His childhood home. A place he had avoided for years, ever since his father's untimely death had cast a long shadow over the estate. Haverleigh had once been a place of sorrow, of unresolved feelings and memories that were difficult to reconcile. He missed when it had been a place of happiness and joy. He hoped to change that with Pippa at his side.

“Are you ready for this?” Pippa asked, a note of concern in her voice. Her gaze flickered from the window, meeting his. Her eyes were warm with understanding. She already knew how difficult this would be for him—she had been the one to suggest they visit his home. She understood how much sadness he still carried after his father’s death.

“I hope I am,” he replied, his voice low and filled with affection. “I never thought I’d be back here, not after all that happened.”

Pippa gave him a soft smile, her fingers gently brushing against his. “But you are back, Christopher. You’re here now, and I think it’s time you stopped running away from it.”

He exhaled deeply, turning his gaze to the window. The estate was finally coming into view, its familiar silhouette against the horizon. The towering spires of Haverleigh were distant but unmistakable. It had been too long since he’d seen the grand old house, since he’d walked the halls of the place where he’d spent so many years. So many of those years without the presence of his father and without the security of knowing what came next.

“You’re right,” he said softly, his heart tugging at him as the estate drew nearer. “I’ve avoided this place for too long. I wasn’t sure if I could face it.”

Pippa’s voice was gentle as she reached for his hand. “We will fill it with love and laughter again. It will know the joy we feel and if we are blessed with children—they will call Haverleigh home. There’s no reason to keep it shrouded in darkness.”

Christopher looked at her, a warmth flooding his chest as he took in the sincere understanding in her eyes. He had feared coming back here, but now, with Pippa beside him, it didn’t seem so daunting. The thought of returning to Haverleigh had once brought him only discomfort and sadness, but now... now he felt something different. He felt the stirrings of peace, of something healed and whole. As their

carriage pulled up to the grand front door of Haverleigh, Christopher stepped out first, offering his hand to Pippa. She smiled and took it, her fingers warm in his. Together, they ascended the grand steps to the door. The door opened, and the butler greeted them with a bow before ushering them inside.

The house was silent but welcoming, its halls stretching long and wide, with high ceilings and great windows that let in the light of the setting sun. Everything was familiar, but now it felt different. Less lonely. Less empty. Christopher hesitated for only a moment before stepping further into the entrance hall, Pippa by his side. His heart lifted as the familiar weight of the house settled around him—this was his home, this was where he had grown up. It was a place filled with memories, both painful and joyful, but most importantly, it was now a place where new memories could be made.

“I don’t know what I expected,” Christopher murmured, his voice thick with emotion as he looked around, “but I don’t feel the way I thought I would.”

Pippa smiled up at him. “You were afraid. You thought you could never come back here. But now you have. And it’s different, isn’t it?”

He nodded, his eyes softening. “It is. It’s not the same place I left behind. It’s... ours now. Ours to fill with new memories.”

The weight that had once anchored him to the past was gone. Pippa’s presence in his life, their shared future, had made everything feel lighter, brighter, filled with the potential for all the love and happiness they had yet to discover together.

“Come,” Pippa said, her hand in his as she tugged him gently. “Let’s explore. I think it’s time you make peace with Haverleigh, and let it be something new.” There was a wicked gleam in her gaze. “And you have yet to kiss me in our home. You should rectify that immediately.” She darted down the hall all but begging him to chase her.

Christopher smiled and followed after her, knowing that with Pippa by his side, everything was possible. Whatever had happened before, whatever had haunted him in this house, could be left behind. The future was theirs to create.

As she led him on a merry chase through the halls he finally believed he could be happy. It was then that Christopher realized something—Haverleigh was no longer a place of sorrow for him. It was a place of new beginnings. And he could finally see it for what it was: home. The home he had always wanted, and now, with Pippa, the home he would build for their future together. Her love made what he thought impossible a reality. Love truly was grand.