



Vexing the Duke (Wicked Winchesters #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: Scandal forces them to marry...will another scandal tear them apart?

At their first meeting, she spat upon his shoe. Within a fortnight, they were wed.

When Miss Sarah Hancock causes a scandal in Boston, her father takes her to London in search of a husband.

At her first party, Sarah insults the Duke of Amherst who takes her over his knee to spank some manners into her. When his discipline comes to light, Sarah's father offers him a choice: Marry Sarah or send her back to America where she has no prospects for a husband.

Intrigued by the spirited girl from America, the Duke proposes.

Despite the circumstances of their marriage, Sarah and Jeffrey form a bond and appear headed for a bright future. That is, until Sarah pretends to be someone she's not.

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CHAPTER 1

London, 1814

For all of Father's claims about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, he had no qualms about parading his only daughter around as though I were a prize mare at the county fair, regardless of my thoughts on my own life, liberty or happiness.

Since my arrival in London, after a harrowing trip across the Atlantic no less, I had been primped, prodded, and polished by the determined Mrs. White, whom Father had hired to make me into a suitable bride for an English gentleman. I shall certainly take Best In Show, whatever "the show" might be.

In London, I was quite alone—a fact made evident to me during each foray into public. My accent was the object of curiosity. Inevitably, the locals subjected me to quizzical looks, some stares, plus an occasional unfriendly query of "Are you an American?"

Damn right. I was no happier about being in their country than they were at having me there.

But, I was a young lady. Miss Sarah Hancock, whose father had decided to sell her off. No, not for money. My father hardly lacked financially. What he hoped to gain by bartering me was prestige. His greatest wish was to call me Lady Something.

My greatest wish was to simply not feel so alone.

A glimmer of hope flickered in my heart as I had been invited to visit the home of Lord and Lady Winchester. Lord Winchester was an American who inherited a title and came to London. My father, being as American as I was, had a letter of introduction to Lord Winchester when we arrived and made the man's acquaintance shortly after we set up our household in London.

I had no delusions that Lady Winchester, a proper English countess several years my senior, would become a close confidante. However, after calling upon Lord Winchester, Father reported that a young lady of about my age resided with Lord and Lady Winchester. He did not have her name, so like a man to ignore that detail, but he did report that she was Lady Winchester's goddaughter who was, like myself, engaging in the social season in search of a husband.

I got myself properly attired for a morning call, descended the staircase of our rented home and went to Father's study to inform him that I was ready for our visit to the Winchesters.

Not finding him in his study, I moved through the rooms on the first floor, my concern growing as my efforts to locate him yielded no results.

Perhaps I had not understood the time and date of the invitation. A bit of disappointment tweaked at me because I had built up the opportunity to meet a young lady of my own age into a grand event. Perhaps my new friend, for of course we would become fast friends, would be able to decipher some of the intricacies of the social hierarchy of London which confused me to no end. A baronet? What on earth was a baronet? Was that better than being a duke?

And what made one title superior to another anyway?

Did no one care about character or ambition or good humor?

Apparently not.

Speaking of lack of good humor, when I entered the breakfast room I found the dreadful and dreaded Mrs. White.

“Well, it is about time you showed your face. Come along, we must not keep Lady Winchester waiting.” She stood and swept past me without so much as a ‘good morning’ or ‘fix your hair.’

She paused and ran her gaze over me with minute scrutiny. I fought the urge to fidget and determined that I would not allow her to disrupt my good mood.

“You look well enough for a morning call,” was all she said before she continued.

“I was under the impression,” I said when I caught up with her, “that my father would be escorting me to the home of Lord and Lady Winchester. Not the hired help.”

Mrs. White’s brows rose and her nostrils flared. I bit back a grin, knowing I had struck a nerve with the old biddy.

She took a deep breath and ignored my dig at her. “Your father has better things to do than to sit around gossiping with Lady Winchester’s goddaughter. Were she associated with any other family, I would not encourage this acquaintanceship, but being the goddaughter of Lady Katherine Winchester gives Miss Primrose a much higher status than she would deserve otherwise.”

Mrs. White checked her hat in the hallway mirror, then went to the front door. “Come along, Sarah. It is a short walk and the exercise will do you good.”

Good grief. How could she manage to steal the joy out of a walk on a lovely spring morning? It was impressive, in a dreary sort of way.

We walked along in silence for a block, then turned a corner and saw a massive home. We stopped before ascending the steps. “This is the residence of Lord and Lady Winchester. As you might guess from the grand home, they are a couple of high standing and wealth. However, Miss Primrose is not a blood relative and is only there on the good grace of Lady Katherine. I have heard rumors about Miss Primrose and some of her behavior, particularly as it relates to a young woman who had been living next door.” She gestured to a house further down the block. Also grand, but not nearly so much as the home we were about to enter. “Slattery Hall is the home of the Waltham family. It is currently under the care of Lady Pearl Kucher. She had been given a great deal of trouble by her niece who refused to cooperate with the expectations of her very concerned aunt.” Mrs. White sniffed again to show her disdain for anyone who did not follow the expectations of others.

“Not only did she not marry Lord Banyon, despite his offer of marriage, she ran off with her guardian.” The final statement was imparted to me in a whisper. “A man without a title and nearly twice her age.”

She drew in her breath and shuddered. “Scandalous. Lady Kucher has barely recovered her own reputation from the horrid actions of her niece.”

Mrs. White put her foot on the first step, then turned to me. “See that you do not behave as regretfully as Lady Kucher’s niece. And be careful of becoming too chummy with Miss Primrose. She is not the type of young lady with whom you ought to be associated. But, the connection to the Winchesters is quite important, particularly to your father and his business interests. Keep that in mind during our visit today.”

Taken aback, I simply nodded.

What must Mrs. White think of me? I had given her no reason to believe I would behave in such a wild manner, though I must admit that I was deeply curious about

this young lady and I hoped that Miss Primrose would share the story with me. Of course, I did not say as much to Mrs. White. I had no interest in talking to her any more than necessary.

I was eager to make the acquaintance of Miss Primrose. If Mrs. White did not like her, that was enough endorsement for me.

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CHAPTER 2

“Lady Katherine has gone to the dressmaker’s this morning,” Miss Primrose said. “She asked me to extend her apologies for not being here to meet you in person, Mrs. White.”

Mrs. White’s entire countenance deflated, though to her credit she gathered her composure and replied with the requisite politeness.

Oh my. Already I liked Lady Katherine Winchester very much. Even I, with my limited comprehension of the ways of society in the ton, knew that this was a burn on Mrs. White, though her notion that she’d be welcomed to sit and share tea with Lady Katherine Winchester when she was little more than my paid handler had been quite audacious, even for her.

Our hostess, Miss Primrose, turned to me and smiled. “I am so pleased you are here. I am certain we will be fast friends.”

Mrs. White sniffed as though warning me not to get attached to this young lady whom she felt was not proper company for me. However, her desire to curry favor with Lady Winchester meant that we would stay for at least the requisite quarter hour visit.

A bit of a devilish plan came to mind.

“How nice to meet you, Miss Primrose,” I said. “I could not help but admire the rose garden next to this beautiful home. Would it be possible for us to take a stroll through

the lovely blossoms?”

“Of course,” Miss Primrose said. “Would you care to join us, Mrs. White?” she asked my handler.

Mrs. White cut her gaze to me before smiling at Miss Primrose. “I am frightfully allergic to roses, my dear,” she said with sugary sweetness. “I shall content myself with the view from your parlor if that is agreeable, while the two of you enjoy the flowers. Though don’t tarry too long,” she said to me. “Too much sun is not good for the complexion.”

Miss Primrose and I walked the length of the first floor of the Winchester townhouse, through a cheerful breakfast room and then out into the rose garden. As soon as the door closed behind us, she turned to me. “Oh my, but she is ghastly,” she said. “I had been surprised that Lady Katherine did not wish to be part of your call today, though she is rather stuffy and a stickler for the rules. Well, she used to be, though marriage to Lord Winchester has helped her to loosen her corset a bit, if you know what I mean.”

It had been so long since I had had a young lady near my own age to speak to, at least one that was not hired to help me dress or style my hair, I simply gaped for a moment and then burst out into very unladylike giggles. “Oh, Miss Primrose,” I said when I could catch my breath, “I am sure we will be most devoted friends. You are very much correct that Mrs. White is simply ghastly. Of all the ladies’ companions my father could have hired, why did he have to choose her? She was recommended to him and she has been ingratiating herself to him since she laid eyes on him, and no doubt his pocketbook. You are so fortunate to have a caring guardian to help you through your season, Miss Primrose.”

“Please, do call me Cassie. Everyone does. It is short for Cassidy.”

“What a lovely name. I hope you will call me Sarah, though it is not nearly so exotic as Cassidy.”

“Sarah, I am so glad to meet you. I am fortunate to have Lady Katherine as a sponsor for my season but I have met very few young ladies my own age and those I have met seem quite cutthroat.”

“Cutthroat?” My eyes widened. “I did not know they were prone to violence.”

Cassie laughed sweetly. “No, they are not prone to violence. At least not physical violence, though they can assassinate a person’s character with only a few words or a look. The worst are the Borden sisters, Lady Lizbeth and Lady Emma. One look from either of them will slice through you like an ax. Their father spoils them with every new dress or hat they ask for. I assume he is trying to make up for the horrid woman he married who is now their stepmother. They make no secret of how they feel about her. If she was wise, she would watch her back. Even worse than that, at least as far as I am concerned, they are hateful to anyone they believe to be beneath their notice.”

“They are jealous of your beauty,” I said. “They are threatened by you.”

Cassie seemed genuinely surprised by this. “No, that cannot be it. I assume it is because I am not titled nor did I grow up amongst them. I am from Canterbury. My mother and Lady Katherine were dear friends and when my mother died, Lady Katherine took it upon herself to see to my season. It was going swimmingly until my friend Tallie eloped with her guardian.”

“So it is true!” I said. “Mrs. White made some reference to a scandal on our walk over here and she gave the impression that she felt you were tainted by it as well, though I do not know why that would be.” Then I gasped. “Oh, did you help your friend escape in order to elope?”

Cassie laughed. “No, though I would have. But Tallie did not need anyone’s help for that. She was quite capable on her own. She is living in South America now. Her letters are most exciting.”

“Miss Hancock!” a sharp voice called from the doorway. I did not need to turn to know who it was.

“Yes, Mrs. White?” I said, taking my time in turning to address her.

“I must insist that you come inside. You have been in the morning sun for more than ten minutes. No doubt your nose will be covered in freckles just in time for the Waterfords’ Ball if we do not go home immediately and put a salve on it to stop the outbreak.”

“Heaven forbid someone gets a freckle,” I whispered under my breath and Cassie snickered then pretended it was a cough to cover her impudence. “Of course, Mrs. White,” I replied. “I am on my way.”

“I am pleased to know you will be at the Waterfords’ Ball. I shall be attending as well. We will be brave in the face of the clique of privileged ladies who look down on outsiders. No doubt the Borden sisters will be there.” She grimaced.

“I shall enjoy that very much,” I said, then hurried inside before Mrs. White came running after me with a scarf to hang over the end of my hat like a veil in order to keep the sun from my face.

Sunshine killer. That’s what she was.

Thankfully no freckles dared to appear upon my nose or cheeks. A catastrophe avoided, or at least in the opinion of Mrs. White.

She still fussed excessively over my appearance as I prepared the next night to attend the ball at the home of Lord and Lady Waterford for which invitations were extremely scarce.

I was certainly heartened to know that my new friend Cassie would be there, and no doubt the formidable Lady Katherine Winchester as well. I looked forward to meeting her, for she was reputed to be quite a beauty and Cassie was very fond of her.

Apparently, an invitation to the Waterfords' Ball for a newcomer such as myself was quite an honor. Pardon me if my gratitude did not overflow for the opportunity to be scrutinized and evaluated like a chicken hanging in the butcher's window.

Mrs. White scowled and tucked an uncooperative bit of my hair back into place then announced it was time to leave.

I crossed my fingers and wished myself good luck.

CHAPTER 3

For all my complaining, the ball was quite enjoyable. Mrs. White, a pitiful substitute for my dearly departed mother, introduced me to several older ladies in attendance, including our hostess, Lady Waterford, who, in turn, presented a number of eligible gentlemen to me.

As soon as I was able, I broke free of Mrs. White and found Cassie, who in turn introduced me to her godmother, Lady Katherine Winchester.

My goodness. What a beauty, even for a woman whom I judged to be in her mid-thirties. She was exceptionally attractive and a number of young men made no secret of admiring her.

Her husband, Lord Thomas Winchester, needed only to give the gawkers a stern look and they scampered off.

I liked Lord Winchester very much. He was an American and hearing him speak without a hint of an English accent made me feel as though I was back home.

“They’re a stuffy bunch, the British,” he said to me while Cassie and Lady Katherine were talking, “but there are plenty of good people among them.” It was very sweet of him to offer me some reassurance, particularly since my own father had not bothered to do so.

My father would be most vexed if he knew he’d missed an opportunity to rub elbows with Lord Winchester, but he had fobbed me off on Mrs. White and seemed

unconcerned about anything else as it related to me.

This made me more sad than I cared to admit, but it could not be helped. Perhaps once I married and Mrs. White was sent along to harass some other poor girl, Father and I would be able to regain our once warm relationship.

But no matter, this night was about dancing and meeting the proper people. Between Mrs. Waterford, my hostess, and the Winchesters, I was introduced to a head spinning number of ladies and gentlemen.

Soon, my dance card was full. The evening passed agreeably. Several of my partners were rather dull, and reminded me of Lord Winchester's words about the British being a stuffy bunch. Why did they bother seeking my company if they were going to spend the entire dance glancing about the room instead of attending to me? To my credit, I did not actually say as much to any of them.

One or two of my partners were worthy of mention. Lord Puffington, a handsome man with delightful dancing skills, charmed me. He complimented my gown, an utterly divine creation of layer upon layer of lace and satin pinched in at the waist by a corset pulled extra tight by Mrs. White. I complained of the restriction, but my determined trainer insisted.

She insisted more than she ought, but she answered to Father, not me.

The Puffington family was much envied, so my warden relaxed a bit once Lord Puffington appeared taken with me. He brought me lemonade then we sat chatting for a few minutes. Nothing of great consequence was said, but at least he did not comment on my accent, putting him head and shoulders above most of the young men I have met since my arrival in London.

While chatting with Lord Puffington, I happened to see Cassie passing by. She smiled

and gave a slight nod behind Lord Puffington's shoulder which only I could see, thereby signaling her approval. There was much about Lord Puffington to merit approval, that was for certain.

My next partner claimed me and I did not see Lord Puffington again for quite some time, but I did notice him dancing with Cassie and she looked pleased. They made a handsome couple and I felt a twinge of envy.

I would never want to be the type of young lady who allowed jealousy to mar a friendship. Having been taken from my homeland and brought to a strange country, I was well aware of the value of friendship.

Suitors, well, they could be found everywhere. And so I chastised myself and wished Cassie well.

During a break in the dancing, Cassie and I got caught up on how our evenings had gone. She was most excited and her eyes sparkled. "I am having a wonderful time, I hope you are as well."

"Yes," I replied honestly. "I am."

The smile vanished from her face when Cassie saw something over my shoulder. "Oh no. The Borden sisters."

"The ones you told me about?"

"Yes," she whispered, her whole countenance wilting. "No doubt they will have something cutting to say."

I dared not turn to look but based on the expression on Cassie's face I could tell they were headed in our direction.

Suddenly, a force impacted my shoulder and I nearly tumbled to the floor. Startled, I looked around to see what had happened.

One of the sisters, I did not know who was who, had bumped into me. Intentionally.

“Oh,” she said, “I did not see you there.”

Then they kept walking, without so much as an apology or inquiring after my well being.

“They are beastly,” Cassie hissed once they were absorbed by the crowd. “Did she injure you?”

“No,” I replied. “It will take more than that to knock me down.”

“Good,” Cassie said. “They are not worth our notice.”

The music started up again and we were each engaged in the dance, the hateful Borden sisters forgotten.

Later in the evening, while standing near an open window seeking fresh air, I overheard a man—I had no reason to believe him a gentleman—maligning Americans as nothing more than the bastard sons of the devil.

Well, I could hardly allow something so offensive to go unchallenged. After the rudeness of the hatchet-faced Borden sisters, this was more than I could stomach.

If Father had heard him, he would have boxed the young upstart’s ears, but since the honor of my country was left to me to defend, I did my part.

I tapped the blowhard on the shoulder. “Pardon me, sir.”

When he turned, I struggled to keep my composure, as he was without a doubt the most strikingly handsome man in all of either America or England. My breath caught in my throat as his dark eyes peered down at me. The corners of his mouth turned up in a sly smile.

“How may I be of service to you, miss?” His sultry voice wafted over me until I nearly forgot my pique, but seeing the mischievous twinkle in his eye reminded me.

“You forget, sir, the Americans, who are the ‘sons of the devil’ as you say, also bested your country in two wars.”

“We only sent hired soldiers to fight the bloody Americans. An army of real British soldiers would have done the job handily.”

“What a thing to say. Have you no respect for your countrymen who died at war?” I glared up at him with a bounty of Yankee scorn.

Finally, he laughed. “My, you are not afraid to speak your mind, now are you? Hardly surprising. Americans are an untamed lot who do not know how to train their women either.”

He smiled down at me. Perhaps he meant to be funny.

In no mood for his humor or insults to my country, I stomped on his toe. Hard. Though my petite feet were only ensconced in dancing slippers, he winced. Whether from pain or surprise, I did not know.

Thereupon, the scoundrel took me by the arm and led me—very unceremoniously, I might add—onto the terrace.

“What are you doing?” Straining not to show my alarm, I glanced over my shoulder

at the other guests, but they were engaged with the dance. No one seemed to notice us, not even the ever-vigilant Mrs. White, who, it turned out, spent more than her fair share of time sipping brandy instead of lemonade.

However, while being escorted outdoors, that woman was the least of my concerns.

This stranger, who had not even been polite enough to introduce himself, put his hand at the small of my back, guiding me to a bench on the far corner of the terrace. Unaware of his intentions, I knew being there with him— alone— was highly improper. Yet the scorch from his touch above my bottom compelled me to comply without protest.

What spell had he cast over me?

CHAPTER 4

He did not answer my question, but once we reached the bench, he placed one foot upon it then bent me over his knee.

“How dare you? Unhand me!” I hissed through gritted teeth. Shouting from the rooftops would have been preferable, but drawing attention to myself or my indecorous situation was unthinkable.

“It is obvious that you, my little Yankee girl, need a lesson in manners, which is precisely what you are about to receive.” Thereupon, the brute swatted my upturned behind.

I can only be thankful for the many layers of my gown because, although shocking, the swat was not painful. “You spank like an old lady. Or a British gentleman. ’Tis hard to tell the difference.”

Perhaps lessons in keeping my mouth shut were not out of the question.

A rustle of fabric, and my skirts flipped up over my back and mussed my hair. I struggled against what he intended, particularly irritated over the damage to my coiffure. Two maids had spent an inordinate amount of time arranging my free-spirited locks to meet Mrs. White’s specifications. She would not be pleased to see me return to the dance floor with my hair out of place. As she liked to say in response to nearly every question, “It simply is not done.”

A cool breeze blew across the slit of my pantalets. I inhaled sharply in response to my

exposure to the night air, as well as a stranger, in such a manner. His hand cracked down on my barely covered backside. I gasped with the impact.

“I bet that did not feel like a spanking from an old lady.” The cocksure gentleman adjusted my torso for a better angle and landed another swat on my bottom.

“I do not know what you people here call a spanking, but my grandmother spansks harder than that.”

Why could I never learn my lesson?

Usually, my manner was not so contrary. Of course, I did not often encounter men who excited my ire so profoundly, either.

I must have had a similar effect on the man who imprisoned me over his knee because he wrapped his arm around my waist, pulled me closer to restrain my movements, and proceeded to lay into my buttocks in a manner fit to make any grandmother proud.

I lost count of the number of times the swine’s hand landed on my upturned cheeks, but he struck repeatedly. My delicate flesh warmed quickly under his assault. I kicked my feet in an attempt to impede his efforts, though rather than slowing him, my resistance made him laugh. “You are quite the little hellion, Yankee girl.”

“Stop calling me that.” My jaw clenched in anger and resolution.

“Since you have not told me your real name, what choice is there?” Although he exerted himself thoroughly in my punishment, which continued unabated, he spoke as calmly as if he were reading the news.

I am not proud of this, if asked directly to verify its accuracy, I may not be so honest

in the future, but I shall confess it here.

While teetering across his knee, I worked up an impressive amount of saliva, which I then projected onto his shoe with both accuracy and delight.

He paused in his efforts to scorch my rump, set me on my feet—my skirts thankfully fell back into place over my throbbing bottom—then stared down at his sputum-adorned shoe.

He bit his lip. For the second time in as many minutes, my own sanity came into question.

I stood next to him, gasping for air because my position across his knee, as well as my own trepidation over the consequences of my actions, had made it difficult to fill my lungs sufficiently.

My captor's hand rested gently on my arm, while I scanned the terrace, considering the possibility of escape. But before I could take action, a familiar voice called me.

“Miss Hancock! There you are. I have been quite frantic in searching for you.” Mrs. White, red-faced from exertion coupled with brandy, huffed and puffed in my direction. She took firm hold of my arm. “Hurry, now. You are to dance the next with the Duke of Amherst. He is the prize catch of the season, so you must be on your best behavior.”

Stunned she would speak so in front of the oaf who had dragged me onto the terrace in the first place, I peeked around to read his reaction to her words, but he had vanished.

Had the whole thing taken place in my imagination? The burn in my tail end indicated it had been all too real.

I straightened my skirts and patted my hair in preparation for my new dance partner. The bully was gone, along with my thoughts of him.

As we approached the dance floor, the bitter widow squinted at my coiffure and tsked in dismay. “Honestly, Sarah, how did you manage to get your hair into such a frazzle already?”

There was no way to explain to her how hanging upside down over a man’s knee made it challenging to maintain one’s hairstyle, so I was grateful when she took her attention away from me to focus it on our hostess, Lady Waterford who presented my next partner. “Miss Hancock, please allow me to introduce his grace, the Duke of Amherst. He is most eager to make your acquaintance.”

I curtsied like a trained pet, as was expected of me. Glancing up from my lowered position, I stared straight into the smirking face of...Duke Spanked My Rump.

He bowed and gave me a dimpled, devilish grin. “I am pleased to meet you, Miss Hancock.”

