

Duke Number Five
A Survivors Short Story and Prologue

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Part I: The Wanton Widow

Lord Phineas Duncombe, fifth son of the Duke of Mayne, had one duty—to keep his brother alive. It was no easy task as Richard Duncombe, fourth son of the Duke of Mayne and now the duke himself, was what Phineas termed an idiot. Richard drank too much, gambled too much, whored too much, and generally involved himself in pursuits that tended to lead to violent and premature death.

Avoiding said premature death was the sole reason Phineas was attending a ball in London two days before Christmas instead of taking his ease, warm and cozy, at the family pile in West Sussex, where his mother and two sisters had already gathered and were undoubtedly wondering when the men of the family would make an appearance.

Phineas stood against the wall of the card room, his eyes watering from the smoke emanating from a dozen cheroots and several pipes, and watched his older brother lose at piquet. Piquet, for God's sake. It was a child's game. Phineas knew this well as earlier that evening he'd played it in the drawing room with the son of one of the ladies who worked in the brothel Richard had visited. The boy had beat him because Phineas had let the lad win. If Richard couldn't win at piquet, he should avoid the card room altogether.

Phineas heard the strains of the orchestra and rather wished his brother might put down the cards and the bottle of brandy and play at charming the ladies for an hour or so. Phineas rather liked charming ladies, and he also liked dancing. But there were no ladies or dancing to be had in the gentleman's card room.

Why couldn't Ernest be the brother Phin had to keep alive? Ernest had enjoyed reading and sketching. Ernest had been easy to keep alive. Phineas should have been more careful with Ernest. He should have insisted the third son of the Duke of Mayne stay inside during the cold weather of early December. But then there had been two

brothers ahead of Phin in line for the title, and he hadn't been overly worried. All of that had changed when Ernest slipped on a patch of ice, fell, and hit his head so hard he was dead instantly.

What were the odds? Death by ice. It seemed incredible. And, of course, Ernest's death meant Richard was now the duke and somehow Phineas had become the spare. And Phineas intended to remain the spare, too. He did not want the responsibility that came with the ducal title. Estates to manage, tenants to oversee, laws to vote for or against—none of these tasks suited Phineas. Thus, his mission tonight...and probably every night for the rest of his life. Depressing thought that it was.

A hand clapped on his shoulder, and Phineas sighed when he saw it belonged to the Earl of Annesley, who had been a friend of his brother Phillip—or was it George? “You're moving up in the world, eh, Duncombe?” He blew smoke in Phineas's face, and Phineas attempted not to cough.

“If you're implying the death of my brother Ernest earlier this month is something I celebrate—”

“Not at all!” He leaned close, his breath smelling of port. “But you must admit, you probably never expected to be this close to the title.”

“I never *wanted* to be this close to the title,” Phineas retorted.

Annesley clapped him on the back again. “No, no! Of course not.” But his tone was that of one placating a child.

Still, the earl was correct that Phin had never expected to inherit the title. His father, the fourth Duke of Mayne, had died quite suddenly when Phineas was eighteen. He'd been at the dinner table, enjoying his meal, when he'd clutched at his heart, turned purple, and passed away even before a doctor could be called for.

Brother Phillip, who *had* been expected to become the duke one day, became the fifth Duke of Mayne. He'd lasted six years. He'd even married and had children, none of whom had survived past their first year, unfortunately. And then one summer day Phillip had decided to go swimming in the pond the boys hadn't swum in since they'd been children, and the next morning Phillip's body had been found bloated and floating close to the shore.

Phillip's drowning had set off small alarms in Phineas's mind, but not so many that he renounced his career in the army. He did avoid swimming for some time, however.

And so brother George had become the sixth Duke of Mayne. George had always been a bit of a hothead. He had a ferocious temper, and Phineas was relatively certain he beat his wife and caused her to miscarry at least once. But the duchess would say nothing against her husband, and Phineas was rarely home to observe or intervene in the relationship. George had lasted five years. He died in a duel over some misunderstanding at his club—Phineas was still not clear what exactly that misunderstanding had been—leaving his wife a widow without issue and Ernest, he of the slippery ice, duke.

By then Phineas had been nine and twenty and part of the elite troop fighting Napoleon on the Continent under Lieutenant Colonel Draven. The troop called themselves the Expendables because they were all younger sons who were not needed to carry on the family name or inherit the title. Phineas had felt a little less expendable after George's death, but Ernest was so unlike George that Phineas really hadn't worried.