Unsure of how to answer, yet determined not to let my irritation show, at least not to anyone other than my unwanted partner, I simply nodded in reply before he led me to the dance floor.

I waited stiffly by his side, resolved only to engage with him as mandated by the dance. He had other ideas and turned into quite the chatterbox.

“I apologize for not escorting you back inside, but I feared the reaction of your chaperone might have been unpleasant for both of us.” He rubbed his hands together as though they were cold, which is ironic considering the heat they had inflicted upon my tender bottom.

“How thoughtful of you.” I glared at him to make my disdain clear, then pointedly turned away from him.

“Had we been found alone together, the scandal would have been sufficient to force a marriage between us,” he leaned low and whispered in my ear. The heat of his breath and the sensation of his nearness was quite unsettling and he caught me unawares.

I gasped. “Marriage? Is it not bad enough that you manhandled me, but now you add threats?” My body heated and I was grateful when he stood erect, keeping his unnerving whispers to himself.

“Manhandled? You said I spanked like an old lady.” I would swear there was a tone of humor in his voice which made me turn to look at him again.

“You do spank like an old lady, at best. I referred to the manner in which you hauled me away from polite society in an attempt to damage my reputation.”

“I believe I did put a little bit of sting to your ‘reputation.’” The bastard had the audacity to wink at me.

“Besides”—he took my small hand and enveloped it in the same hand that minutes before had assaulted my derriere—“I had to attend to my blemished shoe. I certainly could not dance with the most eligible young lady at the ball with spittle on my footwear, now could I?”

His dark gaze held mine. Despite my wish to tell him what he could do with his shoe, the words did not come, my mouth went dry. The dance had begun and I stumbled over a simple step.

His arm encircled my waist and righted me. The pressure of his touch created a strange sensation in my lower regions. One I had never experienced before.

Presumably, it was extreme revulsion because what other reaction could such a lout inspire?

He did not miss a step. Several young ladies watched him with admiration. Being a fair and just young lady, I examined him dispassionately, deciding he was a most attractive man— on the outside. But what must the character of such a bully be?

Thankfully, our time together ended. Lord Puffington claimed me for a second dance. This pleased me very much, and the evening ended well, particularly when Duke High and Mighty sat out while I took the floor with Lord Puffington.

CHAPTER 5

After the Waterfords' ball, I slept in due to the exertion of the evening plus the late hour of our return. Young ladies were expected to survive an entire season of such activities in order to secure a suitable mate. Was it a test of fortitude as well?

I dozed past breakfast, so my maid brought food to my bedchamber. I wanted nothing more than to spend a quiet afternoon reading a novel. After satiating my hunger, I crawled back into bed and read until I fell asleep again. I was in the midst of a delightful dream featuring Lord Puffington when insistent knocking on my door woke me. Before I could investigate further, Mrs. White stormed into my room.

She stood at the foot of my bed, hands on hips, gaping. "Sarah! What are you doing?"

"I should think that would be obvious," I said, emphasizing my point with an exaggerated yawn.

"You must get up and get dressed right now," Mrs. White said, taking hold of the bedclothes and giving them a yank.

However, I was faster. Dropping my book onto the floor, I clutched the blankets with both hands and held tight.

"Unless there is a fire, I will not be getting out of this bed any time today. Please leave," I gritted at her.

She blew out an aggravated breath and relinquished her hold on the covers. A pulse in

her plump throat throbbed. “You have already received two bouquets of flowers from gentlemen you met last night and it is likely that more flowers as well as callers will arrive. It is imperative that you are prepared to make a good impression. Which means,” she drew in a haggard breath, “that you must get out of bed and dress.”

She spun on her heel and exited. My maid entered before the door closed and within minutes, my plans for a leisurely day were dashed.

As I sat at my vanity watching the maid arrange my hair I thought about what Mrs. White had said. Flowers. For me.

Who had ever heard of such a thing? Certainly nothing so flattering had ever happened to me.

Two bouquets of flowers, but she did not say from whom they had been sent. Surely Lord Puffington would wish to acknowledge our new acquaintanceship in such a grand and romantic manner.

In my weary mind I ran through the other gentlemen with whom I had danced, giving a mental “yay” or “nay” to each one as their faces came to mind.

Then his face popped into my brain.

The Duke of Amherst.

With his dark good looks and eyes that seemed to see everything.

The man who had turned me over his knee.

And upon whose shoe I had spat.

I stole a glance in the mirror and saw that my cheeks had flushed pink.

Though I was still quite fatigued, in the light of day, I could see just how horribly I had behaved.

In my defense, I did not know he was a duke at the time that I spat upon his shoe. Surely that accounted for something, did it not?

I could hardly ask Mrs. White upon which members of the peerage it was acceptable to spit. Maybe a baron? Or a knight?

“Are you not ready yet?” Mrs. White burst into my bedchamber without even bothering to knock. “Give me that!” she snapped at the maid, grabbing the comb from her hand and giving an unnecessarily rough tug upon a segment of my hair.

The poor maid cowered, then left the room.

I envied her.

“Well, that will have to do. Lord Puffington is already in the parlor waiting for you. Come along.” She grabbed my arm and hoisted me from my seat as though I was a sack of potatoes and dragged me across the room.

When we got to the hallway, she closed the door to my bedchamber and released her grip on me. She shook out her skirts and patted her hair. “Shall we?” she said, as though she had not just roughed me up like a common thief.

Then I remembered—Lord Puffington had come to call upon me. Me! A little thrill ran through me that a gentleman of his caliber and distinction would show an interest.

“And for heaven’s sake, Sarah, be mindful of the honor it is that Lord Puffington has

taken time to show his respects and call upon you. Please be on your best behavior and do not make a mess of things. He is your best prospect for a husband.”

Mrs. White, happiness killer.

The sooner you are married, the sooner you will be free of Mrs. White , I reminded myself.

I managed to put aside the sting of her comments, descended the staircase with a fair amount of grace and entered the parlor with a smile for Lord Puffington. He was a most agreeable looking man. “How nice to see you, Lord Puffington,” I said.

He bowed and then presented me with a large bouquet of pink roses. My heart thrilled. Not only were the flowers beautiful, but they would also send Mrs. White into a fit of sneezing.

“Thank you,” I said, taking the fragrant bundle from him.

“Are these not beautiful?” I asked, turning to Mrs. White and holding them toward her. A look of horror flashed over her face before she schooled her features.

“Yes, they are quite nice,” she said, taking a step back. “I will call a maid to put them in a vase.”

While she went to the pull cord for the maid, Lord Puffington and I sat facing each other. He filled out a wingback chair while I perched on a damask sofa.

“You are looking well,” he said.

“Thank you,” I replied.

Then the two of us sort of stared at each other.

A maid entered and set a vase with Lord Puffington's roses on a table next to two other arrangements. One was an assortment of carnations in an array of colors and next to it was a small vase with the sweetest cluster of lilies of the valley in it. My heart warmed at the sight of the delicate flowers. Of course, no one in England knew they were my favorites. Someone had simply made a lucky guess. Each arrangement had a small card next to it, presumably from the sender. Curiosity tore at me, but I dared not take my attention away from Lord Puffington to inspect the cards. I could not be so rude to him. And Mrs. White, who perched upon a sofa in the far corner of the room, would surely have a heart attack if I were to do so.

Hmm.

No, I could not treat Lord Puffington in such a callous manner.

"I enjoyed meeting your sister last evening," I said.

"She sends her regards. In fact," he reached into his pocket, "I have an invitation for you and your father, as well as your ... companion," he glanced toward Mrs. White then back to me, "for a dinner party at my home. It is Thursday next. I hope you will be able to attend."

As he handed me the invitation, our fingers touched. Strangely, it did not create the warm tingle which I might have expected. It was not as though I was in the habit of having contact with gentlemen, but the lack of reaction was curious to me.

Probably nerves.

"Thank you," I said. "I have no prior engagements and I look forward to attending."

He smiled. "I look forward to seeing you then."

And then he left.

Mrs. White was as startled as I was. She hurried to her feet and crossed the room. "What did you say to him? Why did he leave so quickly?" A look of panic filled her face. "I knew I ought to have sat next to you and steered the conversation myself."

The urge to shove her out of the way and run to my father, begging him to fire her, was strong.

I resisted.

"I did nothing wrong, much as it would please you if I had."

"Why Sarah, what a thing to say. You know I only want the best for you."

How she could even say those words and not have lightning strike her, I had no idea.

"He came to invite me to a dinner at his home next week." I held the invitation out to her as proof of my statement.

She took hold of the document and studied it.

"You shall need a new dress for this dinner. Mercy! I shall see to finding a hairdresser to tame your wild hair." Then she flitted out of the room as though her skirts were on fire. The petulant part of me wished they were.

The invitation filled my heart with excited anticipation. However, Mrs. White's exuberance and astonishment made me wonder if she really believed me to be such a sow's ear that she could not make me into a silk purse.

With her out of the way, I went to the other arrangements and opened the cards. The larger arrangement came from Mr. Smithers. I thought for a moment and tried to recall him in some meaningful way and sadly I came up with nothing.

Next to the fragrant cluster of lilies of the valley lay a card in an envelope. It was turned over so that what I could see was the wax seal with a deeply embossed “A” in the center.

My pulse hammered.

He wouldn't dare.

Would he?

Besides, he was not the only person with an ‘A’ name whom I met the night before.

Though he was the first to come to mind.

I turned the envelope over in my hands and noted the strong strokes of handwriting spelling out my name.

My fingers slipped beneath the seal and opened it, pulling out a thick card with the crest of the Duchy of Amherst across the top.

My whole body tingled and I traced my finger over the raised crest.

Bold strokes spelled out a short message:

With all good wishes,

J.

I stared at the words, few though they were. I do not know what I expected or hoped for. The other cards had not been any more effusive.

Yet, something in me felt a bit disappointed.

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CHAPTER 6

Mrs. White was in such good humor after the call and invitation from Lord Puffington that she did not object when I announced my intention to visit with Miss Primrose and did not insist upon accompanying me. I hurried to leave the house before she changed her mind.

The short walk to the Winchester home was very pleasant and the sense of freedom at being permitted to journey out on my own was exhilarating.

I breathed deeply of the fresh air and gloried in the sunshine of a new day. I had attended my first ball in London, made a favorable enough impression on a nice gentleman that he and his mother and sister had called upon me and issued an invitation.

In addition, I had a new friend.

Much as I hated to admit it, things in London were not nearly so bad as I had expected them to be.

As I neared the corner to turn on the street where Cassie lived, a carriage slowed to a stop. I glanced to the side but paid it no real attention as I assumed it was simply pausing to allow traffic to pass.

“Good day, Miss Hancock. Have you escaped from your nanny?”

My footsteps halted, though I quickly recovered and continued walking, head held

high and ignoring anyone who might be speaking to me.

“You must have the hearing of an old lady,” the same voice called out to me. “I said, ‘Good day, Miss Hancock. Have you escaped from your nanny?’ Am I speaking loudly enough for you now?”

A woman across the street stopped and stared, no doubt alarmed by the man shouting at me from his carriage. In order to prevent causing more of a stir, I stopped and turned toward the source of my harassment.

The aforementioned conveyance was massive and ornate. A team of four horses, perfectly matched and adorned lavishly, pulled the largest coach I had ever seen. Coachmen and footmen in pristine livery stared straight ahead from their assigned posts fore and aft.

A crest painted in gold upon the shiny onyx coach revealed what I already knew, The Duke of Amherst was within.

Resplendent in a dark green coat and black hat, the detestable duke peered at me from the window of his elegant coach. And bless my soul if my heart did not skip a beat at his handsome face and devilish grin.

However, I would not be swayed by his good looks and charm. And I refused to be impressed by his extravagant means of transportation.

The man had spanked me, after all.

“Oh, hello your grace,” I said as though just noticing him. “Have you lost your way? The meeting of arrogant dukes is half a mile in that direction.” I gestured behind me with my chin, then turned and continued on my way to see Cassie, satisfied that I had gotten in the last word with the imperious aristocrat.

And thereupon stepped into a puddle of mud, sinking to my ankle. I felt the squish beneath the sole of my shoe and knew, having experienced this particular mishap before, exactly what had happened. A small gasp escaped my lips, but I recovered and set them firmly as I withdrew my foot from the unusually thick mud and continued my stroll as though nothing untoward had happened.

Straining my ears, I prayed the loathsome coach containing the equally loathsome Duke of Amherst had gone in the other direction or at the very least that my nemesis had closed his window.

I took two steps without hearing his mocking voice and counted myself lucky.

Until I nearly ran into the lout as he stood before me.

I stopped and looked at him. How could I not? He was a man who commanded attention from anyone with his dignified bearing. Not to mention broad shoulders and smoldering eyes, which I am sure some young ladies found irresistible.

Not me, of course.

Without saying a word, he removed a gleaming white handkerchief from his pocket and proceeded to wipe the mud from my shoe.

“It would appear, Miss Hancock, that where you are concerned, I spend a great deal of time cleaning shoes. One might think I had been reduced to the status of a cobbler.”

“Oh, do you also make shoes? It seems a footman is the one who cleans them.”

Why, oh, why, could I not be polite to this man?

Could it be that the sight of him, the essence of him so near to me, did things that rotted my brain in some manner? He did not touch my foot, nor did he do anything other than behave in a gentlemanly manner as he wiped the mud from my shoe. Then he withdrew yet another handkerchief and laid it upon the ground before me. "Use this to wipe the mud from the bottom of your shoe," he said and rather than mocking, his tone was kindly. Caring.

I did as he instructed, leaving a splotch of mud which would cause some poor laundress fits of distress when she saw it.

"Thank you," I finally said when the task was complete. "You are most kind."

We gazed at one another and time seemed to stand still for a hazy moment.

"I suppose that was painful for you to say, Miss Hancock," he said, a twinkle in his eye. "But I am always happy to come to your aid when you are in distress."

Whatever had passed between us which had given me a warm feeling toward him vanished in an instant.

"I am not in distress. I simply stepped in some mud. You are the one who made a mountain out of a molehill."

His gloved hand reached out and his finger grazed my cheek in a fleeting touch. "You do bring out the devil in me, Miss Sarah Hancock." Then he tipped his hat, gathered up the mud-stained linens and returned to his carriage.

Good riddance, I thought. I hoped to never see him again.

As his carriage moved away, I realized I had not thanked him for the flowers.

Perhaps I was as uncouth as he believed me to be.

Damnation! Why could I not even be the slightest bit polite when in his company? I did not set out to be unpleasant, yet when he was near, all reasonable thoughts left my head.

Obviously, the fault was his. He had some sort of mystical powers that brought out the caustic bits of my personality.

Once I was certain the dastardly duke was gone and not planning to circle the block in order to harass me again, I proceeded to Cassie's home.

Fortunately, it took only a few minutes in Cassie's company, along with a strong pot of tea and sugar biscuits, to restore my good humor.

Cassie had also received a number of flower bouquets which were on display in the Winchesters' parlor. Lady Katherine bustled about, arranging and rearranging the buds. Clearly she was pleased that her protege had made an impression upon the ton. I'm sure she did not fuss and demean Cassie the way Mrs. White delighted in doing to me.

I was happy for Cassie and fervently hoped she made a brilliant match.

And I am loathsome enough to admit I was pleased to see she did not receive flowers from the Duke of Amherst.

My head was in such a muddle. Possibly more than tea and sugar biscuits could resolve.

However, I was no quitter, so I refilled my cup and added two more biscuits to my plate.

“Is something amiss, Sarah dear?” Lady Katherine asked, her voice warm with concern. So warm, in fact, that it felt foreign as I had not been spoken to in such a manner in an extended amount of time. My throat felt tight and I feared I might tear up, though why I would have such a reaction, I had no idea.

I sipped tea to soothe my throat. I had intended to make a quip about my appetite being unusually large or some such nonsense, but different words came out of my mouth. “Why are gentlemen so confusing?” I asked, a note of desperation tinging my voice.

Lady Katherine gave a small chuckle, patted my hand and said, “Is it the gentlemen who are confusing, or your feelings about them?” Then she peered at me more closely. “Or is it one gentleman in particular?”

“I-I do not know,” I said, feeling miserable.

“Well, my dear,” Lady Katherine said with a knowing smile, “I am sure it will sort itself out in due time.”

That might have been the best advice, but I was so unaccustomed to discussing my feelings, that I was grateful when Lady Katherine steered the conversation away from me. I was particularly delighted to learn that Cassie and Lady Katherine would be at the dinner which the Puffington family was hosting the following week.

Much better to focus on the pleasant, if dull, Lord Puffington than the vexatious Duke of Amherst.

And yet...

CHAPTER 7

Mrs. White continued her unrelenting efforts to tutor me in the ways of English gentility. The invitation to dine with Lord Puffington and his family spurred her onward even more fervently than before. She grilled, quizzed, and cross-examined me on the nature of the peerage as well as British titles. The difference between a viscount and an earl was now crystal clear. In America, we called people Mr. or Mrs. or Miss. It was hardly so complicated, but to the British, particularly my dour tutor, these things were all very important. The shrew made dire threats should I forget or fail to show appropriate deference based upon title.

She even had the temerity to attempt to correct my accent.

More accurately, she hired someone to accomplish the task.

Summoned to the drawing room one morning after breakfast, presumably for callers, I entered with a smile, only to be faced with Mrs. White standing next to a horrid little man whom she introduced as Professor Keating. He dipped his bald head to me. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Hancock.”

His pronunciation and precise tone surpassed the elocution of even the most high born British lords and ladies of my acquaintance.

Mrs. White, using her most genteel diction as well, explained. “Professor Keating is here to teach you how to speak.”

I glowered from the pockmarked face of Professor Keating to the beady eyes of Mrs.

White and took a step backward.

“Your father has ordered these lessons.” She tipped her chin up in challenge, anticipating my objection.

“At your suggestion, of course.”

“We only want what is best for you.”

I rushed from the room to find my only parent. He had his nose buried in a book in the library when I burst in.

“Father,” I gasped, expecting the shrew to be fast on my heels, or as fast as her jam-and-pudding fueled frame could carry her. “What is wrong with my accent? Am I not an American?”

He tore his attention away from reading long enough to glance up at me. “Mrs. White thinks correcting your accent is a good idea.”

I clenched my fists at my sides. “What about what you think?”

“Sarah.” He set the book aside to focus on me. “We are here to find you a husband. Assuming we succeed, England will be your new home. If you are going to be British, you should sound like it.”

Taken aback by his plan to convert me into someone else, I squared my shoulders and replied with every bit of Yankee pride within me. “I will never be British, regardless of who I might marry. What is wrong with you? Have you forgotten your own country?”

“No, Sarah. But I will not be living here for the rest of my life. If all goes according

to plan, you will.”

A cold feeling washed over me. Though I knew this was the purpose of the trip to London, it only now occurred to me that my father, my closest living relative, would leave me here and travel back home. To his home. But I would not. Once I was legally wed, he would wash his hands of me and resume his life an ocean away.

It did not help matters that he seemed to be in a bit of a rush to accomplish the task and be on his way.

Rather than waiting for Father to force me to return while the smug Mrs. White watched, I turned and left the room, running right into the winded lady herself.

“Sarah! Why can you not be more careful?” she scolded. “Honestly, you are the most difficult young lady I have ever encountered.”

Ignoring her, I stomped my way back to the drawing room and sat down opposite Professor Keating. “One lesson. That is all I will consent to.”

“To which I will consent,” the clammy little man corrected.

“I thought this was about my accent, not my grammar.” I conveyed my annoyance with a fierce glare, though he likely wished to correct that as well.

“Fine.” He pulled himself up to his full elfin height. “Let us begin with a few simple exercises.” He cleared his throat in preparation for his torture.

“Americans,” he pronounced the word as though it was vinegar upon his tongue, “place too much emphasis on the hard sound of the letter R. The British articulate it much more gently.” He demonstrated. “Pahk, rather than park, you see?”

I shrugged.

“Now you try it.”

“Pahk, ahthah than park,” I mimicked.

“Miss Hancock!” Mrs. White, of course, chose that moment to enter the room. No doubt she had lingered in the library to slaughter my character to my father before returning to belittle me in front of Professor Sweaty Brow.

“Professor Keating—” She caught herself before she went into a full-blown tirade. She gave him her best smile, which simply meant she did not scowl. “Would you please excuse Miss Hancock and me, um, myself? Um. The two of us. I should like to speak with Miss Hancock privately for a moment.”

Professor Keating scuttled out the door without further comment, no doubt relieved at an opportunity to escape the tension in the room.

“I am ashamed of you. Behaving so rudely to Professor Keating. After your father paid him a handsome sum, indeed, to make you sound like a proper lady.”

“Ashamed? How dare you. You are nothing to me, and to imply my actions reflect on you in any manner is ludicrous. Believe me, I am as ashamed to be in your presence as you are to be in mine.”

Father entered the room. He glanced from Mrs. White to me and back again. “I have sent the professor on his way. Perhaps hiring a pugilist master would be a better activity for the two of you.”

Mrs. White and I kept our distance from each other for the rest of the day, but she started up again that evening. As if my nerves were not sufficiently frazzled over the

party at the home of the Puffington family, my unrelenting tutor felt compelled to lecture me during the entire trip to their townhouse. Would that I could open the door to the carriage and push her out to be trampled by the hooves of the horses pulling the carriages which followed ours, but such an act would be most unladylike, indeed.

Perhaps that was a bit harsh, but I had been under the thumb and scrutiny of that humorless, cold woman nonstop since my arrival in London and would have done almost anything to be rid of her.

If only I could find out more about her past. Perhaps that would reveal some nugget of information which I could use to persuade Father to terminate her from his employ. But so far, no information had been forthcoming. I believed Cassie had become distracted by suitors. I could not blame her, however, I was desperate to be free of Mrs. White.

I had attempted to talk with Father about her dogged determination to turn me into a simpering fool, but he had no ear for my concerns. What little charm she possessed she heaped upon my father, not me.

I wondered if a husband for me was not Mrs. White's only objective.

Thankfully, once we arrived at the party, Lady Puffington distracted my chaperone sufficiently for me to slip away to converse with Lord Puffington and his sister, who were both quite amiable.

The evening started off exceedingly well. Optimism flickered in my breast at the possibility of soon becoming part of the Puffington family, freeing myself of Mrs. White along with her constant carping, criticism, and control.

From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Cassie as she arrived with both Lord and Lady Winchester. I was happy to see my friend, though the fact that she was

accompanied by the Winchesters gave me a pang of sadness since my own father could not be bothered to attend this event, fobbing me off to Mrs. White instead.

Lord Puffington excused himself to speak with other guests and I turned toward Cassie, eager to speak with her.