Ernest had been only thirty-three, unmarried as he was relatively shy, but a man who did not like duels and certainly never had the asinine notion to go swimming alone in a pond.

And then there had been the ice.

At the funeral, Anne, the daughter who had been born between Ernest and Richard, had remarked that if women were allowed to inherit she would be the next in line for the title. Phineas had thought the idea brilliant and had been trying to convince Richard to introduce it for debate when the Lords reconvened. Anne had children. If Anne inherited the title, Phineas would be safe.

Instead, he was stuck with the idiot Richard who seemed intent on living fast and dangerous. If the man would at least marry and have a son before he got himself killed, that would be something.

"You know what they are calling the title, don't you?" Annesley asked, calling Phineas's attention back to him. Phin had been trying to forget the earl was there.

"I have no interest in such matters," Phin said because he didn't and also because he already knew. Philomena, his younger sister, had told him.

“The Cursed Dukedom.”

“Is that the best the *ton* can do?” Phin replied. “There’s no alliteration, no rhyme.”

The earl raised his brows. “You think you can do better?”

“Naturally. One might call it the Doomed Dukedom or the call my brother the Fluke Duke or—call me Phin the *Fin*.”

“That’s rather good. Because you’re the last brother.”

Phineas pointed at him in acknowledgement.

“And *fin* is Latin for *end*.”

“Nothing gets past you,” Phineas drawled.

Suddenly a chair across the room toppled over, and Richard, face florid, rose to his feet. The eighth Duke of Mayne pointed at the man seated across the table from him. Phineas didn’t know the man, but he thought he might be the son of a viscount or baron.

“If you’re so confident,” Richard said, his words slurred, “then let’s wager on it.”

“I don’t like to wager on ladies,” the viscount or baron’s son retorted.

“Excuse me.” Phineas made his way to his brother’s side in a near sprint.

“Afraid you’ll lose, eh?” Richard taunted.

“Actually, I have to agree with Mr...?”

“Denny,” the man supplied. He was probably close to Phineas’s own age of two and thirty, tall and clear-eyed.

“I agree with Mr. Denny.” Phin put his hand on Richard’s shoulder. “It’s in poor taste to wager on ladies.”

Richard shrugged his hand off. “I didn’t ask you, *Perfect* Phineas. Go run home to Mama if you don’t want to play with the big boys.”

Considering Richard was only two years his senior, Phineas did not take the directive seriously.

“Besides,” Richard continued, “we’re all friends here. We can keep a little wager secret, can’t we, boys?”

Phineas rolled his eyes. The wager would be public knowledge before the cock crowed.

“I still think it’s in bad taste,” Denny argued.

“Why? She’s no lady, not really. Everyone knows she’s spread her legs for half the men at this ball. I even heard rumors she let her own manservants tup her.”

“Might I ask who you are speaking of?” Phineas asked.

“Why? You haven’t tupp’d her. Didn’t even want a whore at Mrs. Swan’s tonight.”

A few of the men chuckled.

“Call me a fool, but I’d rather not die of the pox.”

“Mrs. Swan’s girls are clean!” Richard roared. Phineas winced. His brother really was quite foxed. It would have been best if he could have persuaded Richard to go home and to bed now, but drink only made Richard belligerent.

“I’m sure they are. I’ve never met a bawd whose girls weren’t clean as the new fallen snow.”

That ended the chuckles.

“Ignore my *virgin* brother,” Richard said loudly.

Phineas wasn’t a virgin, but he didn’t correct his brother. No doubt Richard considered any man who couldn’t count his intimate encounters in double digits virginal.

“I say we wager. First man to roger Lady Longstowe wins fifty pounds,” Richard said.

“Not much confidence in your prowess, have you?” Denny tossed back. “Why not make it a hundred?”

Why not gamble the whole estate away why he was a it? Phineas was disgusted with his brother, and not for the first time.

Richard held out his hand, and Denny rose and took it. The two men shook.

“When does the contest for the lady’s affections begin?” Richard asked.

“Why not tonight?” someone called. “The Wanton Widow is here.”

This caused a hum of voices. Phineas had not heard of Lady Longstowe, but he knew of the Wanton Widow. She was said to be extremely beautiful. She’d been quite young when she’d been married to a marquess—presumably Longstowe—and the man had kept her out of Town and thus away from corruption. But Longstowe had passed away a few years ago, and the lady had made her way into Society. Apparently, all those years in seclusion had made her curious. She did have quite the reputation for taking

lovers. She was known as wanton because she never took the same lover twice. A man had one night with her and then she was done with him forever.

“Then why are we still in here?” Richard bellowed. “To the ballroom!” He led the charge of men interested in the wager, while those left behind reseated themselves and began their games anew. Phineas would have liked to stay behind., but he couldn’t very well keep his brother alive if he didn’t stay close to his side.

And, truth be told, he was curious to have a look at Lady Longstowe. He hadn’t known her when she’d come out as she was more than a decade older than he, and though he liked to attend balls and other *ton* functions, they clearly did not have the same set of acquaintances as he’d never been introduced to her.

At least he was free of the card room.

He followed the other men trailing toward the ballroom and looked about for his brother. He was speaking with the hostess, Lady Houghton. She was tittering loudly, so clearly Richard was telling her of his scheme.

Mr. Denny, on the other hand, had another idea. He had approached a woman on the other side of the room. Phineas couldn’t see her as too many people stood between them, but he spotted Denny’s bright blond hair quickly enough and could see he was speaking with a woman by the flash of her fan and the glimpses of her red skirt. The notorious Lady Longstowe?

Phineas didn’t particularly care what Denny did. It was Richard he had to worry about. He made his way closer to Richard, intercepting a footman with a tray of champagne and shooing him away before he could offer Richard more to drink.

The orchestra began to play a new song

“She’s dancing with Denny!” Richard whined.

Phineas, who was standing behind Richard, cursed. Now Richard’s pride had been challenged and he would never give up on the quest for the lady.

“We’ll intercept them after the dance, and I’ll introduce you,” Lady Houghton promised.

“That’s if Denny doesn’t lure her into the gardens.” Richard pouted.

“It’s freezing outside,” Lady Houghton pointed out. “There is nothing amorous about shivering from the cold during lovemaking, I assure you.”

Thank God the lady had pointed that out else Phineas would have had to spend the rest of the evening in the cold, making sure his brother's pursuit of the widow didn't lead to him dying of frostbite or slipping on ice or being hit on the head with an icicle.

Lady Houghton moved aside to speak with another guest, and Phineas slid beside Richard. "I'll give you a hundred pounds if you leave right now," he said.

Richard scowled at him. "And forfeit the wager? I think not."

"You've already had a woman tonight. What's one more? Besides we have to spend all day in the coach tomorrow on the way to the old pile. I always get a crick in my neck when I try to sleep in the coach."

"Then go home," Richard said impatiently. "I don't want you here."

"And yet, in light of our brothers' early demise, I feel as though I should stay and keep an eye on you."

Richard laughed. "Worried you'll end up the duke? I don't foresee that happening. I thought for sure when Ernest was made duke I had no chance at all, but now that I have the fortune and the town house, the servants, and the rest of it at my disposal, I have no intention of dying any time soon. I certainly wouldn't be so stupid as to crack my head open on ice or drown in a pond. For God's sake, the pond isn't even six feet deep!"

"Forgive me for pointing out that reckless wagers and over imbibing do not inspire confidence."

"I can hold my liquor and I have a much longer fuse than George. Never fought a duel and never plan to. You can go home, *Perfect*. I have a seduction to see to."

Phineas stepped back again. Perhaps he should go home. After all, how much danger could Richard face from a woman? Considering how promiscuous she was, she probably had the pox, but then Richard had dipped his wick in a whore every night Phineas had been in his company, so if Richard was to acquire the pox, he probably already had.

Besides, the pox took years to kill a man. Surely Richard would marry and have a son before then.

But Phineas didn't leave. Instead, he stepped back and watched the dancers finish the quadrille. Denny was indeed dancing with a woman in a scarlet gown. Phineas had a

glimpse of the bright gown as well as glossy red hair. He didn't try very hard to see her face, instead scanning the other guests for anyone he might know or wish to speak to.

He spotted another retired army officer and made his way to him, spending the next twenty minutes recalling campaigns and battles. When he glanced at his brother again, Lady Houghton was introducing him to the lady in red.