“Well, hello Yankee girl,” came a familiar voice from behind me, clipping the wings of happiness fluttering about in my chest. “Have you spat upon anyone yet?”

I turned, determined not to rise to the bait, but one look at the Duke of Amherst’s smug expression changed my mind. “Not yet, but that could change at any moment.”

“I would expectorate no less from you, little spitfire,” he replied.

I opened my mouth to respond then closed it. Had this man actually bested me in a war of words? Perhaps I misheard him and he simply said expect not expectorate, because who could really be that clever?

“Have I stunned you with my wordplay, Miss Hancock?” A satisfied smile turned up the corners of his lips, which were quite luscious and surrounded even white teeth—I imagined them nipping at various parts of my body.

What? First, it was a most improper notion. Had Mrs. White been able to monitor my thoughts—which she certainly wished to do—she would have been shocked all the way from the top of her bonnet-covered head to the tips of her sensibly shod toes.

Stunned did not begin to describe the confusing sensations assaulting me, and I rarely surprised myself.

Second, how could I possibly have randy thoughts about him, the most despicable man I had encountered in all of my one and twenty years?

Yet, I continued to stand before him, dumbfounded.

Thankfully, Lord Puffington joined us. “Ah, Jeffrey, I see you have met Miss Hancock. Is she not delightful?”

The notion of these two gentlemen discussing me as though I were not standing in front of them annoyed me. When the possibility arose that the duke would respond with his thoughts on my ‘delightfulness,’ the urge to flee the room immediately became my priority. I searched about for an exit, but Mrs. White stepped into my line of sight, signaling me to smile and appear amused.

Would she pat me on the head once I performed as directed?

“Yes, she is delightful indeed,” the duke replied to Lord Puffington, though he kept his eyes on me while he spoke. “You never know what might come out of her mouth.”

My face flushed with embarrassment, and my dearest desire was to get away from both of them. I would have liked the opportunity to spend more time with Lord Puffington, but not if it meant one more instant in the company of the exasperating Duke of Amherst.

I excused myself but, as I began to step away, the loathsome woman accosted me. What had begun as a promising evening suddenly turned into my own private Dante’s Inferno: cold, calculating Mrs. White on one side and the too-disturbing Duke of Amherst on the other. I looked at Lord Puffington, telepathically pleading with him to rescue me from this hell, but he had somehow disappeared as soon as Mrs. White came near.

“Ah, Miss Hancock, the music is starting. It is time for the dance you promised me.” The Duke of Amherst whisked me away before she could utter a syllable. We stood

up together with the dancers.

“I did not promise you a dance,” I whispered through a forced smile.

“Based upon the expression in your eyes when your governess?—”

“She is not my governess.” Honestly, could he be more infuriating?

“Given the childish way you sometimes behave, you can understand my confusion.”

“You are not confused. You simply hope to rankle me, something you have an uncanny ability to do.”

“And do you know why that is?” he asked before the dance parted us briefly.

“Because you are despicable,” I responded the next time he came within earshot.

“No.” He grinned. “It is because you fancy me.”

I stopped in my tracks to glare up at him. The dance was forgotten while raw emotion coursed through my veins. “You! I fancy you ?” I threw my head back and laughed. “Do you honestly believe I could ever fancy a man such as you, after you turned me over your knee and spanked me?”

Jeffrey, the Duke of Amherst stared. An eerie silence fell over the dancers and even the musicians quieted. From the corner of my eye, I saw Cassie with her mouth hanging slack.

Horried, my focus darted from shocked face to shocked face until my gaze met the stony glare of Mrs. White.

CHAPTER 8

Father insisted no decisions be made in haste, so when Mrs. White reported my behavior to him—and though she was supposedly responsible for my comportment, she blamed the entire matter on me—he sent me to bed with instructions to get a good night’s sleep, with a promise we would discuss the situation in the morning.

How could he expect me to rest? My mind whirled. Another scandal. I had shamed my father and myself, not to mention suffering the self-satisfied smirk on Mrs. White’s face.

I had no idea why she appeared so happy. If we returned to America, she would be out of a job. However, since she lingered in the library with Father after my departure, perhaps she had designs on accompanying us to America as my new stepmother.

A shudder tripped through my body while a bit of bile rose in my throat. I would do anything to get away from her, including give myself to the Duke of Amherst.

Yes, upon consideration of the options, binding myself to the vexatious duke was far preferable to living in a household with that woman as my stepmother.

Of course, there was no reason to think my father would be so foolish.

The variety of thoughts crashing through my brain made sleep elusive.

Summoned to the library the next morning, I expected a stern lecture followed by

orders to pack for a departure to America. Instead, the Duke of Amherst stood next to my father.

My breath caught in my throat, and I took a step back. I scanned the visitor's face for a hint as to his intentions. Of course, he must have been angry with me for embarrassing him, though my statement contained nothing but the truth. Regardless, it was scandalous for me to shout about it in the middle of a dance. My face heated with mortification.

Father indicated an upholstered chair next to the one where our imposing guest had settled himself, while Father sat on the other side of the desk and studied the two of us.

“Sarah.” He rubbed his forehead. “I have spoken with his grace, who indicates what you said last night, though highly shocking, was actually true.”

I regarded the man next to me with surprise. Why did he not deny the whole thing? Call me a crazy gold digger? It was not as though there were any witnesses. Plus, the word of a man of his lineage and reputation would carry much more weight than that of an upstart American girl like me.

Father spoke again. “Based upon his admission, I could demand satisfaction and force a marriage between the two of you.”

The maids—undoubtedly listening outside the closed door—could have heard my sudden inhalation of breath.

“Marriage? To him?” I turned and stared at the duke, who met my gaze, seeming completely nonplussed.

“Is the thought of it so abhorrent to you?” he said, calm as you please.

“I-I had not considered it,” I lied.

“The other option,” Father interjected, “would be for us to return to America and allow his grace to tell whatever version of events he cares to. I would not ordinarily offer a choice, but seeing that you both contributed to this mess, it seems the fair thing to do.”

I slumped in my seat. Allow this man, or anyone, to tell tales about me? No! Despite my lack of decorum, I still possessed some pride.

An opportunity for freedom from England, this exasperating man, as well as all the other pomp and circumstance presented itself. Why did I not take it?

“Of course, that would be the duke’s preference.” I stared at the floor, expecting his agreement.

“Not necessarily.” The gentleman turned to address my father. “Sir, would you mind allowing Miss Hancock and me a moment to speak privately?”

My father sat up straighter in his seat. “That would be highly improper.”

“I believe we are past the point of what is proper or not, sir.”

To my knowledge, no one, man or woman, had ever stood up to my father, particularly in such a firm but polite manner. A tiny bit of admiration formed in my heart.

Without responding, Father rose and vacated the room, though he did not close the door completely when he left.

Bewildered, I scrutinized the Duke of Amherst. Did he plan to spank me again for

getting him into such a bind? Instead, he turned in his seat, gazing at me full in the face.

“What will happen to you if you go back to America?” His warm voice floated over me and I almost wanted to crawl into his lap.

I considered lying, but the situation required honesty. I took a deep breath and confessed. “Father says he wishes to have a daughter married to a titled English gentleman. While it is his desire, the whole truth is I have rebuffed or offended all of the eligible suitors in America.” There. I said it. I grasped the arms of the chair, preparing myself for his ridicule.

Instead, he laughed heartily. “All of them? Surely you exaggerate.”

“Father took me to Boston so my aunt could introduce me to eligible gentlemen. That went fairly well until...” I braced for my admission. “One young man attempted to steal a kiss. I had no idea of his intention, so when he startled me, my reaction was instinctive.”

I peeped up at the Duke of Amherst, who wore a singularly delighted expression on his face. “Go on.”

“I blackened his eye. Shortly afterward, we left for England. So now you know.” I slumped in my seat. All the starch had left me.

His look of enchantment persisted.

“It must please you to know I have shamed myself in two countries.” I tilted my chin in defiance.

“As a matter of fact it does, but not for the reason you might think.” He grinned at

me. “It means I am your last, best hope for marriage, is that not correct?”

“Why should such a thing make you glad? Surely you have many prospects for a wife.” My voice barely above a whisper, I curled into myself, trying to disappear. “Better prospects than me.”

“Would not a wife who is grateful to be saved from a life of spinsterhood be a good choice? She would always be thankful to have a husband such as me.”

“What?” My malaise disappeared. “If you expect me to spend the rest of my life kowtowing after you in gratitude for the grand honor of being your wife, you are sorely mistaken.” I stood, intending to go to the door to call my father back into the room, but before I could get past the duke, he took hold of my hand and drew me down to sit on his lap.

“Your spirit is precisely the reason you will be an ideal wife for me. I am well past prime marriage age, but I have refused to bind myself to a woman who simpers after me in a ‘yes, your grace’ sort of way.”

I did not fully comprehend his meaning because the flecks of gold in his dark eyes mesmerized me—burnished speckles which were only apparent when one was in close proximity, such as sitting on the gentleman’s lap.

The next thing I knew, his mouth settled over mine in a gentle kiss that made my toes wiggle.

When the kiss ended, he whispered against my lips, “Stay here, Sarah. Be my wife.”

CHAPTER 9

“Married? To the Duke of Amherst?” Cassie gaped at me for half a minute. We were strolling in the garden of the townhouse my father had rented for our stay in London. The roses giving us a natural barricade against the intrusion of Mrs. White.

“Yes, it all happened this morning.” I could scarcely believe it myself, though saying it aloud made it seem more real.

“Married? To the Duke of Amherst?” Cassie repeated as though she was in a trance. I couldn’t blame her, I felt much the same way myself.

“Yes, it is quite extraordinary,” I said.

“I hurried over here as quickly as I could,” Cassie said, finally out of her stupor. “After the scene at the Puffingtons’ home last night, I feared you would be on your way back to America before I got a chance to say good-bye.” She shook her head slowly from side to side. “Instead, you are to be a duchess.”

“I expected the same as well, but the Duke refused Father’s offer to take me back to America and asked me to marry him.” I did not mention the pleasure of sitting on his lap and feeling his lips kissing mine. That was my own sweet experience to savor.

“A duchess.” Poor Cassie really was gobsmacked by the whole thing.

“I can hardly get my mind around it myself,” I said. “I do not even know what it means to be a duchess.”

“I am sure it will be wonderful,” Cassie said, dreamily. “The Duke of Amherst is an exceptionally handsome man. And I understand that he is vastly wealthy.”

Cassie and I sat on a bench in the garden and were silent for a moment during which time the full weight of my betrothal settled over my shoulders. Married. To the Duke of Amherst.

Forever.

“Oh, Cassie,” I whispered. “What have I gotten myself into?”

She shifted on the bench and took both my hands in hers. “You have gotten yourself into a brilliant match with a man who obviously cares about you. Otherwise, he would have sent you packing to America. A duke is not prone to do things he does not wish to do. If the Duke of Amherst has asked you to marry him, then that is what he wishes to do.”

“I hope that is the case,” I said.

“Did he really sp-spank you?” Cassie asked in a whisper, her face turning red.

“Yes, he did. The first time we met. I overheard him insulting Americans and I could not allow him to go unchallenged. I had no idea who he was.”

“No!” Cassie gasped.

“Yes, he took me to the garden and turned me over his knee.”

Cassie’s eyes went wide and her hands released mine and flew to her mouth. She looked from side to side, lowered her hands and then leaned toward me. “I believe that Lord Winchester sometimes spansks Lady Katherine,” she said. “One morning

when I went to Lady Katherine's dressing room, I was about to knock on the door when I heard her squeal and then I am certain I heard the sounds of a hand slapping flesh."

"No!" I stared at her. "Lady Katherine? Are you certain?"

"I did not want to believe it myself," she said. "But then Lord Winchester said, 'Do you know why you are being punished?' I nearly fainted." She drew in a breath before continuing. "I know I ought to have left, but my feet were frozen in place."

"What happened?" I asked, shifting to sit on the edge of the bench.

"She said that she was sorry for being contrary but she did not believe she deserved to be punished. But Lord Winchester disagreed and kept swatting her."

Speechless, I simply stared at her.

"The most stunning thing was that later in the day when I saw them, they were more loving to each other than usual."

"Lady Katherine? And Lord Winchester?" I was still in shock.

"They are the most happily married couple I have even observed. So I think that if the Duke of Amherst wishes to spank you, then that bodes well for your happiness."

It was the most insane logic I had ever heard, but then I thought about the feeling of being over Jeffrey's knee. Though I had been furious at the time, in retrospect, that incident had set my life on the current path and I found I could not be disappointed.

After our chat in the garden, Cassie and I went to the home of the Winchesters in order to select a gown for her to wear as my bridesmaid.

“I have never been a bridesmaid before,” Cassie said, excitement in her voice. She twirled in a circle, showing off a very pretty pink dress. “What do you think of this one?”

“It is perfect,” I said and Cassie smiled brightly.

“I understand congratulations are in order, Miss Hancock.” Lady Katherine entered the room, a big smile on her face.

“Thank you,” I said, gazing at the elegant lady. As much as I tried not to, all I could think about was what Cassie had shared about the sorts of things Lady Katherine and her husband engaged in.

“I am going to be Sarah’s bridesmaid,” Cassie said.

“How wonderful,” Lady Katherine said.

“It is going to be a small wedding,” I said, “but I h-hope you and Lord Winchester will attend.”

“I would not miss it,” Lady Katherine said. Then she leaned down and whispered in my ear. “Husbands who are willing to take their wife over their knee are the very best. I’m sure you will be very happy.”

Just as quickly as she entered the room, she exited.

And I picked my jaw up off the floor.

Cassie and I exchanged a glance. “Did you hear what she said to me?” I asked.

Cassie blushed and nodded her head. “Yes,” she said, then squeezed my arm. “I am

sure it is yet another sign that you will be blissfully happy in your marriage.” Then she sighed dreamily.

“You are a good friend, Cassie. I hope you will have a blissfully happy marriage as well.”

Cassie shrugged. “I am beginning to feel discouraged,” she said. “You and Tallie both married off and here I am, still on the shelf.”

“I noticed that Lord Puffington called upon you recently.”

She blushed. “Yes he did. He is a most kind man and his family lineage is impeccable. It’s simply that...”

“He is a bit on the dull side?” I added.

“Maybe I am being foolish,” Cassie said. “But I want excitement. Tallie eloped to South America and was married by a ship’s captain. You are marrying a duke and though I know it’s not the traditional way of making a match, do you not feel that it was fate that brought you together at the Waterfords’ Ball? The Duke of Amherst has been raised to be in control of his emotions, yet somehow you stirred something up in him that caused him to... spank you?”

“I have wondered at the way things have come to pass in my life since arriving in London,” I said. “Nothing has gone to plan, that is for certain.” I paused for a moment. “But what of Lord and Lady Winchester? They are obviously very happy together and they live a rather normal life.”

“But it was a scandal that forced them to marry,” Cassie said. “Perhaps I shall have a scandal of my own someday.”

CHAPTER 10

For several days after the Duke of Amherst's proposal, my mind whirled. I told myself the sudden change in my circumstances caused the confusion, but truth be told, the experience of sitting in my fiancé's lap, his firm arms around me as we kissed, etched itself in my memory. Having never experienced a man's lips pressed to mine before—the last man who tried ended up with a blackened eye—my conclusion was simple. I liked it very much.

During moments alone, I closed my eyes to relive the scene. The scent of soap and fresh air enveloped me while so near to the man who would be my husband. The awareness created by his lips upon my own haunted me. Despite the many tasks he needed to complete before our marriage, my intended called upon me every afternoon and often stayed for dinner.

Mrs. White, as well as Father, deferred to him. I began to think of my future husband with admiration and curiosity, though I often wondered why he had not simply sent me back to America.

Each afternoon, I eagerly anticipated his arrival. My attitude toward marriage had changed significantly. It seemed possible the two of us might share some felicity in matrimony.

"Tomorrow, at this time, you shall be my wife." The golden flecks in his eyes darkened with emotion.

"Yes." My cheeks heated. My bravado left and I turned into a demure lady.

“Do you understand all that is entailed in becoming the Duchess of Amherst?” he asked.

I stuttered and stammered and stared. Was he honestly talking about marital relations? My lips moved until, at last, some words came out. “Are you referring to...to...my wifely duties?” I longed to run to my bedchamber to bury my head in a bowl of cold water to extinguish the flush of sheer embarrassment burning my face.

Jeffrey did his best to stifle a laugh, but his levity still angered me.

“Is it not bad enough that you force me to speak of such private things, but now you laugh at me?”

“My apologies.” He wiped a laughter-induced tear from his eye. “I did not intend to force you to speak of private things. I simply referred to the many responsibilities incumbent upon you as my duchess in a social setting in addition to within the household as well as within the duchy...not necessarily in the bedroom.”

We were seated together on the sofa. Mrs. White had absented herself on some excuse—probably chasing after my father—so my fiancé and I conversed alone in the drawing room. I focused on my hands, which were tightly clasped in my lap, so mortified I could not look at my future husband. If only Mrs. White would appear so we could leave this horrid subject.

But, as was her contrary nature, she did not comply with my wish. I continued to keep my head down, my face inflamed with embarrassment.

“It would seem,” Jeffrey spoke softly, leaning down until his face reached mine, “that perhaps you are a bit nervous about what will happen in our marriage bed. Is that correct, Yankee girl?”

Could the humiliation get any worse? Speechless, I closed my eyes and regretted the last few minutes.

To my horror, my fiancé closed the gap between us, rested his hand on my shoulder, and slid his fingers around the nape of my neck. The warmth of his caress infiltrated my body, and I relaxed. Touching my chin, he tipped my face up, leaving me no choice but to stare directly into his eyes. The corners of his mouth lifted in a small, sweet smile. “Do not be afraid, my little poppet, for I shall take tender care of you. I want us both to be happy in this marriage, including our marriage bed.”

His mouth covered mine in a kiss demonstrating the tender care he promised. He pulled me close with one hand at the small of my back. The other softly embraced my nape. A sigh escaped my mouth. When I opened my lips, he deepened the kiss.

The sensations were completely foreign to me. I am unsure how to describe them even now other than to say my response resembled that of a wanton harlot. By the time the kiss ended, I clung to my fiancé’s lapels and panted like someone who had been saved from drowning.

He ran his thumb over my lips, which were tender and swollen. “I thought it might be wise to wait before consummating our marriage since we have not known each other long. However, I now believe it might be best if we did not.” He stroked his thumb along my jawline then down my throat. “Would you agree?”

How could I answer such a question? If I said yes, I would sound like a randy tart. If I said no, I would be lying.

Instead, I broke from his embrace and stood up. “Whatever you wish, your grace.” I gazed out the window in an effort to appear unaffected.

My soon-to-be-groom simply smiled, pulled me down across his knees, and before I

could squeal an objection, he landed five firm swats on my backside.

“What is the meaning of this?” I struggled against his firm hold.

“You said, ‘whatever you wish.’ What I wish is for you to stop pretending you have no regard for me, because I know you do.”

“Oh, do you now?” Why did my feelings for him matter?

“Yes. I have proof.” He yanked my skirts up until only my pantalets covered my cheeks, a position we had both experienced before.

He tugged at the ribbons holding my undergarments in place and, soon, my rear end was exposed to him. His hand skimmed the flesh of my behind; a quiver tingled through my nether region. A unique feeling, it frightened yet fascinated me.

The Duke’s fingers were cool against my flesh, which heated from the swats he gave me, as well as from my embarrassment. I ought to have struggled against him and his intentions, but the awareness created by his touch mesmerized me. My breath caught in my throat as I awaited his next move.

Languidly, he teased the curves of my naked cheeks. The intimacy of his caress strummed through me. Was this part of my wifely duties? My heart pounded, while I bit my lip to keep from crying out for more as he worked the flesh near my most private places.

“Lovely.” His voice softened. His praise filled me with pleasure.

His hand left my behind. I mourned the loss and raised my bottom seeking more contact.

He fulfilled my desire, but not in the way I expected. His hand came down upon my buttocks with a resounding smack. I inhaled sharply, wondering what caused this sudden transformation from pampering to punishment.

Before my brain assimilated to this change, he struck again. And again. A flurry of spanks landed on the same spot in the middle of my behind. Between the swats, which took my breath away, I panted. “Why? What did I do?”

“I told you,” he conversed as though we were discussing the weather, not my unprotected backside, “I could prove you do care for me.” He spanked a series of slaps on the upturned curve of my bottom then moved down to the tops of my legs where he smacked so thoroughly, I would not be able to sit without wincing for the entirety of my wedding day and beyond.

“This is your method for proving it?” I turned so he could see the incredulity, coupled with annoyance, in my expression.

“Yes,” he replied, then landed two more spanks on my sit spot before he resumed the gentle fondling which began the interlude.

Confusion mixed with consternation in my brain. The feelings his touch evoked mystified and frightened me. Although I often speak out of turn, in all other matters my emotions were under tight control. I had learned long before that any sign of weakness or emotional attachment only led to suffering, a type of suffering much worse than my scorched and tingling behind.

Yet, there I lay, my buttocks on display for a man who believed himself entitled to take me across his knee at his whim. Why was I not angrily thrashing against him? His tender ministrations on my hindquarters and thighs soothed me in a way I had not experienced in a very long time. A sigh escaped my lips, while I wriggled into a comfortable position.

My movements opened my legs. My betrothed's fingers trailed along the quivering flesh of my leg, spreading exquisite warmth through my body. I held my breath, unsure of what would happen next, but not wanting him to stop, either.

He gently stroked the opening to my most feminine place. I gulped. His tentative exploration continued. A low moan emanated from somewhere deep in my soul.

"Ah, you see? I knew you liked me." My husband-to-be's voice, though rich and rumbling, thickened with emotion that sent a shiver through my body. Pressing back into his probing, I wanted to deny his accusations, but my mouth went dry and I could not form words. My brain spun in circles. The only vaguely coherent thought centered on a profound determination to prolong his attentions.

Thankfully, we were in accord. He continued to massage the moisture in my nether region. I whimpered and squirmed in a quest to extend the contact.

Pressure built and coiled tighter and tighter within me. My hips quivered and bucked against Jeffrey's lap. His labored breathing matched my own.

Just when it seemed the coil tightening within me would spring loose, he stopped. I slouched over his thighs, my eyes closed, my breathing shallow. Bewilderment washed over me. What had happened to me, to my body, to my self-control? What was this skill my future husband possessed to make me forget everything I ever knew or thought about myself?

He once again stroked his hand over my buttocks, whether to calm himself or me, I do not know.