He had a view of her in profile. She was taller than average and curvaceous. Her head was inclined slightly, so he did not see much of her face, but her red hair was glossy and quite bright. She wore a headpiece of gleaming jet, which her hair all but outshone. Richard was speaking, and she seemed intent on what he was saying until Lady Houghton erupted into laughter and the Wanton Widow smiled and looked away.

That was when the world stopped.

That was when all the air rushed out of the room.

That was when Phineas Duncombe, fifth son of the Duke of Mayne, forgot to breathe.

Her smile faded as soon as she looked away from Richard. She obviously didn't find him very amusing. In fact, she looked rather annoyed. Well, in truth, she looked beautiful. She didn't have the youthful beauty of a debutante or even a young wife. Lady Longstowe had a mature beauty that was surely less fleeting. Her red hair was swept off her forehead, emphasizing her auburn brows and lashes that framed eyes a bright blue. She had a small nose, a full mouth, and an oval face. He couldn't stop his gaze dipping to her décolletage, and then it was rather hard to look away because it was quite an impressive sight to behold.

When he did finally raise his gaze, he found her eyes were on him. He felt heat rush to his face and before he could stop himself, smiled sheepishly. She gave him a dismissive look and turned back to Lady Houghton and Richard.

Phineas had wanted to kick himself. He'd been an utter arse. First, he'd stared at her like a drooling schoolboy, then instead of winking or flirting in some way, he'd acted ashamed. What was wrong with him? He was usually so charming with ladies. Then again, he'd never seen a woman like Lady Longstowe. She was no young miss who fluttered her lashes and dropped her fan for a man's attention. Lady Longstowe was...she was amazing.

He wanted her, which was clearly out of the question as his brother was already pursuing her. As though to punctuate that point, Richard led the lady to the center of the ballroom, where a waltz had just begun to play. Phineas watched them dance. Richard and he had shared a dance teacher, which meant Richard danced quite well, even this far into his cups. Lady Longstowe was the picture of grace, looking up into Richard's face even as the duke leered down at her bosom.

Just as Phineas had.

God, he was no better than his lecherous brother.

Phineas looked about for someone to talk to or a chit to dance with—anything to take his mind off his brother and the Wanton Widow—but he saw no one who interested him in the slightest. And so he watched his brother drool and paw Lady Longstowe for one dance and then another. By the end of the second dance, Phineas was ready to smash Richard's nose flat.

Which was absurd, really. Who was Lady Longstowe to him? She was at least a decade his senior. Certainly, she could take care of herself. And if she was the kind of woman charmed by Richard, then she was not at all to his taste.

When Richard left Lady Longstowe's side to fetch her a glass of champagne from a footman, Phineas intercepted him. "You've had your fun now, Richard. Let's go home."

"Don't be daft, Perfect," Richard said, pushing past Phineas. "The fun is just beginning." He took a champagne glass and handed it to Phineas. "Have another drink and dance with one of the wallflowers. The night is young." Richard took two more glasses and started back toward Lady Longstowe.

"I don't want a drink, and I don't want to dance." Phineas walked after his brother. "We have a long day of travel tomorrow. I will call for the coach, and if you aren't in the vestibule in a quarter hour, you'll have to walk home."

"Capital idea!" Richard said, holding one of the glasses aloft. "Take the carriage home. I'm certain I'll be riding home with the Wanton Widow tonight. In fact, I may ride *her* all the way home!" He roared with laughter and walked away from Phineas, who stood in the center of the ballroom seething.

Phineas looked down at his champagne. He did not want the beverage. He did not want to attend this ball. What he did want was one night where he did not have to trail his brother. One night where he could climb into his own bed before dawn and not go to sleep with the knowledge that he'd wake midday with a splitting head.

He looked over at Richard again and caught Lady Longstowe's gaze. Her eyes, so blue against the pale complexion typical to redheads, were fastened on him. Phineas's heart jumped, and before he could think what to do, she looked away again.

Back at his brother.

That was it. Let her have the idiot. There was no danger at this ball, and if Richard went home with Lady Longstowe and spent the night in her bed, he'd be in no mortal danger there either.

Phineas set his full champagne glass on the tray of a passing footman and walked out of the ballroom.

Part II: The Duke

Phineas waited until almost noon before he took the ducal coach and started for Southmead Cottage, the estate of the dukes of Mayne, in West Sussex. The weather was cold but clear, and the roads would be good. Still, he wanted to arrive before nightfall. It was Christmas Eve, after all.