"I am sorry, poppet," he whispered. "Your first time should not be this way." He replaced my pantalets over my heated, squirming bottom, righted my skirt, then set me on his knee.

I chewed my lip, attempting to sort my emotions. Shame at my wantonness flowed through my body, along with confusion over the sensations I had experienced. Why did he stop? Did I do something wrong?

What did he mean about my first time? Was this what married people did together? Was my maidenhood intact?

Jeffrey turned me so I was forced, again, to look at him. He appeared sad. I wondered if I had disappointed him. So I asked.

“No.” He smiled tenderly and brushed my hair away from my face. “The disappointment is with myself.” He set me away from him. I missed the contact with his warm body. I perched next to him on the sofa, confusion rampant in my being. Moments before he had filled me with euphoric sensations unlike any I had experienced, yet now I sat next to the man who would soon be my husband, and he appeared mad at himself for touching me.

Was caressing me so abhorrent? Was he disappointed he agreed to bind himself to me for eternity?

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Perhaps I should go back to America. I am not wife material.”

The sadness around his eyes disappeared. He smiled ruefully. “Oh no, my poppet, you are most definitely wife material, and I intend to prove it to you once we are wed. Until then, I bid you adieu, my little Yankee girl.” His lips brushed softly along my temple and then he stood.

He exited the room, leaving me to wonder at all that had taken place.

Of course, Mrs. White chose that time to return to the drawing room to quiz me about his departure. “Why has his grace left so soon? Did you say something to upset him?”

Oh, I shall be relieved once this marriage takes place as I fear if you have enough time, you shall surely wear out the man's good humor until he decides not to marry you after all."

Yes, she was a bounty of joyful good tidings. I shoved to my feet and glared at her. "Should not you be packing your things as well? After my wedding, your work here will be done so you will be free to torment some other poor girl." Then I left the room without a backward glance at the old prune.

CHAPTER 11

I woke early on my wedding day. Once my fate had been decided, Father expedited matters, with good reason. Although only a short time had passed since the incident giving rise to my sudden betrothal, even I, an American, knew tongues wagged all around London about the scandal. The sooner I became the Duchess of Amherst, the sooner the tongues would wag about someone else.

Mrs. White assisted me in dressing in one of the many gowns purchased for my season. My reflection in the mirror pleased me. I hoped Jeffrey would feel the same. My soon-to-be-former-handler fussed a bit and pretended to be maternal. I considered spitting on her shoe but, frankly, could not be bothered. My soul yearned to be rid of her in order to get on with my life, whatever it might hold.

Although the thought of becoming a duchess terrified me, what did I know about being a duchess? I realized that I would prefer to move into unknown territory than to remain in my life as it was then constituted.

A soft spot had formed in my heart where Jeffrey, the Duke of Amherst had taken up residence and a glimmer of hope flickered there.

Father and Mrs. White rode with me to the church in the carriage my father had secured for use during our visit. He had expected to be in London for at least three months, so my sudden engagement put him in a bind. However, on the way to the church, he shared with me he had been able to terminate his agreements for the carriage and townhouse. Therefore, he would return to America the next day.

Father never intended to make London his home after my marriage, but his sudden announcement chilled me. We are not a sentimental family, we Hancocks, but still, I might have hoped my father would not abandon me before the ink on my marriage license dried.

Despite my hurt, my composure remained intact. Wondering at Mrs. White's reaction to the departure of my father, along with any hopes she might have of securing his affections, I stole a look in her direction. Her pleasant countenance caught me off guard. Perhaps because I had never seen her in any state other than dour.

When we arrived at the church, I was pleased to see Cassie and the Winchesters. After the ride in the carriage with my father and Mrs. White, the warmth of the Winchesters and their ward was much appreciated.

I nearly ran up the aisle to my groom. Although I was not in love with him, at least he enjoyed my company, which was more than I could say for my own dear father whose recent actions evidenced his urge to be rid of me.

At the altar, I peeped at Jeffrey during one of the lengthy prayers the vicar felt necessary to pronounce in an effort to assure our marital felicity. To my surprise, Jeffrey gazed down at me at the same time, gave me a wink before closing his eyes and assuming the proper prayerful attitude.

Once the marriage ceremony concluded, we adjourned to the Duke of Amherst's townhouse for the wedding breakfast. Thank goodness for Cassie and the Winchesters. Otherwise, the mood would have been very dour with only my father and Mrs. White.

The Winchesters and Cassie did not linger too long after breakfast finished. They offered their good wishes for our happy marriage and then were on their way. No doubt they wished to be away from my father and Mrs. White as much as I did.

Although I was not sure what awaited me as a married woman, after my father's pronouncement in the carriage, I could not be away from him fast enough, so when he and that woman lingered after the meal, I sighed loudly to indicate my impatience.

After they finally left, my groom turned to me. "You were eager for our guests to leave. You must be anxious to be alone with me."

The look in his eyes made my heart thunder in my chest and my toes curled inside my wedding slippers. However, I refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing how his nearness affected me.

"I wished for them to leave, but not to be alone with you. Honestly, you are the most self-centered person I have ever met."

"Is it so wrong for a man to want to hear his wife say she has an interest in him? I have gone out of my way to establish a harmonious relationship, yet all you do is rebuff my efforts." He stepped toward me and tugged at a bit of my hair, which had come loose when Mrs. White hugged me with a show of faux affection. "We both know you are not immune to me, do we not, my dear wife?"

"I shall now add arrogant as well as vain to my previous description of you." His proximity made it difficult to think straight. Emotions warred within me. I ached to throw myself into Jeffrey's arms, to beg him to show me the ways of married people. Yet, I had no inkling how to be a wife and the notion of revealing ineptitude to my new husband terrified me.

His fingers played with the lock of hair, and the familiarity of his touch was distracting.

"Are you saying you do not want to consummate our marriage?" He tucked the errant tress behind my ear then trailed a finger down my throat and across my collarbone.

“As I recall during one of our conversations you were quite concerned about your wifely duties. Perhaps it is time to remove the mystery.” His finger moved in sensual circles on the flesh of my collarbone.

The breath caught in my lungs. My mind went blank. I simply waited, my heart beating a cadence while his finger explored the flesh displayed by the low bodice of my dress.

Although I intended to keep my eyes on the ground, I peeked at his body lingering very near to mine. After our guests left, he had removed his jacket and the rapid pace of his breathing was more evident without the additional layer of clothing. Perhaps I held some appeal for him after all.

His fingertip slid inside my gown and touched the edge of one nipple. He moved deeper into the dress, squeezed the tip of my breast between his thumb and forefinger. An involuntary moan escaped my lips.

“Shall we go upstairs, little duchess?” His husky voice sent a jolt through my body. All I could do was nod.

He scooped me into his strong arms. I clung to his neck with my face buried in his shoulder. He took the stairs two at a time, kicked open the door to a bedchamber, then kicked it closed behind us with a resounding boom. Despite the momentum of our entry, once we were alone, his actions slowed. He set me upon my feet as though I were a delicate treasure.

A large bed—my husband's bed—dominated the room. It was made up with crisp fresh linens plus a mountain of pillows. Heavy drapes, tied back at the corners, gave the whole scene a very intimate, masculine feel.

I gulped and licked my parched lips. I had never been alone with a man in his

bedchamber. What decent young lady would? Yet, I was now expected to share a marriage bed with my spouse.

My heart pounded. My tummy churned. “I-I do not know what to do,” I whispered.

“I would be most surprised if you did.” Jeffrey cupped my chin in his hand. “It is a gentleman’s honor to teach his wife about the pleasures of the marriage bed. It is his duty to ensure his wife’s needs are met and she finds pleasure in the intimacies married couples share.”

Until he kissed me for the first time, I never gave much thought, other than dread, to what happened between men and women, but since then, many fantasies of what might lie beyond gentle kisses filled my thoughts.

My husband swept his thumb across my bottom lip; a trill of excitement followed his touch. He lowered his head. I closed my eyes when his lips covered mine. His mouth smoothed over my lips and, once accustomed to the sensation, I attempted to match his movements. His mouth stretched into a brief smile against mine, he pulled me close then kissed me more firmly.

The caress left me light headed and my knees wobbled. He grasped my shoulders to steady me. Yearning for more, I spoke unreservedly. “Please, J-Jeffrey, teach me how to please you and be a good wife.”

A smile lit his face. He lifted my hand, turning it over to place his lips at the inside of my wrist. “Thank you for your trust in me, my sweet duchess. I shall do my best to deserve it.”

I tilted my head to examine my new husband, stretched up on the tips of my toes then touched my mouth to his.

He growled deep in his throat and crushed me to him. “Oh, my little hellion,” he whispered between kisses he trailed down my throat, “what is this power you have over me?”

’Twas though he drew the breath from my body. My head swam. Fainting seemed a possibility. I clasped his shoulders, reveling in the muscled strength beneath my palms. His power imbued me with confidence, in him if not myself.

“Show me, Jeffrey. Show me how to love you.”

He paused in his efforts to rain kisses on my entire décolletage to gaze into my eyes, a gentle smile on his lips. His dark eyes shimmered with tenderness, while my heart swelled with longing, longing to please him. To be worthy of his affection.

“I most certainly shall, little wife.” He whispered the words against my lips before he claimed my mouth in a kiss that seared through my body.

I wound my hands around his neck then held his mouth to mine, my tongue straining to keep up with his.

He worked at the fastenings down the back of my dress, until, soon, I stood before him in only a chemise and pantalets, my gown pooled around my feet.

I resisted the urge to cover myself as his dark eyes raked over my nearly nude body. Silently, I prayed for his approval.

He touched the tip of my chin with his fingers, gently grazing my jaw line with his thumb. “You are beautiful, my Sarah.”

The reverence in his voice filled me with pride. His hand cupped the back of my head, and he brought my body firmly against his.

Without the layers of my gown between us, Jeffrey's arousal pressed against my stomach. Captivated, yet anxious, I anticipated making love with my husband.

I had promised to allow him to show me the pleasures of the marriage bed, so I fought my trepidation and gave myself over to the sensations. I rubbed my hands against his chest then slid them down the flat planes of his stomach, the luxurious fabric of his shirt a contrast to the hardness of his chiseled body. An urge to touch his flesh overwhelmed me, and I tugged at his shirt to free it from his breeches.

"Whoa, Yankee girl. All in good time." He opened the fastening of his pants, yanked his shirt loose then placed my hands against his heated flesh.

I mewled with longing, and my hands, as though they had a mind of their own, explored his rippled stomach, then rasped over the hard tips of his nipples. At my touch, he inhaled sharply. A moan rumbled from his chest. Emboldened by his response, I repeated my movements, touching my fingertips against his taut nipples, allowing them to linger, stroking back and forth.

"You are going to get it now, little hellcat," he growled and lifted me from the floor to the center of the bed in one swift, fluid motion.

Jeffrey stepped back. He stripped off his clothing then came to kneel over me in the center of the bed. Our bed.

My attention focused on the length between his thighs. Never having seen a man's member before, I was surprised by the appeal it held for me. Somewhere deep in my core, a throbbing began. I arched my hips forward, my actions driven by primitive instinct.

He chuckled. "We have all night, Sarah girl. Let us take our time." He lowered his face to kiss me in a sweet caress. Somehow, he knew how to calm me before I

became overwhelmed with sensations and unknown longings. He lay next to me, pulled me to his side until we faced each other, his hardness throbbed against the flimsy fabric of my pantalets.

His gaze held mine, and he tapped the tip of my nose. “There is one important rule which you must learn, Sarah, the Duchess of Amherst.”

His use of my married name sent a warm thrill through me. “What rule is that, Jeffrey, the Duke of Amherst?”

“You are never to wear more clothes than me.”

My eyes went wide with such a bold statement, yet I found the courage to say, “What shall happen to me if I break this rule?”

He reached behind me to give my barely covered hind end a meaningful squeeze. “We both know my preference for rule enforcement.” He moved his hand from the cheeks of my derriere to the ribbons holding my pantalets up, which he expertly untied and removed. He dispatched my chemise with dexterity as well.

“There.” With his finger, he blazed a trail from the curve of my hip to the tip of my breast. “Now you are in compliance.” He tweaked my nipple, creating a molten river of passion flowing from my breast to nether region. I squirmed next to him.

Innocent and unsure of my desires, I knew with certainty I wanted Jeffrey. Needed him. Needed to be closer. I tossed my leg over his hip, opening my most private place so it brushed against his arousal.

He snaked his hand from taunting my breast and inserted a finger into my intimate passage. I tensed at the intrusion.

“Let me show you pleasure, my Sarah,” my husband whispered.

He caressed the walls of my vagina then teased the hard nub he found below the curls of my womanhood. My anxiety disappeared. With a guttural wail, I urged myself against him hungrily.

My hips rocked over his finger, and I clutched at his powerful shoulders while something unknown curled and constricted inside. I had experienced this feeling previously, when he touched me this way before our marriage. That time he stopped, leaving me wanting. I hoped he would not abandon me too soon again.

“You are so slick and wet for me, little Sarah. Are you ready for more?”

Suddenly fearful, I simply stared into his eyes.

“Trust me, little one. I shall do my best not to hurt you, though there might be some pain this first time. 'Tis mother nature's fault, not mine.”

He rolled me onto my back then braced above me, his manhood perched at the opening of my sex. His face hovered inches from mine. I reached up to pull his mouth down for a kiss at the same instant he slid his length into me. He paused for a moment for me to adjust to having him inside me. The fullness was overwhelming, yet once I became accustomed to the sensation, it thrilled me. I wriggled my hips beneath him, and we moved in unison.

He pressed in even farther. Sharp pain caused me to halt. Jeffrey paused, his breathing ragged, and brushed the hair back from my face. “I'm sorry. It will be better next time. I promise.”

He devoured my mouth with his, and I floated away on his kiss, the pain of my lost maidenhead vanquished by the passion of our union.

CHAPTER 12

A few hours later, I awoke to the strange feeling of sharing a bed. It was nearly as intimate as the acts I had shared with Jeffrey. While my eyes adapted to the darkness of the room, I relived the sensations and emotions of making love with my husband. Although I came to my marriage bed inexperienced in such matters, it had been undeniably pleasurable. For the first time in many months, I looked to the future with optimism.

Turning carefully in the large bed, I studied my groom as he slept. Who was this man to whom I had pledged myself? We had been intimate without really knowing one another.

I admired his handsome face with its strong jaw, aquiline nose, and broad brow—though it seemed to be in a constant furrow. But now, in sleep, his brow smoothed, he appeared content. That I may have played a small role in helping him to find peace, and maybe even some pleasure, heartened me.

Despite my rough and tumble ways, I wanted Jeffrey to be happy he chose me.

Curious, I took the opportunity to examine his body, which was naked, though a sheet draped his lower half. He breathed deeply, and it occurred to me the last several days had probably been as stressful for him as they had been for me. I had never considered the situation from his perspective. Perhaps I am a selfish child.

Mesmerized by his chest with its smattering of dark hair, I reached out and touched the stiff curls. The same exhilarating sensations I had experienced during my

deflowering flooded back. His sleep remained unaffected by my movements, so I continued my exploration, tracing the trail of hair down the angled planes of his stomach toward the sheet where it continued.

Just as I reached the edge of his covering, my husband's hand enveloped mine. I jerked my head up to look at him.

He smiled at me and his eyes darkened with passion. "Feeling bold, my little wife?"

"Um, uh...." Embarrassment scorched across my face. I tugged in an effort to free myself from his grip, but he would not allow it.

"I am going to take that as a yes." He held my wandering fingers in his then laid them flat against his navel. With my hand sandwiched between the muscled flesh of my husband's stomach and the warmth of his palm, Jeffrey steered it beneath the sheet into the thatch of thick hair surrounding his manhood.

Perhaps the linens over his lower regions emboldened me, perhaps my newfound confidence as a wife and lover spurred me onward. Regardless of the reason, I moved away from his control to tentatively clasp the base of his shaft.

Warm and firm in my grasp, I recalled the sensation of it within my passage and gently squeezed the appendage, which now fascinated me. When it pulsed against my palm, I withdrew in surprise.

He chuckled, removed the sheet, clasped my hand with his and returned it to his groin, then piloted it up the length of his member. "There is nothing to fear, Sarah, dear. Did this part of my body not give you pleasure?"

I blushed. Despite the intimacies we had shared, I remained a novice in all things erotic so the notion of discussing such topics mortified me.

He used me to stroke himself. "Please do not be embarrassed. I know you are unaccustomed to such familiarity, my wife. We shall learn together."

His praise gave me courage. My ministrations grew more enthusiastic. Jeffrey no longer guided my actions. I watched myself gratify my husband. I touched the head of his penis, and he writhed with pleasure.

I moved back to the base then up again. With each caress the warm coiling sensation built once again low in my belly.

He reciprocated by working his strong fingers between the folds of my sex.

I whimpered and rolled my hips to meet his touch, still holding his manhood. A small amount of fluid covered the tip of his member. I brushed my thumb across it, and he cried out my name.

"I cannot wait much longer, little vixen." He halted his exploration of my passage to shift me to straddle his hips.

Although I had been nude for several hours, this position displayed me directly before my lover's view. Instinctively, I covered my chest.

Jeffrey moved my hands to my sides and fondled the hard peaks of both my breasts. I closed my eyes, wishing he would touch me in this manner for all eternity. He massaged my flesh then toyed with my nipples until I cried out.

The spring of desire within me wound tighter and tighter. Jeffrey cupped my hips and lifted me so my sex hovered over the tip of his penis. "Are you ready, Sarah girl?"

I nodded, and he lowered my body to encase his large shaft. I held my breath while he shifted his hips. I had thought he filled me entirely the first time we made love, but

this time he moved even deeper into my womanhood.

“Relax, Sarah.” His voice was soft. “You feel so good.”

“You feel good, too.”

My admission was rewarded with a blazing smile from my spouse who then reached up and pulled my face down to his for a languid kiss. His tongue tugged my own while his manhood stretched the opening of my femininity. I was cocooned in pleasure and my heart swelled with joy.

When the kiss ended, I sat up straight, no longer shy about my husband’s observation of my naked body. I tipped my shoulders back to enhance his view then rocked to and fro to tease him.

“My God, Sarah. What are you doing to me?” Jeffrey gripped my hips, pumped my body up and down, all the while maintaining the snug connection of his penis inside of me.

I braced my hands against his hard chest, closed my eyes, and groaned in a most improper manner as I reached the heights of ecstasy.

CHAPTER 13

The next morning, or more accurately, later that morning, we made our way to the breakfast room for some much needed nourishment. Despite the wanton intimacies of the night before, in broad daylight and with the staff nearby, I felt bashful with my husband, so directed my focus to spreading butter over my toast.

“What is so special about the toast that you stare at it instead of your handsome spouse?” he commented. “Do I no longer hold any allure for you?”

“Jeffrey,” I whispered, using my peripheral vision to determine if the staff could hear his comments.

“Is it so wrong for a gentleman to hope to have his wife’s attention on himself instead of on a piece of bread?” He leaned toward me. “You were certainly attentive last night.”

My knife clattered against the edge of my plate, leaving a chip in the fine china bearing the Amherst family crest. “Oh, I am so sorry.” Shocked and embarrassed, I covered my mouth with my hands.

Alerted by the racket, a footman appeared, took away the damaged plate, and replaced it with another. I expected Jeffrey to be angry, but he laughed.

“This is not funny,” I said. “I broke something with my clumsiness.”

“I should have known better than to shock you with my comment. I am grateful since

the last man who startled you ended up with a black eye.”

“Jeffrey! Please do not mention that. I am sorely embarrassed by the event and regret ever telling you.”

“Now, my little wife, no secrets between us. Besides, I am glad you slugged the other man. Otherwise, you might not have arrived here to spit on my shoe.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but closed it without saying anything because visitors were announced. We exchanged a puzzled glance, wondering who would call upon a newlywed couple the morning after their marriage.

My father and Mrs. White entered the room. If I had been startled earlier, it was nothing compared to the shock of seeing my father with that woman's hand upon his arm.

Jeffrey recovered first and invited them to join us.

My father declined. “I have come to bid Sarah good-bye.” He turned to me with a smile and opened his arms in an invitation for an embrace.

I did not feel so amiable. “What is she doing here?” I pointed an unladylike finger at Mrs. White.

The object of my attention clasped my father's arm possessively then directed her self-satisfied smile in my direction. “Tell her, Albert,” she said through the grin plastered onto her lips.

My father cleared his throat. “Yes, I also wanted to share with you, Sarah, and you as well, your grace, that Mrs. White and I are to be married today, before our ship sails for America.”

“I will be your new mother,” the odious woman sneered.

All of the warm, relaxed feelings I had enjoyed the preceding few hours vanished, and my body shook with white-hot rage.

“What?” My high-pitched screech drew the footman back into the room. I knew I should curb my reaction but could not. Not for this.

I left my seat and strode toward the two intruders with all the hauteur my newly acquired title gave me. “No woman could take the place of my mother. Most certainly not a fortune-hunting shrew like you.”

“Sarah,” my father glared down at me, his voice threatening. “I will not allow you to speak to your stepmother in such a manner.”

“You may give her whatever title you wish.” I drew myself up to my full, yet still petite, height. “But under no circumstances will I ever acknowledge her as a member of my family.”

My hands quivered. My reaction angered my father, but I did not care. “She is cruel and heartless and cares nothing for you other than for your bank account.”

My father took a step toward me, his hand raised as if to strike. I flinched and covered my face but nothing happened. When I looked up, Jeffrey held my father’s arm twisted behind his back.

“I do not know what your practices are in America,” Jeffrey said to my father, his low, measured voice emanating danger, “but no man enters my home and threatens my wife .” He released my father’s arm. “I will thank you both to leave this house immediately and never return unless invited by my wife, the Duchess of Amherst.”

Jeffrey's stare burned into my father until he lowered his eyes and led Mrs. White away.

Once the door closed behind them, I collapsed against my husband who held me in the protective circle of his arms. I inhaled deeply of his scent. Eventually, the pounding of my heartbeat returned to normal.

"Thank you," I whispered against his chest. "No one has ever stood up for me like that before."

He tipped my head back and caressed the side of my face. "You are my wife, Sarah. It is my duty to stand up for you, protect you from harm. Keep you safe."

His broad hand ran up and down my back, offering comfort and warmth.

"I am too much trouble," I whispered.

Jeffrey's gaze bore into mine. "That is simply not true," he said. "I am sorry that you believe that."

"I have always felt like a burden. Ever since my mother died. My father wanted sons, not me. Only when he realized he could marry me off to better his own standing, did he have any interest in me. Now he is gone. My family is gone."

Jeffrey cupped the back of my head and held me close, my face resting on his strong chest. I inhaled his scent and some of the tension left me.

"You are not too much trouble and you are not a burden," he said, his voice rumbling beneath my ear. "Do I make myself clear?"

I nodded.

Again, he drew me away from him and looked into my face. "I am sorry your father has treated you this way and I am sorry that he is returning to America. But, I am your husband. You are my family and I am yours."

I stared at him, tears sparking the corners of my eyes. "Why?" I asked in a whisper.

He gave me an indulgent smile. "Because, poppet, that is what happens when you get married. Did you not listen to the vicar who performed our marriage? We are to cleave to one another." Then he waggled his brows at me. "Sort of like what we did last night."

It was sweet of him to try to cajole me out of my mood, but I could not let this moment pass. I might not have the courage again to broach the subject.

"Why," I said, forcing myself to continue, "did you marry me? Why not send me back to America, shamed yet again?"

He looked at me for a breathtaking moment, his entire countenance softening until his gaze was quite tender. So tender, I blinked back more tears.

"I shall admit," he said, "that for the briefest of moments, I considered it. But when I thought about never seeing you again, never hearing one of your tart comments or seeing your beautiful smile...well, let us simply say that I found that notion intolerable. Let there be no mistake, Sarah, I wanted to marry you and I intend to be a good husband to you. Just as I know you intend to be a good wife to me. And I know you want me too."

My heart hammered in my chest and I gazed at my handsome husband. Was it possible that he might care for me, just a tiny amount? Perhaps, one day we would be a love match?

'Twas nearly too much for me to hope for, but in that moment, it seemed possible and happiness filled the places in my heart that had felt empty moments before.

“Well,” he said, the hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth, “are you not going to argue with me? Tell me that you do not want me? Do not enjoy being married to me?”

It was a challenge and we both knew it. For once, I did not up the ante, but instead I stretched up on my toes and kissed him boldly on the mouth. “I do want you,” I said.

He smiled against my lips and then swept me into his arms, carrying me through the townhouse while the servants gaped. “We do not wish to be disturbed,” he called over his shoulder as we ascended the stairs and I buried my heated face in his neck.

“Jeffrey!” I gasped. “You are scandalous.”

“Is that not what brought us together? Scandal? So perhaps it is not such a bad thing after all.”

I squeezed my arms around him. How had I, a foolish girl from America, managed to find the best man in all of London? Perhaps in the entire world?

He laid me upon our marriage bed and hovered over me. I reached up and caressed the side of his face, then drew him down to me for a kiss filled with all of the words I wanted to say to him but did not have the courage to do so. Not yet, at least.

But, as he proceeded to kiss and caress me, stripping away my clothing as well as his own, I knew that I was in severe danger of falling hopelessly in love with my husband.

CHAPTER 14

Two days later, the butler announced I had a caller. I knew so few people in London, I assumed it was Cassie and I hurried to the parlor, eager to get caught up with my friend.

I came up short when instead of Cassie's smiling face, I gazed into Mrs. White's stern visage.

"You!" I gasped before I had a chance to compose myself after the shock of finding this woman in my home. "I thought you had sailed to America. Or did my father come to his senses and leave you behind?"

"The trip has been delayed. We sail in the morning," she said, "though your father and I did get married as we had planned. I am sorry you could not be there."

"Oh, I am sure you are," I said, not even trying to keep the sarcasm from my voice.

"Please, Sarah," she said. "We are family now, there is no need for you to be so hostile."

I did not deign to respond to that comment. "Why are you here? Did not my husband tell you never to darken this door again?"

She smiled at me as though I were a foolish child. "We are family, Sarah. Surely that counts for something?"

“What do you want?” I demanded. “You are not the type to try to make amends and you have no reason to now that you have achieved your goal of marrying my father.”

She ignored my comment, but the sweet and caring stepmother mask she wore fell away as well. “You are an ungrateful child. My sister has fallen on hard times and seeks a position as a housekeeper. I thought perhaps you could speak to the Duke ...”

I cut her off before she could finish. “Out!” I shouted, pointing a shaking finger to the door. “As though I would have a spy from your family in my home.”

Mrs. White, though I supposed that she was now Mrs. Hancock, the name galled me, stood staring at me.

“You cannot speak to me that way, I am your stepmother.”

I took a slow step in her direction, my voice low. “I told you to leave.” My fingers itched to scratch her eyes out.

She gathered her things and moved toward the door. Unsatisfied, I followed her. “This woman,” I said to the staff who had gathered when they heard my raised voice, “is never to be admitted to this home again. Do I make myself clear?”

Stunned, the maids and footmen nodded while the butler opened the door, making her egress faster. I stopped him from closing the door, then grabbed an apple from a bowl by the door. I stood on the steps and threw it at her, bouncing the fruit off the side of the rented carriage.

She ducked into the conveyance and they sped off. I watched with great satisfaction. As did several of my neighbors who had been drawn to their windows. They were not even subtle about watching. Lady Custard waved from across the street, then clapped her hands in a show of appreciation for my actions.

I was rather proud of myself.

A throat clearing interrupted my enjoyment of the moment. I turned to see Jeffrey standing at the base of the steps to our home.

My bottom tingled in warning.

“That was quite a scene,” he said, walking up the stairs to join me.

“Yes. I cannot believe she had the nerve to show her face here. Asking for a job for her sister. No doubt meant to spy on me and report to her in America.”

“Why have they not left?”

“She simply said their voyage was delayed. I should have known from the lingering stench in the air.”

He took hold of my arm. “I believe it is time for us to end this show for the entire neighborhood.”

Inside, he handed his coat and hat to the butler, then guided me to his study.

“Did you see the way I threw that apple? It nearly hit her, though I think the thud on the side of the carriage was just as good as if I’d landed it on her head. Or knocked off her hat. Would that not have been delightful?”

Jeffrey did not respond, simply looked at me.

“It took a lot of nerve for her to ask me to give her sister a job.”

“It was not her behavior I found troubling...but yours.”

I gaped at him. “What are you talking about? Do you not recall that my own father attempted to slap me and you ordered him never to come here again? Yet his wife shows her face and begs a favor of me.”

“True.” He tapped the tip of my nose, as though I was a naughty child. “But it does not excuse your behavior. You are my wife. I expect you to behave like a duchess at all times...or at least at all times when we are not alone.”

I gawped, incredulous. “Are you mad? There was nothing wrong with my behavior. If anything, you should be proud of me for standing up for myself.”

“You degraded yourself by your shrill tone and crude words. Not to mention the scene you caused for everyone in the neighborhood to see.”

“Lady Custard seemed to support my actions.”

“Lady Custard is the biggest gossip I know. She’ll be in her carriage within a quarter hour, telling the tale all around town.”

“Are you saying I must smile sweetly whenever I am insulted and not defend myself?”

“You were not insulted. If anything, your pride was hurt because your father has chosen a woman you despise as his new wife. And then that woman came to ask a favor of you.”

“Damn right. I despise her.”

“Enough!” Jeffrey grabbed my elbow and turned me to him. “I will not allow you to swear, and I most certainly will not tolerate such language when you speak to me.”

The touch of my husband's hand on my elbow reminded me of our first meeting as well as his reaction to my bad behavior. Instinctively, my free hand moved to cover my bottom.

"That's right, my little spitfire, your behind is going to get a firm spanking. Go upstairs to our bedchamber, remove all of your clothing, then stand in the corner until I tell you otherwise."

"The corner? I am not a child." I jerked out of his grasp, faced him with both hands on my hips.

"If those are not the words of a petulant child in need of a firm hand, I do not know what would be. Now, be on your way before I decide to add more strokes to your punishment for your uncooperative attitude." He swatted my hide then steered me toward the door of his study.

I opened my mouth to reply but thought better of it and trudged up the stairs, making enough noise with my small feet to inform Jeffrey of my displeasure. "Quit stomping," he called after me. "I am well aware you are not pleased. It is not necessary for you to act like a brat in order to make your point."

"I am not a brat!" I shouted down the stairs at him, despite the irony of the statement.

On entering his bedchamber, I was again assaulted by the sight of the large bed, our marriage bed. My mind raced with images and memories of how we had spent our time there in the past few days.

How could the man who so tenderly introduced me to the wonders of marital intimacies turn into a brute who intended to spank me? And for no good reason, either.

Hideous Mrs. White ruined everything for me.

I knew what my husband expected, so reluctantly did my best to comply. Too discomfited to ring for my maid to assist me in undressing, I attempted to complete the task myself. I managed to get some of the hooks of my dress undone, but one or two at the very middle of my back were impossible to reach. Angry and frustrated, I hopped around the room, yanking at the bodice in an effort to wrestle free of the garment.

It was no use. My small hands simply could not span the fraction of an inch needed to unfasten the blasted thing, and I said as much to the empty room.

“Your mouth certainly gets you into a great deal of trouble, does it not?”

My toiling halted. I turned to see Jeffrey standing in the doorway. “I assumed I was alone.” I huffed and resumed the tussle to escape my gown.

“Calm down, little hellcat.” He easily unhooked the stubborn clasps, drew the sleeves down my arms, and lowered the dress for me to step out.

Wearing only my undergarments, I turned my back to him. “Would you be kind enough to assist me in removing my corset?” I tried very hard—well, maybe not extremely hard—to keep the sarcasm from my voice.

Perhaps turning my buttocks toward a man intent upon spanking me was unwise. Jeffrey, being clearer of mind than I, landed a swat in the center of my derriere. It ought to have been expected.

I remained in position, assuming he would assist in the removal of my corset since he had decreed I stand naked in the corner. The thought terrified me. Certainly he had explored my body thoroughly during our couplings, but to stand stripped in broad

daylight for his inspection was too much to contemplate. However, what choice was there? I could hardly go running after my father and ask him to take me back to America with him. Nothing Jeffrey might mete out could be worse than being in the presence of that she-devil or the betrayal of my father.

Jeffrey tugged on the constraints of my clothing, but instead of loosening my corset, my pantalets puddled around my stockinged feet. I gasped and covered my lady parts.

My husband positioned me to face him then gripped my wrists. I was determined to retain my modesty, but his superior strength exposed my private curls to his inspection.

My face burned with embarrassment while the rest of me burned with need.

But, there was still the matter of my punishment, and my mate, though passion darkened his eyes as he reached down to fondle the silky entrance to my most womanly place, was unlikely to forget my misdeeds. His finger slipped between the lips of my femininity. I gasped again.

“What is this, my little poppet? You are wet with desire. Is it possible you like to be punished?”

My entire being flushed with mortification. I tried to cross my legs to prevent him from probing further.

Undeterred, he continued his attentions for a moment before removing his hand. “Let us get on with your punishment before we engage in pleasure.” He directed me to the corner.

“But you said I was to be naked.” I had no wish to stand in the corner nude, but I also did not want to be accused of breaking the rules.

“You are correct, little wife.” His eyes roamed my figure while a quiver thrummed low in my belly. “But I have decided to alter my instructions. This outfit is most alluring.” His hand slid down my back and cupped my exposed bottom cheeks.

He tucked the minimal fabric covering my breasts beneath them displaying the rounded swells of my bosom to his touch. Jeffrey licked his lips while his fingers plucked at their pebbled tips. I gasped with pleasure. When he pinched one nipple, then the other between his thumb and forefinger, I closed my eyes with ecstasy. When he eventually stopped his teasing, I ached for him.

He gripped my shoulders to steer me toward the corner. “Stand here quietly, little vixen, while I prepare for your punishment. Afterwards, we will take up where we left off.” His voice, a gravelly growl, seared a jolt of longing through me.

CHAPTER 15

I stood in the corner, wearing only my stockings topped by my modified corset. I listened to him moving about the room and wondered what he had in mind for my chastisement. I glanced down at my exposed breasts. My pert nipples strained for more of my lover's attention. How wanton my body had become in a mere twenty-four hours.

In an effort to distract myself from the longing building throughout my being, I stared into the juncture of the walls and tried to focus on what I saw rather than my thoughts or feelings. In all my twenty-one years, I had never spent more than a few moments with my private parts uncovered. Yet my groom expected me to exhibit myself for him.

I was angry, embarrassed, and confused, but, Heaven help me, all I could think about was the joy of his fingers inside my lady parts. I clenched my thighs together while the nerve endings of my cunny—as Jeffrey told me it was called—pulsed.

A sharp crack to my posterior drew my attention back to my misdeeds.

“It would appear”—his hand slid down the curve of my cheeks then infiltrated my sex—“you are enjoying corner time more than you ought.” His fingers probed, my breath whooshed between my lips. “Is it possible flaunting yourself for me excites your passions?”

“Absolutely not!” I lied.

“You are soaking with longing, little duchess.” He taunted my tingling flesh, and I leaned back into his hand. “Since corner time is not having the intended effect, let us move on to your punishment.”

Due to the attention he paid to my feminine places, my thinking was decidedly fuzzy, so when he took my hand and led me to the bed, I could not resist. I secretly hoped he had decided against punishment, in favor of pleasure. But I corrected my thinking when he pressed my shoulders down to position me over a pile of pillows in the center of the bed with my backside tipped high. My face burned with humiliation at being displayed in such a manner. I was certain my whole body, especially the parts now posed for his observation, was crimson with shame.

Jeffrey tugged at my hips and knees until he had arranged me in the position he wanted. Cool air wafted over my two most private openings, while I buried my face deep into the pile of pillows.

I braced for punishment, but instead of the crack of his broad palm upon my exposed derriere, his hands molded the flesh of my behind. Although it felt sinfully divine, I was well aware his actions of working the cheeks of my rear back and forth allowed him to view the puckered hole of my bottom.

I moaned into the pillows.

“Was that a moan of pleasure or embarrassment?”

My response was muffled, but a firm swat to the center of my rump brought my head up.

“I could not understand you, Sarah girl. Please repeat what you said.”

“I said ‘I do not know.’” I glared over my shoulder at my husband. He rolled up the

sleeves of his shirt to reveal the muscles of his forearm, which flexed as he continued to caress the flesh of my bum.

He winked at me then slid his fingers into the moist cleft of my womanhood. “I told you there would be no lying, did I not?”

“Oh...ohh.” I tried to speak, but his touch left me gasping. “I did not lie,” I finally managed between gritted teeth.

“So, you are not finding this enjoyable?” He worked his fingers back and forth in my opening while he used his other hand to squeeze the flesh of my hindquarters. “Because the evidence here”—he thrust his fingers in up to the hilt then removed them to pinch at the nub of my desire until I ground back into him and moaned deep in my throat—“as well as here would indicate you enjoy this very much. You know you are mine, do you not, little duchess?”

“Yes,” I murmured.

“Good.” When he removed his hand, I restrained myself from begging him to continue. “Let’s get on with this punishment.”

A burst of quick swats heated the left side of my rump. The same was applied to the right. I tried to scramble away but succeeded only in scattering the pillows about. Jeffrey grabbed my ankle to hold me in place while he replaced the pillows and arranged me over them.

He leaned in close. “Hold still for your punishment,” he whispered in my ear. “You know you deserve it.”

The rasp of his voice sent a trill deep into my nether region. I nodded to show consent.

“Tell me, little wife, why are you being punished?” He landed a firm spank to my sit spot, connecting the heat of my right cheek with the burn of my left. My entire rear end tingled with the warmth of his domination.

I had trouble recalling anything other than the sensations pulsing through the lower half of my body, but with focus, I remembered the reason. Unfortunately, I forgot my manners. “I am being punished because of that she-devil Mrs. White.”

The onslaught to my backend stopped, and I again glanced over my shoulder at my husband who stood up straight at my words.

“Oh, really?” He trailed a finger across my heated flesh. “Are you saying it is unreasonable for me to punish you because you are without fault?”

“If not for her , I would not have acted badly. She made me do it.” From my undignified position, I huffed to show my disdain.

Since my punishment resumed with a row of swats, which started at the bottom curve of my left cheek and went all the way to the top of that side before doing the same on the other, I assumed he did not agree with my assessment of the situation.

“Ouch, Jeffrey. It hurts,” I said after a particularly hard smack to the top of my thigh.

“That is the point, my dear,” he replied. “Besides, you are not repentant.”

“Why should I be? Though I am sorry for swearing at you.”

“Well, it is a start.” He chuckled but continued to sting my tail end from stem to stern.

His flat palm cracked against my bottom. I fisted the bedcovers but held my position,

despite the searing pain.

Damn Mrs. White with her selfish ways. The indignity of it all boiled inside me then bubbled out my mouth. “This is not fair. I did not do anything wrong, and I apologized for swearing at you. Now you are just being hateful.”

“Is that so?”

His calm demeanor fueled my anger. “Yes, that’s so. You can spank me all day and all night, but I won’t be sorry for anything I said or did to that woman.”

The assault on my backside halted, so I peeped out from the pillows, ready to bask in my triumph.

Imagine my surprise when he laid a package on the bed next to me. “A wedding gift for you. I had planned to wait until later to give it to you, but I think we can put it to good use now.”

The burn of my backside was forgotten as I hastily unwrapped the package. I gasped. A beautiful brush lay inside a velvet-lined box. I picked it up and traced my fingers over the ornate design on the back—the Amherst Family Crest.

When I gazed up at him, tears threatened the corners of my eyes. “Thank you.”

“You are most welcome. Now, let us try it out. “

I smiled to myself. Not only had my spanking stopped, but I’d received a gift. I had the Duke of Amherst wrapped around my little finger.

I moved to take the pins from my hair.

“Oh no, poppet. Back into position with you.” He took possession of the brush and pointed it at the pile of pillows.

“W-what?”

He slapped the back of the brush against his open palm. “We have work to do here. Now, do as you are told.”

I gritted my teeth to squelch the scream of frustration building within me, but his expression brooked no opposition, so I dutifully perched myself as ordered.

The brush landed on my backend with a resounding slap. I ground my knees into the bed and clutched the pillow to my chest. This was his idea of a gift? An entirely new form of heated throbbing flamed across my buttocks and thighs. I closed my eyes and tried to think of something else, but the burn to my bum could not be ignored.

My husband swatted the same spot repeatedly until I nearly bit a hole in the pillow. He paused to run his fingers over the area then grasped my hand and forced me to do the same.

I discerned a raised pattern on my bottom and turned from the pillow to look at my tormenter.

“The Amherst Family Crest,” he said. “I told you, you are mine.”

I ought to have been incensed. Marking me like a possession. Instead, I sighed. I belonged to him.

“I am sorry, Jeffrey. I behaved badly and I deserve to be punished.” Surprisingly, I meant every word.

“Good girl.” He kissed the top of my head.

Whack! Another blow landed on my backside. Apparently he was not finished with his discipline.

We continued on in this manner for a few more minutes, Jeffrey whaling on my upturned cheeks while I buried my face in the pillows and cursed Mrs. White along with my traitor of a father. My mother’s death devastated my father and me, but rather than grow closer, we had each dealt with our grief by closing out the world. My grief often came out in the form of tart comments.

My backend numbed from its punishment, but one hard whack broke the damn. I slumped into the pile of pillows and wept.

The bed dipped with the weight of my husband’s body. Soon he snuggled me in the warmth of his embrace. He whispered words of solace against my hair, and his fingers rubbed softly across my bare shoulders.

The rough fabric of his pants chafed my abraded backside. When I winced, he shifted my body to a more comfortable position, though I suspected sitting would be unpleasant for the rest of the day, if not the week. At the moment, only the security of his arms mattered. I had come to rely upon him considerably in our short acquaintance and even shorter marriage.

His strength reassured me. His murmured words soothed my aching heart. Eventually, my sobs subsided to a few hiccups muffled against the rugged flesh of his neck.

Jeffrey brushed the tangled ends of my hair away from my face. Meeting his gaze made me feel even more vulnerable than having my backend spread before him.

“Sarah,” he said, his eyes gentle, and I became lost in their depths. “This punishment hurt, but it did not warrant sobbing in such a desperate manner.”

“It was painful.” I tried my best to deflect from the topic I suspected he planned to probe.

“Yes, that was my intention.” He tapped the tip of my nose. “But, there was more to your tears than a stinging bum.”

“What makes you think you know everything about me?” My hackles rose like those of a cat backed into a corner. “You do not know me at all.”

“I know you are angry and hurt over something which happened well before you ever arrived on British soil. What it is for sure, I do not know. Deep down, you are a submissive girl, but no one would know because you put on such bravado to keep everyone at bay. Is that not true?”

“No, it is not, Duke-Of-Know-It-All. I keep everyone at bay because they are not worthy of my attention.” I sniffed. “Besides, people always disappoint me.”

“Have I disappointed you?”

I stared into his eyes and wanted to say yes but could not. “No,” I forced myself not to lower my gaze. “You have been a true gentleman to me, except for when you took me over your knee and spanked me at Lady Waterford’s ball.”

“But, if I had never spanked you, you would not be my little wife right now, would you?” He lowered his mouth to cover mine in a gentle kiss filled with promise and affection.

CHAPTER 16

“Married life certainly agrees with you,” Cassie said, linking her arm in mine as we strolled through Hyde Park on a sunny afternoon about a week after my marriage. Jeffrey had been called away by urgent matters and I took the opportunity to visit with my friend.

“Thank you,” I said, suppressing a wide grin. “I am surprisingly happy.”

“I am happy for you, your grace,” Cassie said.

I stopped short and since we were connected at the elbow, she did as well. “Please, Cassie. You must call me Sarah. I insist.”

“It would not be proper,” she said. “You are the wife of The Duke of Amherst. Life will never be the way it was before.” Her pretty eyes held my gaze. “But we will always be friends, no matter how exalted you become.”

“Cassie!” I play-swatted at her arm and we continued our stroll with a laugh.

“So,” she whispered to me as we turned the corner into a topiary garden, “is married life everything you... um... hoped it would be?”

I shrugged. “‘Tis too early to say, but I will admit that I enjoy it very much.”

Cassie took my arm and dragged me down to sit upon a bench. “I meant...” she blushed, “the things, you know, the things married people do.” She was barely able to

get the words out but the urgency of her tone gave me pause.

Once I understood her meaning, I blushed as well. “Yes,” I said, a smile pulling at my lips. “It is ... wonderful.”

“Bu-but, what happens? What does it feel like?” Cassie blew out a breath. “I have asked Tallie the same questions but she is vague. I suppose she does not feel it would be a good idea to put such personal matters in a letter, and she is likely correct, but I am most curious, and anxious, to know about these things.”

I looked at my sweet friend. I had arrived in my marriage bed a complete innocent about the happenings and now, with nearly a fortnight of experience, I could see how fortunate I was to have a skilled teacher such as Jeffrey. But, what on earth could I tell Cassie without divulging information which Jeffrey would no doubt find too personal to share, not to mention that I did not even have the words to convey the experience properly.