Of course, his idiot brother would not oblige him. Richard's valet said his master had returned about four in the morning and gone straight to bed. That was good news. Richard had survived another night. But despite Phineas badgering Richard's valet several times to wake the duke, Richard would not rise from bed. At one point, his curses were so loud, Phineas heard them all the way across the ducal town house.

And so, once again, Phineas had been forced to set out on his own. His brother could take another conveyance or ride his horse. Or he could stay in London, for all Phineas cared. Not that Phin left everything to chance. He spoke with the grooms and instructed the best to accompany his brother when he was ready to depart. He spoke to Richard's valet and ordered him to insure his brother was warmly dressed and sober enough to ride. If Richard was not feeling well, the butler, who Phin also pulled aside, was to put Richard in a carriage, no matter what objections Richard made.

His nanny duties accomplished, Phineas stepped into the ducal carriage, placed his feet on the warm brick on the floor and closed his eyes. If the head that wore the crown was heavy, the head of the next-in-line was blissfully light. And that was how Phineas intended to keep it.

He arrived at Southmead Cottage just in time to change for dinner. He'd been given the green room, which was one of the smaller rooms, but the one he always occupied when the family was at Southmead. To call the house a cottage was a bit of a

misnomer. It might have begun as a cottage when the oldest section had been built—sometime in the seventeenth century—but after a century of additions and improvements, the sprawling building was more castle than cottage. Still, it always felt more like home than the town house in London. Phineas changed quickly and went down to the drawing room, where his nieces and nephews begged him to give them horsey rides.

Phineas obliged them, and when his back began to hurt, he joined his sisters, his mother, and his brother-in-law for a celebratory glass of Madeira.

“Where is Richard?” John, Anne’s husband and Phineas’s brother-in-law, asked with a tone of resignation.

“He was out late, as usual, and couldn’t be roused from bed. I’m sure he’ll be here before we finish dinner.”

His mother gave a worrying look at the windows. “But it’s growing dark outside.”

Phineas was worried too, but he refused to allow the idiot ruin Christmas Eve for him. “The roads are good, and I instructed the best grooms to accompany him. Except for a headache from overindulgence in drink, Richard will arrive hale and hearty.”

The gong sounded then, and the company went down to dinner.

After dinner, while the ladies sipped tea and the men port, Philomena begged Anne to allow the children to open the presents she had bought them before the little ones were put to bed. Anne’s children, looking adorable in their nightclothes and caps, gave their mother pleading looks, and she had little choice but to agree. Phil had bought the three little girls dolls dressed in ballgowns trimmed in Catarina lace.

When Anne saw the lace, her eyes went round. “That lace is worth a fortune. The girls will dirty it before morning.”

“I don’t care,” Phil said, smiling at her nieces. “The little dresses look so pretty with the lace.” She lowered her voice. “And wait until you see the dresses I had made for you!”

Phineas imagined the girls would match their dolls.

Anne’s son, being older than his sisters, was finally allowed to open his gift. It was a book of Greek myths. “Thank you, Aunt Philomena,” the boy said, opening the book and beginning to read immediately.

The children were then kissed and hugged and bundled off to bed, and the adults sat by the fire reading from their favorite books or from the story of Jesus' birth in the Bible.

Finally, it was only Phin and the duchess. When the longcase clock chimed midnight, she gave a long sigh. "I do not think Richard will come tonight."

"Shall I go out and look for him?"

His mother waved her hand. "If I know your brother, he probably stopped for a wee nip in a pub and ended up drinking more than his share. He will turn up tomorrow, rumped and apologetic."

It was a perfect description of Richard and the sort of thing he did all the time. A game of cards, a bottle of wine, or a buxom wench were all vastly more entertaining to Richard than family gatherings, the House of Lords, or estate management. Once again Phineas had reason to wish Ernest had not fallen on that ice. He would have made a much better duke.

A cat would have made a better duke than Richard, who was probably, right at that moment, in some whore's bed snoring in drunken slumber.

For his own part, Phineas didn't sleep quite so soundly that night.

It was not even seven when Phineas's valet roused him Christmas morning. "The duchess wishes to see you, my lord."

Phineas covered his head with the pillow. "Where is she?" he mumbled.