“With the right man,” I said, “it is an incredible experience which I cannot adequately describe to you.”

Cassie huffed out a breath. “Truly? I thought that if anyone would be able to enlighten me, it would be you.”

“I am sorry I cannot say more. Perhaps you could ask Lady Katherine?”

“I would die of embarrassment,” Cassie said. “It took all my nerve to ask you and all you can do in response is smile dreamily and tell me it can be incredible. With the right man.” Her shoulders slumped.

I felt awful. Not only because she was so discouraged but because I honestly was not sure how to begin to describe the ardent couplings I shared with Jeffrey. Racking my

brain, I finally said to her, “When you meet a man whose mere touch sends tingles through your body, then you will know he is the right one.”

“I-is that how it was with the Duke?”

“Yes, though I was loath to admit it,” I said. “I am sorry I cannot be more helpful. Truly I am.”

“I suppose I shall have to find this man whose touch makes me tingle,” she said, brightening. “Come along, duchess. We need to be seen on a day like this.”

Standing, she tugged on my arm and I stood as well, grateful she had not been upset with me.

As we exited the topiary garden, we turned to the right, heading for the main promenade area. The path was already crowded with fashionably dressed ladies out for the afternoon to see and be seen.

Next to me, Cassie stiffened. “Oh no,” she whispered.

I followed the direction of her gaze and my heart sank. The Borden sisters, Lady Lizbeth and Lady Emma, attired head to toe in the latest Paris fashions. Lady Lizbeth twirled a parasol the color of a robin’s egg as she smiled and flirted with a bevy of dandies who sought her attention.

“Perhaps they will not see us,” Cassie said.

“Can we duck into one of the gardens?” I asked.

“No, we have been seen. Lady Emma is glaring at me. They cannot be avoided. Brace for impact.”

Cassie's warning made me giggle. The two sisters were like battleships moving through the ton .

Remembering the last encounter with these hateful sisters, I quickly wiped the smile from my face and prepared to bite back all the things I would like to say to them. I dared not cause trouble nor do anything which might reflect poorly upon Jeffrey. He was more important to me than these sisters ever could be, no matter if they did have some imagined ax to grind.

Though I hated the idea of giving way to them, I knew that the wise thing to do was to take a step to the left in order to allow them to pass us with minimal contact. In just a matter of seconds we would be past them and back to enjoying our afternoon.

I drew in a breath and held it. Cassie did the same. Brace for impact.

"Well, my stars, is that you, Sarah?" Lady Lizbeth Borden stopped in her tracks, blocking my progress. Had she just called me by my name? As though we were most intimate friends?

I glanced from side to side, wondering what trick she had up her lacy sleeve.

With no other option, Cassie and I halted our progress.

"How nice to see you," Emma said, giving a slight curtsy then nodded to Cassie. "And you as well, Miss Primrose." Her words and actions seemed friendly, but her demeanor still wreaked of insolence. Nonetheless, Cassie and I returned their greetings.

"I was exceedingly surprised to learn you had married the Duke of Amherst," Lizbeth said. "Though of course, I am very happy for both you and Jeffrey."

The way she used my husband's Christian name rankled me to no end, but I maintained my composure. I refused to allow these snippy girls to get under my skin.

"You know, we are old family friends with Jeffrey," Emma said.

"Strange," I said, unable to restrain myself, "he has not mentioned you." I looked at Lizbeth, then Emma. "Nor you."

"Well," Emma said, with an acid smile. "You have not been acquainted with him for long, he has probably not had time to share much about himself with you. That happens when a marriage is rushed."

Next to me, Cassie made a noise in her throat that sounded suspiciously like a growl.

Brace for impact, indeed.

However, Cassie got herself under control. "I'm sure her grace has many more things to discuss with her husband than the two of you lovely ladies," she said, with an equally acidic smile and heavy emphasis on my title.

"Of course," Lizbeth said, stepping to the side. "We shall not hold you up any further. Do give our regards to Jeffrey."

Cassie and I took half a dozen steps, moving away from them as quickly as we could without drawing undue attention.

"I know what I'd like to give those two," Cassie said once we were away from prying ears. "The nerve of them. I liked it better when they ignored us, but pretending to be your bosom friend now that you are a duchess, well, it is despicable."

Her indignation on my behalf warmed my heart.

Glancing over my shoulder, I was gratified to see Lady Lizbeth step in horse manure.

CHAPTER 17

After a month of marriage, I happily discovered I had managed to control my tongue and not earn any bad-girl spankings, though Jeffrey treated me to one or two good-girl spankings that I liked very much. In fact, there were many things about being married I liked very much.

Although we did not have a wedding trip, Jeffrey made a point of doing minimal business, so we were able to spend a great deal of time together. I enjoyed learning more about him. While the circumstances of our marriage were controversial and not likely to make for a good match, I could not help but be eternally grateful to the strange set of circumstances that forced our union upon us.

My duties as the wife of the Duke of Amherst were numerous. Oversight of the household staff and budget was a daunting task, indeed. Eventually, I would manage the household staff at all three Amherst family estates. I planned to do my best not to disappoint Jeffrey.

My other duties seemed mostly confined to the bedroom, and there I also strived not to disappoint.

Although he was very proper and always behaved, at least publicly, like a perfect gentleman, in private, my husband was quite ardent. My response to his ardor surprised me even more. I had been vaguely aware that marital intimacies of some sort happened, but I assumed they were of a perfunctory and businesslike nature for the sole purpose of procreation. Marriage thoroughly divested me of that notion.

While I was certain Jeffrey wanted to have children, particularly a son, I hoped not all of his attentions to me were for purely familial purposes.

Why he had bothered to marry me at all puzzled me. He could have easily refused and sent me back to America without batting an eye and no one would have thought the less of him. Yet, he did not. When we became engaged, he had said he wished to marry me for my spirit. It hardly seemed sufficient reason. Handsome, charming, and rich, he could have chosen any woman as his wife, so why an American upstart like me?

As summer approached, we adjourned to Bradford Hall, the Amherst family's country home.

"Shield your eyes." Jeffrey's excitement had built during our entire journey from London to the country, so when we turned onto the lane to Bradford Hall, he insisted on surprising me.

"But you have pulled the curtains closed, is that not enough?"

"You may either conceal your eyes or I shall put you over my knee. In either case, you will not get your first glimpse of Bradford Hall until I say so."

The thought of going over his knee titillated, but I complied. He covered my hands with his.

"To make sure you do not peek," he said, but I think he just liked holding me close. I liked it, too.

At last, the carriage came to a halt. When the door opened, my eyes remained hidden.

"Thank you, Edwards, but I shall assist the duchess from the carriage. Please see to

the luggage,” Jeffrey said, dispatching the footman.

Thereupon, my virile duke lifted me in his arms and exited the carriage. “No peeking, Yankee girl,” he whispered, and a thrill wound through my body at the rasp in his voice. He set me on the ground. “Behold, Duchess of Amherst, your country estate.”

I eagerly dropped my hands to my sides and stood agape. Nothing in Boston or Philadelphia, or possibly anywhere in the world, could compare to the massive, elegant manor.

When I finally recovered myself, I glanced at my husband. Instead of gazing at his home, he focused on me. A look of sheer glee covered his face.

“Does it please you?” he asked, eager as a schoolboy.

“Yes,” I said. “It pleases me very much. How could it not?”

“I am glad you like it.” Taking my hand, he escorted me inside. He showed me around the entire first floor, pointing out favorite paintings or artifacts, telling me stories of scrapes and bruises he acquired from sliding down the banisters, as well as enlightening me as to the history of his—now mine as well—family. I had never seen him so animated, at least not outside the bedroom.

When he headed for the second floor, I insisted upon a respite. “Jeffrey”—I flung myself upon a sofa—“I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I am quite fatigued and would dearly love some refreshments before we continue our tour.”

He blushed. Yes, Jeffrey, the Duke of Amherst, blushed. “I am sorry.” He grinned sheepishly. “I so wanted to share this home with you, I overlooked the fact you have had an extended journey to get here.” He rang for refreshments then sat with me in the drawing room until they arrived.

“Does this house remain empty when you are not here?” I asked, taking in the rich furnishings of the room.

“Of course not. The staff is here year round.”

“They stay here simply waiting for your return?” This seemed highly inefficient to me.

“It is their home,” he said, a note of pride in his voice. “Besides”—he lifted my hand to his lips and kissed the inside of my wrist— “I hope we might spend more time here than I have in the past. The London social season holds little appeal for me.”

“My home is where you are, your grace,” I said and meant it.

He pulled me close and kissed me until my head was all muddled. Had the refreshments not arrived at that instant, who knows what the help might have found us doing a few minutes later.

Once we were alone again, Jeffrey removed the cover from the tray to reveal a platter of beautifully arranged fruit. My mouth watered at such opulence.

“Pineapples!” I gasped.

“Have you never tried one?” he asked, handing me a plate of fruit in every color.

“No,” I admitted. “Only the very wealthiest Americans have them. Though my father was quite successful, we did not have a conservatory to grow them.” The fruit was a precious commodity. “I’ve always wanted to taste one.”

“So,” he teased, “are you saying there is something here in England that is better than life in America?”

“I cannot answer your question until I taste it.” I met his playful gaze with my own.

I held the plate close to my face and inhaled the sweet aroma. My mouth watered in anticipation.

Jeffrey watched me closely, nearly as excited as I. “Go ahead,” he said eagerly. “Try it.”

“But are you not going to fill a plate for yourself? ’Tis rude for me to proceed when you have nothing to eat.”

“No, no. Please.” He waved his hands to encourage me. “I want to see your expression when you taste it.”

Was I such an oddity simply because I had never tasted pineapple? However, any pique I might have felt disappeared once I bit into the tender flesh of the fruit. Flavor exploded across my tongue then throughout my mouth. My eyes opened wide, and I turned to Jeffrey.

He grinned. “Delicious, is it not?”

All I could do was nod. A bit of sweet juice trickled down my chin. I swiped at it with my tongue, not wanting to waste any of it.

I consumed a second chunk of the heavenly delight while he filled his plate. “Thank you. This is an unexpected treat.”

“I have plans for many unexpected treats for you, little duchess.”

My face flushed, and I nearly choked on the final sliver of fruit in my mouth.

CHAPTER 18

The following morning before breakfast, Jeffrey showed me around the many gardens of Bradford Hall. We walked along the stone-lined paths between the magnificent flowerbeds, my arm tucked through his. I breathed deeply of the fresh air and smiled up at him in contentment.

“You have not told me much about your life in America, my Sarah.”

I scanned the acres of colorful flowers, the beautiful mansion, which was now my home, the liveried footmen, and back to my handsome husband. “I believe our upbringings were probably quite different.”

“You still did not answer my question.” He gave my hair a jaunty tug.

“My father is a prosperous farmer. Of course, his estate is not nearly so large as Bradford Hall, but he has done well for himself and is much respected by his peers. There has even been talk of him running for office.” The note of pride in my voice surprised me. “After my mother died, I had very little supervision. My father was away much of the time, so I learned to entertain myself.”

Jeffrey cocked his head to the side. “How did you do that, poppet?”

“I loved the stables as well as the gardens. I learned to saddle my own horse,” I said proudly. “When they were short handed in the fields, I drove the hay wagon.”

He gasped. I could not tell if he was impressed or shocked. “While I am sure you

were very helpful on your father's farm, Bradford Hall has ample staff to take care of everything. There is no reason for you to saddle your own horse or drive a team. In fact, I forbid it."

I disengaged my arm from his, turned, and stared up at him. "You forbid it? Forbid? You must be joking."

"I am most serious. You are the Duchess of Amherst. The tenants and servants on this estate expect you to maintain a certain level of decorum, as do I. It is important to the order of things that you behave respectably."

"Are you saying, sir, that in order to become a proper duchess, I must be a simpering fool?"

"Of course not. I am simply saying your actions reflect not only upon yourself, but upon me and the Amherst name."

"So, for the preservation of the Amherst name, I must abandon enjoyable activities in order to sit around stitching or painting screens?"

Jeffrey paused then took two deep breaths to calm his ire. I ought to have done the same because my face burned with indignation. I was an American. During the last war, I learned to use a firearm, though fortunately none of the fighting came close enough to our property for me to use my skills. But I knew how and was prepared to defend myself and my home.

"You mentioned you liked gardening as well. Perhaps you would enjoy some projects in the conservatory."

I paused for a moment to study him. I did not wish to argue, and I appreciated his offer of compromise. "That is a possibility."

He tapped the bridge of my nose with his finger. “Whether you choose to take advantage of the conservatory or not, my position on saddling your own horse or driving any sort of conveyance stands. Do not test me on this, Sarah.”

Later that day, Jeffrey escorted me to the conservatory. Immediately, the scent of flowers in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors assaulted my senses. I stopped and stared, turned in a circle to take it all in, then smiled up at him. “It is astounding.”

My praise pleased him. “I thought you might find it appealing. It is one of the highlights of Bradford Hall, is it not?”

I barely heard the last part of his question as I rushed from flower to flower, sniffing and touching the delicate plants. The head gardener, Hanson, followed me at a respectful distance answering my many questions.

After thirty minutes, I came upon a familiar plant. “Is that a pineapple?”

“Yes, your grace.” Henry puffed up with pride. “We have one of the finest crops in all of England.”

“The pineapple we shared yesterday was grown right here, was it not, Hanson?” Jeffrey prompted the beaming gardener.

“Absolutely, your grace. I’m honored you enjoyed it.”

“It was delicious,” I said, remembering the burst of flavor of my first taste of the heady fruit.

Jeffrey gave Hanson a meaningful glance, and the gardener excused himself with a bow.

“Hanson has prepared something special for you, at my request.” Jeffrey wrung his hands and almost appeared nervous. “I hope you like it.”

Curious, I tilted my head. “What is it?”

He nodded toward a large pot with a small plant growing from it. “It is your own pineapple. I thought you might like to have one to tend to yourself.”

I squealed, hugged my husband, then hurried over to inspect my little plant. I touched the sharp leaves and grinned up at Jeffrey. “Thank you. I will take wonderful care of it.”

While at Bradford Hall, learning to run the household of a large country estate along with simply finding my way around the enormous property occupied much of my time. One morning at breakfast, I looked across the table at my husband’s face while he remained unaware of my observation. My heart constricted, and I felt certain I had fallen deeply in love with him. I sighed contentedly thanking the Almighty for my good fortune.

My sigh seemed to rouse Jeffrey from his thoughts. “Is everything to your liking, Sarah, dear?”

“Yes, of course. I could not be happier.” Affection and optimism surged in my heart. I moistened my lips with my tongue, prepared to declare my love to him, until the butler entered the room with a letter.

“An express has arrived for you, your grace.” He held out a silver tray with the missive upon it.

Jeffrey’s countenance went from relaxed to concerned as he read the dispatch. When he finished, he sat silently for a moment.

“Is there a problem?”

He folded the letter, tucked it in his pocket then smiled at me. “Just some business in London requires my immediate attention. I shall leave right away.” He stood, and I did as well.

“How long will you be gone? Shall I accompany you?” The idea of being parted from him alarmed me.

He cupped my cheeks in his hands and gazed deep into my eyes. “I do not expect to be gone more than a few days. There is no reason for you not to enjoy that time here in the country.” He lowered his head and kissed my lips with gentleness. I raised my hands to frame his face.

“Be careful,” I said, a choke in my voice.

“I could say the same to you.” He broke away from me and grinned. “Behave yourself during my absence, Yankee girl.” He gave my behind a meaningful squeeze.

An hour later, the carriage rolled down the lane, leaving me quite isolated indeed.

CHAPTER 19

I did not allow my melancholy to interfere with my plans to call upon a new neighbor. As the carriage rumbled down the long lane from Bradford Hall to the main road, I studied the expansive gardens surrounding my new home. Could any place be more lovely?

What would Mrs. White think if she could see me now? Though I rarely bothered giving her, or my father, much thought since the day they had announced their pending marriage, I could hardly keep a self-satisfied smile from pulling at the corners of my mouth. Was not happiness the best revenge?

During the drive, I had time alone to consider all that had happened in my life in the last few weeks. Who would have ever expected such a turn of events? One thing that would make my life truly perfect would be a friend. I missed Cassie and wished I had gone along with Jeffrey so that I could have spent some time with my only friend in the entire country. Not just some lady who stopped by to gossip, but a real comrade who would love me despite my many flaws.

Perhaps my new neighbor would be such a person. When the carriage arrived at its destination, I exited, hopeful of finding a chum.

At the door, I handed the butler my card, though the Amherst family crest and livery announced my identity before my feet left the carriage.

A maid attended to my wrap while I waited for the butler to inform me if his mistress, Lady Hampshire, was available for visitors. I had never made a call on my own and

hoped the lady of the house would be pleasant.

“Just fifteen minutes,” I told myself. I only needed to stay for fifteen minutes. Mrs. White had drilled this into me.

“Pardon me, your grace?” The maid looked up expectantly.

I must have spoken aloud. “My apologies. I am a bit nervous.” It was highly improper to confide in a housemaid, but loneliness trumped good judgment.

She smiled kindly. “I would be nervous, too. Everyone in the neighborhood is shocked the Duke married an American. It’s all any of the ladies talk about when they visit.”

Shocked? People were shocked Jeffrey married me? Admittedly, it was a surprise to me too, but these were strangers. What right did they have to judge me based solely on my nationality?

The whole neighborhood?

“Felicity!” The butler’s voice filled the entryway. Felicity glanced at me apologetically then scurried off to other tasks.

“Her ladyship would be delighted to make your acquaintance.” The butler bowed, his expression blank. “Please follow me.”

Your actions reflect not only upon yourself, but upon me and the Amherst name.

Jeffrey’s words from a few days before echoed in my mind. Although I wished to flee, or stay to give “her ladyship” something to be shocked about, I could not. My husband expected me to make him proud, and I would.

However, that did not mean I was happy about it. The long hall to the drawing room felt like a walk to the guillotine. What sort of viper's nest awaited me?

“The Duchess of Amherst,” the butler announced. The two ladies in the room stared at me.

I thought of Jeffrey and how disappointed he would be if I did not make an effort to win these ladies over.

The butler left. Lady Hampshire and her guest, Lady Suffield, introduced themselves. I smiled then took the seat indicated by my hostess.

“We were just saying how eager we are to make your acquaintance, and now here you are. How fortunate. I was extremely sorry not to find you at home when I visited earlier in the week.” Lady Hampshire leaned closer. “I hope you will tell us about yourself. We were all so surprised to hear that the Duke of Amherst had taken a wife, especially when we knew nothing about her.”

“How kind you ah to welcome me he-ah.” I reared back in surprise. Heaven help me. Had I been possessed by demons? It was as though I had channeled Professor Keating.

I risked a glimpse at the ladies seated across from me. They appeared as stunned as I felt.

“I, uh...we, um.” Lady Hampshire’s brow furrowed. “What I mean is, we were all told you were an American, but that cannot be. Your accent is clearly, um, British. Is that correct?”

“An American?” I covered my mouth with my gloved hand to show my dismay. “Oh, my. What a thing to say.”

“I heard the same thing.” Lady Suffield peered at me. “Are you sure you are not an American?”

“Well, here I am. You can judge for yourself.”

“Yes, you are right here for us to see for ourselves.” Lady Hampshire had the most peculiar sort of half-smile on her face. I wondered if something was wrong with me—besides my odd speaking voice. I checked to make sure I had not gotten dirt on my skirt, but it was pristine.

“We are delighted to have a new friend in the neighborhood.” Lady Suffield turned to me. “Things around here can get so dull. Do you not agree, your grace?”

All I really wanted was to get out of there as quickly as possible while saying as little as possible. So far, I had not actually lied, which gave me small comfort. My heart thudded with desperation. I glanced at the clock on the mantel. Although it felt like an eternity in hell, I had only spent five minutes there. Ten long, deceit-filled minutes remained.

I cleared my throat, preparing to answer.

“Honestly, Lydia,” Lady Hampshire intervened, “how can she say whether it is dull in this county or not? She only arrived a short time ago, while we have been here our whole lives.”

Now I was quite confused indeed. I thought Lady Hampshire was new to the neighborhood, so I asked, in as few words as possible, for clarification.

“You are correct, in part,” she said. “Perhaps I ought to explain. In case it is not obvious”—she shot Lady Suffield a perturbed glance—“Lydia and I are sisters. We grew up nearby. But, I am also recently married so have only lived here in this home

for a few weeks.”

“Oh,” I said, hoping it was a sufficient answer.

“Where are you from, your grace? I do not believe we have ever crossed paths.” Lady Suffield leaned forward as though eager for my reply.

My mind flashed to the map of England hanging in the drawing room of Bradford Hall. “I grew up in the Lake District.” I prayed neither of them were familiar with the area.

“How delightful!” Lady Hampshire said. “I have always wanted to visit there. I hear it is the most beautiful area in England.”

“Is it really as stunning as everyone says?” her sister asked.

“Oh, I am sure everything you have heard about it is true. Very true.” My heart pounded while my palms grew damp inside my gloves. Desperate to change the conversation, I turned back to my companions. “I have always wanted a sister.”

“I can assure you there were many days when we each wished we were only children,” Lady Suffield said with a smirk at her sibling.

“You said you wished for a sister. Do you have any brothers, your grace?” Lady Hampshire ignored her sister’s jibe.

“Sadly, I am an only child.” I tried to keep my lies to a minimum, though what did it matter at that point? Even my British accent started to feel normal.

“Are your parents still in the Lake District?” Lady Hampshire asked.

“No. My parents are both dead.” Or at least they were as far as I was concerned.

Lady Suffield shot her sister a condemning glance. “I am so sorry.”

“Thank you. Are your parents still alive?”

“Oh yes.” Lady Hampshire laughed. “They are very much alive. In fact, they will be hosting a lawn party at their home in a few days. I hope you and the Duke will attend.”

“I do not believe we have been invited.”

“Oh, I am sorry. We rarely send out invitations. It is always held the first Saturday in July. Most people know since it has been happening for years. But, I will bring an invitation to Bradford Hall tomorrow, so you will have all the details. That is, if you do not mind?” She smiled at me.

“N-no. A visit would be delightful.” I stood. “Good-bye for now, but I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Lady Hampshire.” I held my breath until safely ensconced in my carriage, waiting for someone to call out “Liar! Pretender!” But no one did. Had I actually fooled them?

What had caused me to speak with a British accent?

What would Jeffrey say if he knew?

Despite the angst caused by my impromptu charade, Lady Hampshire and Lady Suffield had been entertaining. They were hardly the genteel ladies I had expected.

Regardless, once they learned of my deceit neither they, nor anyone, would wish to be my friend. I could not even consider the horrible things that would be said about

me once word got out. How could I ever show my face in society again?

And what would Jeffrey say? I have brought shame to the Amherst name.

CHAPTER 20

After dinner, I scoured the library for books with information about the Lake District. I should have packed my bags and left before my ruse was exposed, but there was nowhere for me to go.

Most importantly, the thought of leaving my husband broke my heart.

If it meant pretending I grew up in the Lake District and spoke with a perfect British accent then so be it.

The question of Jeffrey's reaction loomed but was pushed to the recesses of my mind.

I took a book to the bedchamber and practiced my accent by reading aloud. The Lake District encompasses the counties of Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire.

"Lancashah, Lancashah." I practiced soft R pronunciation while pacing the room.

A tap on the door startled me. My maid, Annie, entered "Lady Amherst, are you in need of anything?" She looked at me quizzically.

"No, Annie. Thank you." I picked up my book and continued reading to myself, but she did not leave. I stopped to address her. "Annie, is something wrong?"

She gazed at the floor then met my eyes. "Please, ma'am. I heard you talking and thought you might be in need of assistance."

“Thank you, Annie.” I did my best not to blush at being caught out. “All is well. You may return at the usual time to assist me in dressing for bed.”

Still, the maid persisted. “Your grace.” She drew a deep breath. “Pardon me if this offends, but has your voice changed?”

“What an extraordinary thing to say.” My voice came out somewhere between my natural American pronunciation and my newly acquired British accent.

Confused, Annie left the room.

Sleep eluded me. I missed the comfort of curling up to Jeffrey’s warm body during the night.

Guilt over my deception plagued me. What a traitor to my heritage. How had I gone from challenging Jeffrey when he defamed my country to pretending to be a proper English lady? And why?

I woke from what little rest I got resolved to put an end to the charade. I waited for Lady Hampshire’s visit fully intending to confess my sham.

I would tell her I was an American who had never been to the Lake District, apologize, and trust she showed compassion.

When the butler announced that I had visitors and asked if I was at home for callers, I braced myself to do the right thing.

I entered the morning room fully prepared to meet my fate but pulled up short.

Seated with Lady Hampshire was an older woman whom she introduced as her mother, Lady Buckland.

How could I confess my dishonesty in front of a stranger? Someone's mother, no less? True, I barely knew Lady Hampshire, but she was near my age and appeared to have a sense of humor. I hoped she would understand the folly of a young woman in a strange land.

"How lovely to meet you, Lady Amherst," Lady Buckland said. "I apologize for not calling upon you sooner but I, like so many others, was under the impression you were an American. I simply could not bring myself to be polite to a Yank."

I ought to have set her straight right then and there. Told her the truth then booted her out of my house.

But I didn't.

"I must find out who is spreading such horrid rumors about me."

My guests exchanged a knowing glance when I spoke. Their scrutiny made me anxious, so I snuck a peek in the mirror over the mantel. I looked fine. Perhaps I had imagined it.

"People are always quick to gossip. There is so little else to occupy their minds," Lady Buckland said.

I found it ironic she criticized the gossips, yet appeared to be a happy participant in the pastime as well.

"Please, do not be concerned," Lady Hampshire said. "I am sure his grace is very pleased to have you as his wife."

"Oh yes, I am sure of it as well." Her mother offered a reassuring smile. "What gentleman wouldn't be pleased by a lovely young lady such as you? It is obvious you

have excellent breeding and comportment, and isn't that what a man wants?"

I simply nodded.

"I hope you and the Duke will honor us by attending the annual lawn party Lord Buckland and I host. It is the highlight of the summer here in the country, if I do say so myself." Lady Buckland reached into her reticule to retrieve an invitation, which she handed to me.

I read the invitation, noting the event was to occur in only three days' time.

"I know it is short notice, and I would understand if you have other plans." Lady Buckland had a warm, maternal air about her that made me jealous of her two daughters. "I assumed Jeffrey knew about it since he attends faithfully. However, I can understand how he might have been distracted by his new wife."

I blushed.

The arrival of the downstairs maid with refreshments interrupted our discussion. Instead of thanking her, as I usually did, I simply nodded and smiled. She curtsied but before she left the room, she paused.

"Is everything to your liking, your grace?"

My rebuff had hurt her feelings. I hated to think she might believe me miffed with her. On the other hand, she would expect my real voice while my guests anticipated my sham voice, which made speaking out of the question.

So, I did what any self-respecting imposter would do. I pretended to cough uproariously then waved her off while my guests fussed over my apparent attack of something.

Once she left the room, I miraculously recovered. However, this would not be the last such predicament, unless I ended this charade.

I drew in a long breath, squared my shoulders, and addressed my two visitors. “I am deeply sorry, but his grace and I have other plans. I wish you the very best, though, with your party.”

Both ladies were appropriately disappointed. “If your plans change, please reconsider,” Lady Buckland said.

“Yes, I would enjoy spending more time with you. There are so few lively young ladies about who wish to have fun. I do get tired of stitching and painting screens. I am sure we shall be fast friends,” Lady Hampshire added with a laugh.

“Thank you.” Her compliment filled me with guilt. “I shall endeavor to be worthy of your interest.”

“I am sure you will. I cannot wait to hear all about the Lake District as well as how you met the Duke of Amherst.” She moved to the edge of her seat, obviously hoping I would regale her immediately.

“Oh, yes. I simply adore hearing how young people meet and fall in love.” Lady Buckland clasped her hands in front of her. “Please tell us.”

It is an interesting story. We first became acquainted at a ball when he dragged me outside, turned me over his knee then reddened my bottom.

No, that certainly would not do.

While I clutched my teacup inspiration struck. Overcome by another faux coughing fit, I dumped the contents onto my skirt.

I jumped up, wailing and bemoaning my clumsiness. Soon my guests excused themselves with the promise of another call soon.

In the afternoon, while tending to my pineapple plant, I contemplated the predicament I had created for myself. The plant required very little attention, but the solitude plus the heavenly aroma of the conservatory soothed me, and I craved comfort.

What a mess! This escapade far exceeded the scandal in Boston when I punched the poor young man who attempted to kiss me.

And even the one in London which led to my marriage to Jeffrey.

I sat amongst the greenery and exotic flowers, breathing deeply of the aromatic blooms, desperate for inspiration.

I assessed the situation. Only three ladies had been subjected to my ruse. Lady Hampshire admitted she did not socialize with many ladies besides her sister, so perhaps the story had not spread too far.

All I needed to do was avoid Lady Buckland and her daughters. I had declined the invitation to the party at the Buckland estate. As soon as Jeffrey got home, I would suggest we return to London.

No, I had an even better plan. I would go to him. Immediately.

CHAPTER 21

Relief filled my soul as I sat in the carriage in anticipation of my escape to London. Much as I adored Bradford Hall, there was no choice but to flee. It was the only way to prevent Jeffrey from learning of my horrid behavior. The only way to save my marriage.

I patted my hat to make sure it still sat properly upon my head then prepared to depart, immediately, if not sooner.

Ah, London, with its shops and theater and balls. Everything would be fine there.

I waited for the carriage to move, but nothing happened. Had someone arrived to call me out on my bad behavior? Expose me to the entire county as a fake?

I leaned forward to inquire when the door flew open and none other than my husband reached in to pull me off my seat into a crushing embrace.

“Jeffrey! I did not expect you.” I struggled to make sense of my sudden change in plans.

“The whole trip was unnecessary. I told the idiots who insisted on my presence that if they disturbed me again with such foolishness, I would fire the lot of them. Do they not understand I have important matters to attend to here?”

Any thoughts of London vanished in the onslaught of his lips upon mine. I clung to him and returned his kisses with matching fervor. I had no recollection of entering the

house or traversing the first floor, yet soon we were inside his bedchamber, the door kicked shut resoundingly.

“My dear,” I panted when he finally released my lips. “You will break it.”

“There are seventy-seven rooms in Bradford Hall Hall. If the door to this one cannot withstand a good kick, then we shall find one that can. I mean for us not to be disturbed, little wife, so now the message has been sent loud and clear.”

“Jeffrey!” I could not help but giggle. “What will the help think?”

“They shall think they are fortunate to work in a home with a master and mistress who are too busy making love to notice whether they have polished the silver or dusted the banisters.”

He laid me against the pillows of the big bed then proceeded to remove his jacket and cravat. He untied the neckcloth and unwound it from his throat. I imagined him using it to bind my hands while he spanked me, then marveled at the eroticism of my thoughts.

He attempted to remove his boots. The first came off easily, but he hopped around the room on one foot in a frenzy to be rid of the second.

I left the bed and placed a calming hand on his arm. “Please, sit down. You’ll hurt yourself. Then what good will you be to me?”

A saucy statement, even for me, but excitement combined with love emboldened me.

Jeffrey took a seat on the bench at the foot of the bed. I positioned myself in front of him and pulled his boot-clad foot up between my legs.

“Ah, yes.” He used his hands to explore my backside. Soon they slid beneath my dress. “This is a brilliant idea.”

Elation shot through me. Oh, how I yearned for his touch. I reveled in the feel of his hands on my thighs and buttocks, kneading my flesh.

“I have missed your sweet Yankee arse, little wife.” The husk in his voice went straight to the knot of longing burning low in my belly, but his reference to my Yankee heritage reminded me of my horrible deception, and I worried anew at what his reaction would be. However, my desire to be with my husband outweighed the nagging anxiety, so I pushed the thought far away.

He continued to delve beneath my skirts, causing my legs to shake. I squeezed my knees against his thigh to steady myself.

“You do not seem to be making much progress with that boot, Sarah girl.” He untied my undergarments, lowered them then skimmed his hand down the crease of my rear. “Might it be intentional?” His fingers probed the slickness between my thighs, then drew some of that moisture over the crevice of my buttocks. I stiffened, wondering what he intended.

I did not have to wonder long because within moments his finger, coated in my own essence, pressed the pucker of my backside.

I bit back a squeal. What madness was this?

“Hush, little duchess. I shall take good care of you,” Jeffrey whispered, his voice husky. Then his finger pushed further into that most private opening.

“J-jeffrey...” I said, unsure what to think.

“Just relax, Sarah,” he said, pushing his finger deeper.

Sensations unlike anything I had ever experienced before spread through my body. It was shameful and embarrassing, but the more he probed that intimate location, the greater my desire grew and I mewled deep in my throat.

“That’s my girl,” Jeffrey said, his voice a raspy wave over me.

He continued pumping his finger in and out and soon I moved my hips to mimic his movements. A climax built inside me, growing strong with each thrust of his finger into my bottom hole.

My body tightened and then exploded as the energy of my orgasm burst through me. I cried out as I reached the apex and then slowly drifted back down.

A sigh escaped my lips and I lay limp across my husband’s lap as I caught my breath.

Unwittingly, my hands began to work against the leather of my beloved's boot, though not in a manner likely to lead to its speedy removal.

I could not have been happier.

A quick swat to my bottom got my attention. “I cannot remove my pants until my boot is gone, Sarah girl, so unless you want me to bend you over to take you with one boot on while my pants are around my ankles, I suggest you tend to your task.” He squeezed my bum and whispered, “Then I shall tend to you.”

The lusty promise of his words nearly sent me over the edge of passion again right then and there, but I managed to focus on my assignment, and soon my spouse was de-booted.

With the interfering footwear dispatched, Jeffrey went to the basin and washed his hands, then he brought a wet cloth over and washed my backside with tender care.

Once that was finished, Jeffrey pulled me down to sit on his lap. “I have missed you, my little Yankee.” He gently traced my hairline.

“I have missed you, too, Jeffrey,” I said, though I could not meet his eyes. What would he say if he knew I was pretending to be anything but a Yankee girl?

He tilted my chin up to force my gaze to meet his. After a moment, he covered my mouth in a sweet, gentle kiss.

Soon, we were both overcome with need. The kiss moved from sweet to sensual. My mouth submitted to his urgency. His tongue brushed across my teeth and enticed my tongue to join in an erotic dance, leaving me breathless. I pulled back and attempted to remove his shirt.

It was bold behavior, but his absence stoked my longing to be one with him. I plucked at the closure of his shirt. In my eagerness to remove my lover’s clothes, I created a tangle, slowing our progress toward nudity rather than expediting it.

Frustrated, he set me from his lap, stood, yanked at the opening until he removed the shirt and was left in only his breeches.

“You know the rule, little one. You are never to be more dressed than I am, so off with your dress.”

I giggled at this stern expression then turned for his assistance in unfastening my garment. In moments, I wore only my corset. I had become somewhat accustomed to nudity with my husband, but his absence had restored some of my modesty, so I raised my hands to cover my sex.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Jeffrey moved my hands away and slowly ran his gaze over every inch of my exposed figure. “Your body is mine, and mine alone to enjoy. Do not be shy with me, my wife.”

The possessiveness of his voice sent goose bumps prickling across my skin. He clasped both my hands in one of his and kept them behind my back while he continued to peruse my blushing form.

“Do you know what I am doing, Sarah girl?”

“Looking at me?”

“I am memorizing every inch of your delectable body, so the next time we are parted, I will have this to think about.”

The idea he would think about my naked form when he was alone flattered me immensely.

He reached out and swept a finger across the pebbled tip of my breast. “Did you think about me during my absence?”

What would he say if he knew I fell asleep imagining his heated body next to mine? That I slipped one of his shirts from the laundry basket and slept in it because it smelled like him?

He tweaked my nipple. “I assume, naughty girl, if you had not you would have said so right away.” He smiled then squeezed a bit harder until I gasped with pleasure. “Therefore, the answer must be yes, but you are too shy to say so.”

I nodded, unable to put my feelings into words.

His arms wrapped around me, and I reveled in the ruggedness of his flesh against my own. I slid my hands up to the muscles of his shoulders, which rippled under my touch when he reached behind me to yank at the ribbon holding my corset in place. Fabric tore, my husband swore, but I did not care. I only wished to surrender to Jeffrey and the crush of passion squeezing me from the inside out.

He stepped away momentarily, the absence of his strength leaving me lost and disoriented. My eyes, which had closed as soon as he enfolded me in his arms, opened again to see where he had gone. Very quickly, he returned.

“Here I am, poppet,” he whispered as he scooped up and carried me to the bed. He was now completely naked. The proof of his desire prodded my backside as he carried me.

He laid me upon the bed and gazed down the length of me, his eyes settling on the juncture of my thighs. “Open for me, Sarah.”

The throaty whisper of his voice sent a thrill through me. I complied, sliding my legs across the bed covers until the cool air of the room wafted over my sex.

Jeffrey trailed his hand the length of my leg and teased the edges of my opening. “You are so wet, my Sarah.”

I mewled deep in my throat and raised my yearning hips closer to his fingertips.

He joined me on the bed, lying on his side with his head propped on his right hand while his left drew lazy circles on my quivering stomach. He lowered his head then tugged one breast between his lips.

His fingers moved south to enter my womanly place again, plunging in and out of my tight passage in rhythm with his mouth tugging at my nipple. Fire stormed my body

from every direction, emanating outward from the throbbing in my pussy up to the delirium created by his tongue on my breast. I moaned and clutched the back of his head. My spine arched as I strove to get nearer to him in any way possible.

My feet scrabbled against the quilt while I writhed in response to his sensual onslaught.

“Please, Jeffrey,” I begged. “It’s been so long.”

“I was not gone more than two days, but I appreciate your eagerness. I missed you as well.” My husband moved above me, his knee forcing my thighs farther apart. “As you wish, your grace,” he said.

His mouth covered mine, as he slid his length into me. I clutched his shoulders and wrapped my legs around his hips, clinging to him as though my very life depended upon it. He filled me completely. I cried out his name as I reached my climax.

He held me close and whispered comforting words in my ear as we settled into the bed together.

Later, I woke during the night to find myself ensconced tightly in my man’s arms, his body enveloping mine. His deep breathing assured me he slept. I sighed and whispered into the darkness the words I was still too afraid to speak aloud.

“I love you, Jeffrey.”

CHAPTER 22

The next morning, I decided to allow myself a day to enjoy Jeffrey's company so, by sheer will, I did not think about my predicament.

The time with Jeffrey filled me with joy. I pretended life was perfect with no catastrophic storm—of my own creation—brewing on the horizon.

Unfortunately, sleep did not cooperate. That night, while he slept, I slipped from our room to visit the conservatory.

Small sitting areas nestled amongst the plants made it my favorite place in all of Bradford Hall. There, I found a quiet spot to gather my thoughts. I gazed upward at the yellow moon, thinking back to the many times I did exactly the same thing, but in so many different locations. My father's home in America, on the ship crossing the Atlantic and, now, here, at the home I shared with the man I loved.

I could not believe I had squandered my opportunity for a happy life with Jeffrey. Before my horrible, awful lie, I was unreservedly content. Now, my happiness would only last as long as I could keep my husband unaware of what I had done. Surely, he would cast me aside once he knew.

I would have nowhere to go unless I buggered my pride and returned to America to beg my father, as well as his repugnant new wife, for a place to rest my head. Would I even be able to make it across the Atlantic without throwing myself overboard at the prospect of such humiliation?

I buried my face in my hands, weeping for my foolishness and pride, which had triggered this disaster. Once I cried myself out, I must have dozed off because the next thing I remembered was Jeffrey standing before me in a near panic, shaking my shoulders.

“Sarah, Sarah.” The urgency in his voice woke me with a start.

I gaped at him. “What is wrong?”

His hands continued to grip my shoulders while he let out a heavy sigh. “You scared me half to death. That’s what is wrong.”

Glancing about, I saw the moon no longer hung directly overhead. How long had I slept? “I am sorry, my dear. I did not mean to alarm you. Truly, I did not.”

“What are you doing here, Sarah? Why did you leave our bed?” He studied my face, searching for an answer.

Well, if you insist upon knowing, I have come here to figure out how to prevent you from disowning me and sending me back to America since I have told several ladies in the neighborhood that I am an English lady from the Lake District, not Sarah Hancock from America. How do you suggest I go about remedying this mess?

No, that would not do.

“I am here to check on the pineapple plant,” I said, as though it was a perfectly logical thing to do.

“Pineapple?” He released my shoulders to cross his arms over his broad chest. The muscles flexed beneath the opening of his sleeping attire, and I imagined sliding my fingers across his hard flesh.

“Y-yes,” I lied, licking my lips.

He shook his head from side to side, incredulous. “You wandered through a dark house in the middle of the night to check on a pineapple plant? And frightened the wits out of me in the process?”

“I am sorry. It does sound silly. It was a gift from you, so I wanted to make sure it had not come to any harm.”

“Have the gardening staff here at Bradford Hall given you cause to believe they were incapable of caring for a pineapple?” Jeffrey’s dark eyes bore down on me, though the corner of his mouth turned up oh-so-slightly, giving me a bit of hope he might not be quite as irritated as he appeared.

“No, they are excellent at their jobs.” How can I get out of this conversation?

“So, there was really no good reason for you to wander about alone, possibly injure yourself, not to mention worry me, is that correct?”

Fed up with his questioning as well as the entire situation, I glared up at him, though my anger was with myself. “Yes, I was foolish. Pardon me.” I stood. “Now, if you are done lecturing me, I would like to go back to bed.”

I took a step toward the exit, but Jeffrey’s hand on my elbow halted my progress.

“Oh, no you don’t, little hellcat. There is still the matter of your discipline to be addressed.”

He placed his foot on the bench I had just vacated and angled me over his thigh. “Ah, this reminds me of our first meeting,” he said. “Little did I know when I turned your fresh Yankee bottom over my knee that night I would have the pleasure of teaching

you how to become a proper British lady over and over again.”

“I assessed you as a brute then, and I believe that is still the case.” I ought not to have provoked him, but I was tired, and his actions were unreasonable.

Despite the warm temperature of the conservatory, when Jeffrey raised my nightgown to expose my bottom, my backside prickled with gooseflesh. His hand caressed my flank. My thighs quivered under his touch.

Whap . His palm landed on the curve of my bottom.

“Ouch!” My worries about the future were long forgotten once my attention focused on the pain in my backside. “That hurts!”

“Be grateful I did not send you to find a switch from one of the plants here. We have a ready supply at our fingertips.”

He spanked repeatedly on the underside of my buttocks, and the area heated with each additional swat. “Please tell me, your grace, why would a young wife leave the warmth of her husband’s side to verify the well-being of a plant? Is this an American custom?”

“No, it is not an American custom. It was foolish. Is that what you want me to say?” I ought to have been grateful for his concern for me, but gratitude paled while my backside pulsed.

He wiggled his thigh a bit so my legs spread. I felt the moist air of the arboretum on my private place, the one Jeffrey called my pussy. When I did not respond immediately to his question, he spanked me there, too. A jolt of desire shot across to the heat in my bottom as well as every location in between.

“That is a good start.” I heard a snap and peeked back to see he had broken off a leafy branch from a nearby plant. He patted the rough leaves over the singed flesh of my derriere, sending all the nerve endings into a frenzy.

“I cannot help but wonder.” He used the greenery to swat up and down my thighs and bottom. It was not so painful as his hand had been, but the sensations sent me wriggling across his hard thigh, my thoughts far from pineapples and deception. “What else might be on your mind to make sleep elusive, little wife. Are not our marital activities enough to fatigue you?”

“Yes. No.” I gasped for a steady breath.

“So, you do have something on your mind, and our physical relationship is not rigorous enough to suit you?”

“No. Yes.” I kicked my feet in frustration. “I do not know. Leave me alone.”

“Are you sure that is what you want?” The flora dropped to the floor while Jeffrey’s strong fingers moved inside my yearning passage.

“Yes,” I gasped. He zeroed in on my most sensitive place and stroked familiarly.

“Pineapple is a very sweet fruit, is it not?” he asked while he worked my hot flesh.

“Yes,” I swallowed around the dry lump in my throat. “It is.”

“Do you know what is even sweeter?” His fingers plunged in and out. I pressed into him, clenching my muscles around his digits.

“What?” I finally said.

“Let me show you, little wife.” He halted his attention to my lady parts, tipped me upright, then lifted my nightgown over my head before positioning me on the bench, my knees spread wide. I had no idea what he intended but had no will to question him either. The cool bench felt good against my chastised bottom.

He knelt on the floor and lowered his mouth to touch me. There. Where his fingers had been. I opened my mouth to protest, but once his tongue infiltrated my sex, speech became impossible. I buried my hands in his hair, urging him closer. He enthusiastically obliged.