"In the dining room, my lord. The blue coat or the gray?"

Phineas lifted the pillow and squinted at the coats the valet held out for his inspection. "The gray with the red waistcoat."

"Most festive, my lord."

Phin was less confident the day would be so. When he was dressed, he found his nieces and nephew scampering about the house as though the building was on fire. Phineas dodged them and stepped into the dining room, closing the door behind him. He leaned on it and took a breath.

“Quite rambunctious, aren’t they?” his mother said from the window where she stood looking out. The day was not quite so sunny or clear as yesterday. The skies looked gloomy and a light drizzle fell.

“My head is still ringing.”

“Probably a mistake to give them gingerbread and sugared plums this early, but I like to spoil them when I can.”

Phineas smiled. “I remember many holidays with special treats when I was growing up. You were a good mother and are an excellent grandmother.”

She smiled at him, but there was a sadness in her eyes. She still wore her black mourning clothes, even on Christmas. She had rarely been out of them these past few years. He hadn’t thought much about how the deaths of his father and brother had weighed on her. Now he saw the weight was heavier than he’d been aware. He went to her and escorted her to a chair. Her knees seemed to buckle as she sank into it.

“Oh, Phineas. I don’t know what to do. I simply cannot lose another son.”

The shock that went through Phin’s body made him start. “Has Richard still not arrived?” Phineas was certain his idiot brother would have stumbled in in the wee hours of the night or early morning.

“He has not, and I despair that something has happened.” The duchess covered her face.

“I’ll go out on horseback and look for him now.” Phin didn’t wait for her approval. He started for the door.

“But what am I to tell the rector at church when neither of my sons appear for the Christmas service?”

“Ask Phil,” Phineas tossed over his shoulder. “She has a knack for storytelling.” He ought to know as he’d been subjected to her longwinded stories on many occasions when all he’d done was attempt politeness by asking how her day was.

He changed into riding boots, a wide brimmed hat, and a great coat; had a horse from the stables saddled; and rode out with one of the experienced grooms. Young Simon, as the groom was known, was older than Phineas by a good two decades. Phin had always assumed that at one point there had been an Old Simon, though he’d never known the man.

Once they were away from the estate, Young Simon slowed his horse and steered him away from the village, which was where Phineas had intended to search first. Phineas rode up beside him to object.

“Begging your pardon, my lord, but if His Grace had been in the village, we would have heard something of it by now. The duchess gave many of us a half day, and quite a few of the staff spent their time in the village. It was after midnight when Roberts finally locked the door.”

Roberts was the butler, and surely if he’d heard anything from the servants about Richard drinking in the village, he would have reported it to the duchess.

“What do you suggest then?”

“It’s customary when travel from London to take the main road and enter through the village.”

Phin nodded. That was the way he had come.

“But I’m wondering if His Grace might have wanted a bit more privacy.”

Considering anything that happened in the village would be reported back at Southmead Cottage, Phineas could see the benefit of Richard avoiding the village.

“There’s a fork in the road after that last posting house.”

“I know it.”

“Travel on it for about two miles, and there’s—”

“Johnson’s farm,” Phineas finished, remembering now himself. “Does he still make his own gin?”

“He does, and he has two daughters still at home. They’re not all that easy on the eyes, but they’re happy for some company when they can get it.”

Phineas had gone to Johnson’s farm when he’d been young to drink Johnson’s gin without his father knowing of it. He’d known the way at one time, but he doubted he could find it now.

“Lead the way, Simon. How far, do you think?”

“Six or seven miles, as the crow flies.”

Phineas looked up at the sky and the relentless drizzle. He almost wished he were in church.

Phineas and Young Simon arrived almost two hours later. There had been a downpour, and they'd been obliged to seek shelter under a copse of trees and to lead the horses through several patches of mud too deep for the horses to traverse without aid. When Phineas spotted the smoke from Johnson's farm house, he wanted nothing more than to go inside and have a glass of gin himself.

Instead, he left his horse with Young Simon, removed his hat and went to the front door. A thin woman in her thirties with tangled hair and a dirty apron opened the door before he could knock. "Happy Christmas to you." She smiled, showing her brown teeth.

"Happy Christmas. Is your father at home?"

"Now why would you want him? I'm much more entertaining."

Phineas swallowed. "I'm sure you are, but—"

"Who is it, Polly?" came another woman's voice from inside.