I knew I ought to be ashamed at having his mouth on me there, but I could only feel delight. I watched as he pleased me, never before considering my own anatomy in such a way. His tongue licked along my inner thighs and across the swollen lips of my sex then he pulled back on the hood of my femininity to suck on the small nub there.

“Jeffrey!” I clutched his head between my fingers.

He raised his head and pulled me down for a kiss unlike any I had ever experienced. There, on my lover’s mouth, I tasted my own essence. Shame and exhilaration flooded me. As we kissed, his fingers resumed their torture of my sex. Pulling away from me, he gazed into my eyes. “That, my dear wife, is the sweetest taste on earth.” Then he kissed me again, and I had to agree.

Jeffrey divested himself of his nightshirt. The soft light of the rising sun illuminated the hard planes of his torso and highlighted his large, erect penis. We switched places so that he used the bench. He pulled me down to sit on his manhood, and there, between the exotic scents and greenery of the conservatory, my husband planted his seed in me.

Jeffrey’s return made me so happy, I nearly forgot all the lies I had told in his

absence. All of that changed two days after our sojourn in the conservatory.

“I thought we would leave at one o’clock today,” my husband commented over breakfast.

I glanced up from my repast. “Leave?”

“Yes, for the Bucklands’ lawn party.”

“W-what?”

“The Bucklands are a well-known family in this area. Their lawn party is very popular as well as a wonderful opportunity to introduce my new wife to my neighbors.”

I stared, open-mouthed. My mind swirled, while a lump of dread pitted my stomach. “I do not recall receiving an invitation,” I lied, digging my hole of deceit even deeper.

“Invitations are not necessary. It takes place the first Saturday in July. Everyone in the area will be there.”

“I do not have anything appropriate to wear,” I replied, desperate for any excuse.

“Nothing to wear?” Jeffrey guffawed. “Oh, Sarah, you are so funny.”

“Yes. I had no notice of this event, and there is nothing suitable in my wardrobe.”

He abandoned his breakfast, stood, then indicated for me to do the same. “We shall examine your clothing. You must have several dresses which will make you the most beautiful woman there.”

He led me up the stairs, my heart heavy with dread.

Jeffrey examined my selection of garments. “What about this one?”

He held up a divine blue linen dress, perfect for a lawn party, but since I had no inclination to be anywhere near the event, I vetoed it. He chose another, and a naughty idea came to me.

“That one is nice. Perhaps I should try it on?” I turned, so he could assist me in undressing.

“Ah, Yankee girl, you are determined to distract me this morning.” Despite his protests, he made short work of the task then held out the dress for me to step into.

Ignoring his efforts to clothe me, I moved close to him, slid my hands the length of his torso, and pushed the jacket off his shoulders. “You are wearing too many clothes, my darling.” I used my most seductive tone.

“The rule only applies to you, little one.” Though he did not resist my efforts.

“Oh, I understand the rules.” I skimmed my fingertips from his shoulders to his wrists, opening his cuffs before moving to the front closure of his shirt. “But that does not mean we cannot break some rules as well.”

I grasped the hem of his shirt and tugged upward. He dipped his head to accommodate my smaller stature. His shirt joined my dress on the floor.

“Are you trying to seduce me, Yankee girl?”

In a fit of boldness fueled by desperation, I clasped the front of his pants, cupping his firm shaft in my hand. “I believe I am succeeding, your grace.” I gave a meaningful

squeeze, which was rewarded when he lifted me into his arms and pushed me down into the softness of our marriage bed.

“Lady Buckland will not mind if we are a few minutes late. We are newlyweds, after all,” Jeffrey rasped into my ear.

Despite my seduction, the Duke would not be deterred. Shortly after our tryst, I found myself seated in the Amherst family carriage en route to the Buckland estate.

“I am sure you will enjoy yourself today.” Jeffrey spoke animatedly. “Lady Buckland is quite a character. Her daughters, Lady Hampshire and Lady Suffield, are lively and charming. I think you will enjoy making their acquaintance.”

Oh, we’re acquainted all right . A shudder ran through my body. “I look forward to meeting them.”

What did my mother always say? Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.

The web of deceit had a stranglehold on me that tightened with each turn of the carriage wheels until I feared I would faint.

“You are very serious, little wife.” Jeffrey tipped his hat to a passing carriage, no doubt another couple en route to the Bucklands’ soiree. “Are you unwell?”

I forced a smile. “I am fine, thank you, my dear. Is it not a lovely day?”

“Yes, it is a lovely day, which is why I find it odd that you appear to be scowling and deep in thought.” He tapped his finger on my knee. “Remember...no secrets. So, tell me what is on your mind, Sarah girl.”

My husband had a wide range of nicknames for me, some more appealing than others, but each of them made my tummy tighten a bit with their possessiveness. Whenever he simply called me “Sarah,” I wondered if he was upset with me.

He touched my thigh and squeezed until I met his gaze. “Out with it, or I will take you over my knee to spank the truth from you right here.”

Perhaps having such an attentive and perceptive spouse had some disadvantages.

I clasped my hands tightly together in my lap and stared at them, not daring to look him in the eye. “What if your friends will not accept an American as your wife?”

The oh-so-proper Duke of Amherst cursed under his breath. I snapped my head around to stare at him. His expression went dark. I immediately regretted saying anything, but the words could not be unsaid, so I braced myself for his reply.

He took a deep breath. “I have chosen you as my wife. Nothing else matters.”

I envied his confidence.

We arrived at the Bucklands’ estate, and I prepared to meet my fate.

CHAPTER 23

“I do not know why you were worried.” Jeffrey handed me a cup of lemonade. “Everyone adores you.”

I had managed to avoid Lady Buckland as well as her daughters and also spoke as little as possible.

“Yes, it has been lovely, as you predicted it would be.” I fanned myself. “I am becoming fatigued. Shall we not go home?”

“We have had a busy day.” He grinned at me. “But it would be rude to leave before introducing you to our hostess.”

“We are newlyweds. Surely, no one would fault us for not staying the entire day?” I tilted my head to give him my most coquettish smile.

“Who am I to say no to such an offer?” He touched my elbow and guided me away from the crowd.

For the first time in hours, I breathed normally. Just a few yards until we would be inside our carriage and on our way to the security of Bradford Hall. I tugged on Jeffrey’s arm.

“Slow down, my girl. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but it would be quite rude to be seen running from a party.”

The driver and footmen, noticing our approach, snapped to attention. When a footman opened the carriage door, I was tempted to dive in headfirst.

“Yooohooo! Your grace!”

My heart slammed in my chest. I tried to pretend I had not heard, but Jeffrey halted his progress.

“Lady Hampshire.” He bowed. “How nice to see you.”

“Good afternoon, your grace. I am pleased you were able to attend, after all.”

My husband quirked an eyebrow. “Are you ladies acquainted?” He glanced from me to Lady Hampshire then back again.

“Oh, yes!” The enthusiastic lady gushed. “I have so enjoyed her company.” She smiled at me then turned to Jeffrey. “Can you believe people were saying she was an American?”

He opened his mouth to respond. Closed it. Looked at me meaningfully while my eyes pleaded with him not to say what I knew was on his mind.

“My wife is an American.” Jeffrey bowed to her and compelled me into the carriage.

A hundred excuses burst through my mind, but I dared not give voice to any of them.

Jeffrey sat, stone faced and silent.

A tear formed in the corner of my left eye then trickled down my cheek. Flicking it away, I prayed Jeffrey did not notice. That prayer, like so many others in my life, went unfulfilled.

“Are you crying, little Sarah?”

I sniffed and flicked away another tear that snuck out and traveled down my cheek. “No. I am not crying. There is an abundance of dust in the air. The British do not know how to control such things. I am sure British ladies are used to dust, but I am not.”

When the carriage slowed to allow for another equipage to cross in front of us, I took the opportunity to bolt out the door, across the road, then into one of the gardens of the Buckland estate. It felt good to run, though I must have made quite a spectacle with my hat tipped askew while my skirts billowed out behind me. My husband called after me, but I kept running. Finally, I stopped, panting and winded, to lean against a tree to catch my breath. It had been ages since I had exerted myself in such a manner, and a severe stitch attacked my side. I pressed my hand against it in hopes of stemming the ache.

I ignored the ache in my heart.

More tears streamed down my face. As I scrubbed them away with my palms, I cursed the British and their dusty roadbeds. In all my travels, I never encountered such untidy roadways.

Once my breathing calmed, I sat upon a garden bench to consider my options. Much as I told myself I wished to be alone, I glanced about, expecting Jeffrey to come bursting through the hedgerow searching for me, but when he did not, my heart panged anew.

“I bet he would go running after an English lady,” I said to myself.

“An English lady would not go darting out into traffic, startling a team of horses, as well as terrifying her husband.” Jeffrey’s stern voice was music to my ears, and I

smiled up at him, despite the unhappy expression on his face.

“There is no reason for you to look so happy, little miss, for I intend to spank your sweet Yankee ass until it is the color of the cross on the Union Jack.”

“I-I did not expect you to come after me.” Truly, I had not. His appearance shocked and thrilled me.

“Are you not my wife?” Jeffrey stared down at me, and heat rushed to my face.

“Yes,” I responded, though the answer was rather obvious.

“Then why would you not expect me to come after you? Who else is going to keep an eye on you, my little hellion?”

“Is that all I am to you? Just a bit of entertainment, a poorly behaved Yankee for you to taunt until she misbehaves and gives you a reason to spank her?”

The corners of his mouth turned up. “I am your husband. I need no reason to spank you, though you certainly provide ample excuses for discipline.”

“How fortunate for you, your grace.”

Jeffrey folded his arms across his broad chest, tilted his head, and smiled down at me. “I think it is very fortunate for me. Whether you agree or not remains to be seen. Now, go find a switch so we can get your punishment completed and return home before nightfall.”

A switch? My heart plunged to my toes while blood pounded in my ears. “Surely you are not in earnest, Jeffrey. Anyone might happen by and see us here.”

“I would dare say you are correct, little wife. In fact, I heard a bit of rustling in the bushes a moment ago. I am sure Lady Hampshire has already revealed your true heritage to the party guests, who no doubt saw you running away from our carriage. They will be disappointed if we do not provide a show for them.”

“No.” I stood to face him. “I will not. This is ridiculous. Take me home this instant.” I stomped my little foot as though it would have an impact on the implacable Duke of Amherst.

Well, it did, only not in the manner I intended. He clasped my arm and pulled me up against his firm chest. Instinctively, I tipped my head back, waiting for a kiss. Instead, he tweaked my nose, turned me away from him then swatted my bottom. “Switch. Now.”

Any thrill I got from being pursued disappeared when he pushed me away from him.

“Make it a good one, or I will select one myself,” he called after me as I stumbled toward the bushes.

By the time I emerged from the shrubbery with a switch in hand, my hair hung in loose clumps around my face, my hat had disappeared, and my shoes were covered in grime.

Jeffrey’s gaze scorched up and down my disheveled, unladylike appearance, and fresh tears stung my eyes. Who could have stirred up dust in the middle of a garden?

“Come along.” He grasped my elbow to escort me from the privacy of the clearing onto the roadway where our carriage awaited. We emerged from the shrubbery, the switch clasped in my hand, to snickers and cheers from the partygoers who moved quickly to take in our spat.

My head hung low in shame, but I chanced a glance from beneath my lashes and spotted Lady Hampshire along with her sister at the forefront of the audience. They both appeared highly amused.

I redirected my view to the ground and kept it there until Jeffrey handed me into the carriage. Once inside, I stared at my lap, including the switch he laid there.

“You’ll be feeling those branches once we get home, little miss. Until then, I want you to hold the instrument of your punishment while you consider the seriousness of your behavior.”

“I am sorry, Jeffrey.” I did not raise my gaze from the implement held in my sweaty palms.

“What yarn did you spin for Lady Hampshire to make her believe you were British?”

I worried my lip between my teeth for a moment. “It was unintentional. Please believe me. But on my arrival at her house, the maid said everyone was shocked you married an American. I did not want people to think poorly of you, and somehow when I opened my mouth to speak, a British accent came out.”

I peeked up at Jeffrey to gauge his reaction.

“British accent?”

“Yes. Like this. The pahk in Lancashah is divine .”

He covered his mouth with his hand for a moment. “Is that the same way you spoke to Lady Hampshire?”

“Yes, I could not believe I fooled them.”

“It is surprising.” He stared out the window, his jaw clenched tightly and his hand covering his mouth. He appeared to strain for control of what might come from his mouth.

His silence worried me.

He turned back to me. “You have earned yourself quite a punishment, Sarah girl.”

“Is not my utter humiliation enough punishment?”

“That is a start. But in addition to your ruse, you endangered your life by running between carriages. What if you had spooked the horses or injured others?”

“Maybe you should have left me in the garden. You would be happier without me, would you not?” I held my breath. Would he send me back to America?

“We shall discuss all of these things once we are alone. Until then, not another word from you on any topic until I give my permission. Understood?”

Tears again stung my eyes. His lack of a denial meant only one thing—he wished to be rid of me. By the time my punishment ended, my luggage would be packed and I would be banished from Bradford Hall.

I could not blame him. This was all my own doing. I stared out the window at the countryside and mourned the loss of my marriage.

When we arrived at Bradford Hall, a maid assisted me with removing my wrap and reached for the branch in my hand. “Thank you, Martha, but Lady Amherst is not to let go of that switch until I give permission.”

My face flushed with embarrassment. The maid opened her mouth in shock but

closed it before saying anything.

Jeffrey, calm as you please, touched my elbow, guided me up the stairs and down the long hall to his bedchamber. He pointed to the wooden bench at the foot of his bed. “Sit.”

I did as I was bid and placed the switch across my lap as I had in the carriage.

An assortment of emotions swirled in my brain, but when the click of the locked door echoed through the room, my thoughts became very focused. For the first time since this horrid incident began, the full measure of my pending punishment became clear.

I stared at the switch. My imagination conjured the swish it would make in the air before it cracked across my bottom. Each little crook and knot would sear my tender flesh.

My cheeks clenched against the hard wood of the bench.

And after that, I would never see Jeffrey again. What man wants a wife who embarrasses him amongst his friends? Divorce was out of the question but I would not be the first wife sent off to live a life separate from her husband.

He took the switch from me, retrieved a knife from his writing desk, then began to strip away the bark. Fascination coupled with horror gripped me as each talon of bark revealed the supple branch beneath.

As he pulled off each sliver of covering, he dropped them to the floor. A small pile of curling bark formed near his feet.

“I am sorely disappointed in you, Sarah.” Although I was instructed not to talk, the rule did not apply to Jeffrey who lectured as he worked.

No doubt his words were true since he simply called me Sarah.

“Why would you pretend to be someone else? How could you lie? I thought you were proud to be an American.”

For once, I abided by his rule and said nothing, though my stomach knotted and my heart squeezed with despair.

When he finished his task, he flicked his wrist back and forth. The switch whistled ominously through the air.

“I think it will do nicely.” He turned his focus to me. “It appears you have been pretending to be an English lady rather than an American, is that correct?”

I nodded.

“You did this because you feared you would not be accepted as an American?”

I nodded again.

“Are you saying, by choosing you as my wife, I have shown a lack of judgment?”

I shrugged. Pointed to my sealed lips.

“Yes, you may speak now.”

“You had no choice but to marry me.” I swiped at a miserable tear on my cheek.

“Is that what you believe?”

“It is true, is it not?” I whispered. “If I had not caused a scandal, you would not have

married me. You would not have even paid attention to me.”

Jeffrey stared. “Has nothing that I have said or done since our engagement penetrated your stubborn Yankee brain?” He raked his hand through his hair in exasperation. “Apparently, the only thing you understand is punishment. Stand up.”

I complied. As he assisted me in removing my clothes, I watched his eyes, hoping for a glimmer of affection or desire as my body was revealed to him, but he remained aloof. My emotions spun with dread and despondency. My heart fluttered. My lips quivered.

He handed me the switch. “Bend over and give yourself five licks with the switch.”

I glared, dumbfounded. “Do you not even care enough to discipline me yourself?”

Dejected and angry, I bent so my tail was on full display for him. Before I could change my mind or say more to get myself into trouble, I did as he bade.

I gripped the switch, the smooth wood pressing against my palm, closed my eyes, and gave myself a swat. Although my position, as well as being forced to punish myself for his view, humiliated me, the pain did not rise to my expectations. The sting lingered. I quickly gave myself the remaining four strokes, counting down as I did so, my tone none too subdued. Once the required number was laid across my backside, I straightened to stare at my husband, chin lifted in defiance.

He signaled me to turn away from him then inspected my handiwork. He used his finger to trace across the area where the branch marked my bottom. “You did a fine job for a beginner, my dear, now let us get on with the real discipline.”

Although angry, hurt, and confused by all that transpired, when Jeffrey said ‘my dear,’ my heart sang with delight.

He sat on the wooden bench then pulled me to stand between his knees. Given his tall stature compared to my petite one, we were nearly eye-to-eye. He still held the switch, so he used the tip to draw a lazy circle around first one breast then the other. As he did so, his eyes darkened with passion. His breathing became less steady and, despite his efforts to appear calm, the evidence proved otherwise. I was not unaffected, either. Telltale moisture gathered in my lady parts, and my nipples puckered.

He guided me over his lap where further evidence of his arousal pressed against my side. It pleased and gratified me to know he wanted me. Hope glimmered at the remote chance he would not banish me.

He situated me across his hard thighs then traced his fingers over the areas I had spanked moments before. "Listen carefully, little wife, for we shall discuss this topic only once. After that it shall be closed forever, do you understand me?"

I nodded, and he whipped my derriere with the switch. "Speak aloud."

"I understand."

Another stripe crossed both cheeks of my bottom. "I never intended to marry an American. I was raised to believe only a proper English girl could be my bride."

I gasped. My body stiffened. I knew it .

"Frankly, I had no desire to marry, though it was expected of me. I had not been out in society for several weeks, when finally, my friend Puffington persuaded me to go to Lady Waterford's ball. I looked around the room at all the staid English young ladies standing about hoping to find a wealthy mate, and I was disgusted."

Jeffrey had an uncanny ability to discipline and lecture simultaneously. Without a

pause, he punished my backside repeatedly with the switch. It swished through the air, and I tensed with each impact, but he continued.

“In fact”—he laid a biting swat across the underside of both cheeks—“I was in a foul mood and on the verge of leaving when a very pretty upstart young American girl tapped me on the shoulder to challenge my statement about her country.”

I gasped, not from the lashes across my thighs, though they stung like the dickens, but because of what Jeffrey said about our first encounter. I never expected his recounting to flatter me in any way.

“Once I saw her defiant expression, all thoughts of any other woman, regardless of where she was from or how she spoke, vanished from my mind.”

“No!” I gasped again.

“Are you calling me a liar, little hellcat?” He slapped the switch to my bare skin again and again, making it even more difficult for me to think.

“No. Yes. I do not know.” I could not reconcile his affectionate description of our first meeting with the burn he continued to inflict on my tender flesh. Though hope glimmered that he might not dismiss me from his life, the pain scorching my lower half made it difficult to believe he meant to keep me around. As far as I could tell, I had been nothing but a problem for him.

“Is it so hard to believe I was captivated the moment I saw you?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“You are a stubborn Yankee.”

The pace of my punishment increased. I kicked my legs in an effort to make him stop, but he simply clamped his thigh over mine and continued.

“Do I have to spank it into you that I love you?”

I gasped and tried to glance around at Jeffrey’s face, but he pressed my shoulders to keep my head down. I stared at the floor while he continued to show his love by blistering my bottom.

He finished with a flurry of whipping slaps to my thighs and buttocks, but I barely felt anything, so stunned was I by the course of our conversation. He scooped me up and laid me on the bed. I buried my face in his pillow, inhaled deeply of his scent then hugged the pillow close to my chest. I tried to make sense of what he had said. Surely, he could not be serious. How could anyone be captivated by a person in an instant?

But then I remembered the same moment, as well as the sensation that had zipped through my body when he turned toward me. Did he experience something similar?

I felt his weight next to me on the bed. A cool ointment soothed my heated buttocks. His fingers stroked across my aching flesh, and the sting there lessened. The sting in my heart was a little harder to define or calculate, though it seemed to diminish as well.

“I did not know you felt that way.” The pillow muffled my words.

“Why do you think I married you, poppet?” His voice was warm and gentle, like his touch on my backside.

I slid my legs apart in invitation.

“Ah, you naughty girl.” Jeffrey tapped against my outer thigh. “You keep your naughty bits out of my sight until we finish this conversation. How can you expect me to form coherent words when you are taunting me with your wanton ways?”

The affection in his tone warmed me. I smiled into the pillow.

“I married you,” he said, determined to finish this conversation, “because I wanted to, and not a moment since then has caused me to question my choice. Do I make myself clear?”

“I-I think so.”

“You are my wife. I have chosen you to be my wife, and I am grateful every day I did not choose a proper English girl. My heart is at the mercy of a spirited, disobedient, sassy Yankee girl who has captured my love.”

I rolled over to look at him. Shock registered across my entire countenance as I stared into the face of my husband.

He tweaked my nose. “Is it so hard to believe, Sarah girl, that I could love you?”

There must have been an excessive amount of dust in the room because tears streamed down both my cheeks. I made a note to speak to the housekeeper about it.

I reached up to brush away the pesky tears, but Jeffrey grasped my wrists, held them behind my back then lowered his face and kissed them away.

EPILOGUE

“Usually Mother’s parties are so dull.” Lady Hampshire perched on the edge of the divan in the parlor of Bradford Hall, nibbling a piece of pineapple. “But you made this year’s the best yet.”

“I can hardly wait to see what you do next year.” Obviously, Lady Suffield enjoyed my discomfort.

“I thought for sure you would despise me for lying to you.” I looked from one sister to the other.

“Oh, Lady Amherst,” Lady Hampshire laughed. “Your accent was so bad. We all knew you were lying, but it was so entertaining, we simply did not have the heart to call your bluff.”

“But what of what your mother said about not wanting to be polite to a Yank?”

The sisters laughed. “No one loves a good prank as much as Mother. When I told her about your deplorable accent, she begged me to bring her along on my call.”

“Perhaps I should be angry with the two of you.” I scowled. “Do you know how much I worried before the party?”

“Not to mention the spanking you must have gotten.” Lady Suffield giggled.

“I saw the switch in your hand when you got back into your carriage,” Lady

Hampshire said. “I hope your punishment was not too severe.”

I smiled at my two new friends. “Well, let’s just say I will not attempt to be anyone other than myself from now on.”