"A man. And I saw him first. He's mine."

"Actually—" Phineas began.

The other woman appeared and pulled the door wider. She was a shorter curvier version of her sister. "Ooh, he's a nice one."

Polly elbowed her sister in the breadbasket. "You had your fun last night. This one is mine."

"Speaking of last night," Phineas interrupted, "did a man happen to stop here? I'm looking for the Duke of Mayne."

The women's faces went quickly blank. "A lot of men stop here. What's it to you?"

"He's my brother, and he hasn't come home. My mother is worried for him."

Polly's mask was the first to break. "Hasn't come home? He left here hours ago."

"What time was that?" Phineas asked, relieved he was finally making progress. No doubt if his friend Jasper had been here he would have ferreted the answer out immediately, but unlike Jasper, Phineas was better known for his skill with negotiation, not investigation.

"I can't rightly say." Polly scratched her chin. "It was late."

"But he left last night?"

Polly nodded.

“Before or after midnight?”

“Oh, after. He and Millie were loud as horses, and I couldn’t sleep until after two.”

Millie swatted her sister. “As if you never carry on with a man. *Oh, John. Yes, John!*”

“Was the duke traveling with anyone?” Phineas said loudly to be heard over the women. “Did he come on horseback or in a carriage?”

“Oh, he were on horseback. I think he had a groom with him.”

“He did,” Millie added. “I tried to persuade the man to come in from the cold, but he insisted on staying outside with the horses.”

Phineas gave a quick bow. “Thank you, ladies.”

“Oh, but you’re not leaving” A stricken look crossed Millie’s face. “It’s Christmas. First glass of gin is on the house.”

“Or on me, if you like!” Polly added with a wink.

Millie shoved her, and Polly shoved her sister back, and Phineas replaced his hat and waved farewell at the two women. He mounted his horse again and filled Young Simon in.

“Even if he had as much trouble on the road as we did, he should have been home by dawn.”

“Perhaps we passed His Grace and didn’t realize it.”

Phineas nodded slowly. If Richard had been drinking, he might have tumbled off his horse or stopped to rest and fallen asleep while his horse wandered away. They could have passed him and not realized it. But what of the groom?

Phineas and Young Simon spent another three hours retracing their path, circling in and out of the woods, but when they arrived back at Southmead Cottage, they’d saw no sign of Richard or the groom.

“If it hadn’t rained so hard, we might have had some sign of him,” Phineas told his mother when she’d met him in entry hall. “As it is, any tracks he might have made were washed away.”

The duchess wrung her hands.

“I’ll go back out in a few minutes. I only wanted to change clothing and gather a larger group of men so we might cover more area.”

“No!” The duchess gripped the sleeve of his greatcoat. “I won’t have you catching your death of cold or risk the health of my servants. It’s Christmas. We can’t ask them to forego their celebrations because of your brother’s foolishness.”

“I understand, Mama, but I’d rather be out looking than sitting here doing nothing.” Indeed, Phineas feared if he did sit and do nothing, the real terror of his situation might become appallingly clear. For there was a very good chance that Richard would not come home alive, and Phin’s worst nightmare would come true. He’d be the ninth Duke of Mayne. Why the hell had he ever left London without Richard? He should have never left his brother on his own.

His mother straightened and gave him the look he’d always called The Duchess Stare. “Comforting an old woman is hardly doing nothing.”

“You’re not an old woman.”

“Old enough! I want you here, and here you shall stay. Now go change your clothing and come have some mulled wine. We’ve waited for you to open gifts, and the children are growing impatient.”

Phineas did as his mother requested, but he could not enjoy the day. He was tense and edgy, listening for the door or hoofbeats, hoping his brother would arrive. Richard would laugh at all of them for worrying, and Phineas would hug his brother before punching him in the nose.

And then he wouldn’t let Richard out of his sight until the man had an heir and a spare and Phineas was finally free from the threat of the ducal mantle.

And then, finally, just before the family was to go into dinner, someone was at the door. Roberts went to answer it, and Phineas stared at the drawing room doors, willing them to open and Richard to walk inside.

But the man who entered was not Richard.

“May I present Mr. Fielding,” Roberts said, when he escorted the guest inside.

“Begging your pardon, Your Grace. My lords—and ladies.” Mr. Fielding was small and thin and quite damp. He held his cap in his hands, wringing it constantly, and looking from Phineas to the duchess to the ladies.

“Mr. Fielding, happy Christmas to you,” the duchess said. “I do hope all is well on your farm.” She looked at Phineas. “You know Mr. Fielding. He farms the land adjacent to ours on the north side.”

Phineas moved forward and shook Fielding’s damp hand. “A pleasure to see you again, sir. Might I offer you some tea or mulled wine?”

“No, thank you, my lord. I come with—” His eyes darted to the children. Anne seemed to understand his hesitation, and she gathered the children and escorted them from the room.

“You were saying, Mr. Fielding?” Philomena prompted when the children were gone.

Fielding took a deep breath, and Phineas had the urge to cover the man’s mouth. He did not want to hear the next words. But instead of acting on his impulse, he stood stock still, a pleasant smile plastered on his face and his heart slamming against his ribs.

“I come with bad news, Your Grace.” Fielding looked at the duchess now. “About an hour ago I went out to feed the stock. I like to do it early on Sundays, and Christmas is like a Sunday to me. Out by my barn I found a horse wandering, his reins dragging. It was a fine horse and not one I knew. It had been outfitted with saddle bags, and I opened them and found they contained items belonging to the Duke of Mayne.”

“And what of Richard?” the duchess asked. “Was he with the horse?”

“No, Your Grace.”

“Mama, sit down,” Phil said, ushering the duchess to a chair.

“But I was curious as to the duke’s whereabouts. I put my heavy coat on and went on a bit of a walkabout. Now that the rain has slowed, I could trace the horse’s footprints back to that wooded area on the west side of my property.”

He paused then and twisted his cap viciously.

“What did you find in the wooded area?” Phineas asked, his voice sounding cool and calm, as though it came from someone else. Not someone who could hardly take a breath for the weight of responsibility crashing down on him.

“I found the duke’s body, my lord—or should I say Your Grace? He was lying on the ground, his neck broken.”

The duchess gasped and cried out. Philomena went to her, gathering her in her arms. Phineas did not move. He heard a rushing sound in his ears and shook his head to try and rid himself of the sound. Gradually, he was aware of John at his side, easing him into a chair. John was asking questions—something about the state of the body and where it was now. And then Anne came in and was crying, and John was pulling his coat on and going with Fielding to bring Richard home.

Somehow Phineas found his feet and stumbled after them. He ignored the offers of a coat and hat and followed his brother-in-law into the cold. It didn't bother him. He was perfectly numb.

He took the horse put in front of him, mounted, and followed Mr. Fielding on his old mare. John rode beside him, casting Phineas worried looks.

“Phin, if it is Richard...” John began.

“It's him. I knew the idiot would get himself killed. I should have never left him alone.”

“You can't blame yourself,” John said, all reason and logic. Phineas would have liked to be reasonable and logical as well, but he couldn't think. He could barely guide his horse on the path before him.

“I don't blame myself,” Phin said. “I blame Ernest and his bloody ice and George and his damn temper and Phillip and his asinine swimming.”

“You never wanted to be the duke,” John said. “Everyone knows that.”

“Four brothers ahead of me. Four. You think one could have the courtesy to stay alive.”

John didn't say any more, and they rode the last half mile in silence. By the time they reached the wooded area, it was almost dark. Fielding had stopped to fetch lanterns from his house and Phineas and John dismounted and held the lanterns aloft. Fielding brought them perhaps a quarter mile into the scattering of trees and then stopped. He looked down, holding his lantern out. Phineas paused too, but he did not look down. He heard John exhale. “It's him,” John said. He knelt, presumably to feel for a pulse or any sign of life, though surely Fielding had already done that. Finally, John rose and put a hand on Phineas's arm. “I'm sorry, Your Grace.”

Phin shrugged the hand off and took another step forward. There, lying against a fallen log, was Richard. His neck was twisted at an impossible angle, and his hat lay askew on his head. His breeches were muddy, but otherwise his clothing was unruffled. The lantern gleamed on the pin at his neck cloth and the ring on his finger.

Tomorrow they'd search for the groom, but if they found him alive, probably hiding in fear of reprisal, Phin knew his story would be unsurprising. Richard, drunk or asleep or both, had tumbled from his horse, hit the log, and broken his neck.

Like it or not, Phineas Duncombe was now the ninth Duke of Mayne.