

With four brothers dead and in their graves, Phineas Leopold Duncombe, the ninth Duke of Mayne, had reason to wonder if he would be next. As he walked along King Street in St. James, he took care to look up, lest an errant piano crash onto his head. He kept one eye on the street at all times, vigilant in case a horse bolted and an out of control carriage flattened him. And he was mindful of where he stepped. He'd never heard of quicksand in London, but considering his family's luck, one could not be too careful.

He sighed with relief when he reached the Draven Club. Porter, the Master of the House, greeted him, taking his overcoat. "Your Grace, nice to see you back," the silver-haired man said. "May I offer my condolences on the passing of your brother?"

"Thank you." Phin's gaze swept about the familiar wood-paneled vestibule. The large chandelier overhead illuminated a suit of armor on one side of the room and Scottish broadswords on the other. Directly opposite him was a large shield bisected by a medieval sword. Phin didn't need to move any closer to know fleurs-de-lis embellished the sword's pommel and a skull was at the cross guard. Around the perimeter of the shield, eighteen fleurs-de-lis symbolized the men of the troop who had died during the war. Phin was one of the twelve to come home.

"Is Lieutenant Draven here?" he asked, referring to the leader of the troop.

"Not yet."

Phin started toward the winding staircase carpeted in royal blue, Porter followed, his wooden leg thumping as he moved. "Do you want dinner, Your Grace?"

"No, but I could use a drink. I have a rather distasteful errand to complete and could use fortification."

"I see. I have a French brandy from ninety-five saved for just such an occasion."

"Perfect. I'll be in the reading room." Phin climbed the stairs to the small room with bookshelves on three sides. A large hearth dominated the fourth side and a fire blazed within. Phin settled into one of the large leather armchairs set before the fire, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. The wings of the chair were so large, he was all but obscured. He didn't bother to light a lamp as he didn't intend to read. He wanted time to think. He'd been in the country with his grieving mother and sisters for three weeks. He'd had barely a moment to himself. Not since his brother Richard had turned up dead on Christmas Day.

Happy Christmas, Phin thought. You are the Duke of Mayne. Worst Christmas present he had ever received.

But finally, he had quiet, peace, solitude.

“What are you doing back in town?”

Phin’s eyes opened at the man’s voice, though he managed to avoid jumping with fright. It took him a moment before he placed the drawl and the slight sarcastic tone. “Fortescue?” he asked, though he was almost certain he’d guessed correctly.

Stratford Fortescue, with his high forehead and piercing blue eyes, leaned forward from the chair on Phin’s left.

“Duncombe. No, wait. You’re Mayne now. Congratulations, Duke. And here we all thought you were expendable.” He was referring, of course, to one of the reasons the men of Draven’s troop had been chosen to join what amounted to a suicide team. They were the best and the brightest, but also younger sons who were considered expendable.

“It turns out I’m surprisingly indispensable.”

Fortescue raised a brow. “I’m still dispensable.”

“Congratulations?”

“That was my line. What happened to this brother? Did he drown?”

Phin wished Porter would hurry with that drink. “That was the fifth Duke of Mayne.”

Fortescue didn’t say it, but Phin knew what he was thinking. Everyone said the dukedom was cursed. How else did one explain the early demise of so many Dukes of Mayne? There was Phineas’s brother Phillip, the fifth duke of Mayne and the one Fortescue referenced. Phillip had drowned in a pond on the family estate in West Sussex. The boys had swum there as children hundreds of times.

“He fell on ice then? Or was that the sixth duke?”

“It was the seventh. The sixth was killed in a duel.”

That had been George. Admittedly, the sixth Duke of Mayne had had a bit of a temper, so his untimely death was not wholly unexpected. But how did one explain the death of the seventh Duke of Mayne, Ernest? Ernest was a quiet, cautious sort of fellow. He’d died after falling on ice and hitting his head.

“What killed the eighth?”

Richard. The Idiot, as Phineas thought of him. “It seems my brother Richard was so drunk he fell off his horse on the way to the family pile. According to the coroner, he hit his head and died instantly.”

All unfortunate, premature, accidental deaths. Bad luck, Phin’s brother-in-law John had said when they’d found the body. Bad luck for Phin as now the curse had fallen on him.

“Curious.”

Phin looked at Fortescue. “Do you think so?”

“Four older brothers and four early deaths. It *is* curious. You don’t think so?”

Phin sat back in his chair. Herein lay the problem. He did think the deaths strange, but he couldn’t put a finger on any reason to believe them anything other than accidents or the result of poor choices.

“You asked why I’m back in Town.”

Fortescue sipped his drink. “It was a rhetorical question. I assumed you wanted to escape your mother and sisters.”

“There’s that, but I also want to question the woman who was with my brother the night before he traveled to West Sussex.”

Fortescue narrowed his eyes, looking every bit the strategist, which had been his assignment in the troop. “Was she the last person to see him alive?”

“No. He stopped at a farmhouse to visit our neighbors. The ladies there are quite... friendly to gentlemen. But they’ve lived on that land for decades. They’re a bit loose with their charms, but they’re harmless.”

“You questioned them, of course.”

“Until they were brought to tears. They said he was perfectly well, although exceedingly drunk, when he left them for Southmeade Cottage.”

“If you believe the ladies, the circumstances seem relatively straight forward.”

“I know.” So why was he here?

“And yet, the lady who was with him the before he left for West Sussex might have information you haven’t taken into consideration.”

Fortescue had vocalized Phineas’s own thoughts. “Exactly. I shouldn’t leave that stone unturned.”

“Who is she?”

“They call her the Wanton Widow.” Phin had seen her only once, and the image of her was burned into his mind. “Do you know anything about her?”

“No.” Fortescue looked almost disappointed that he didn’t have any information.

“I do.”

Phineas did jump now then turned in his chair to stare at the chair on his right. Colin FitzRoy leaned forward, his dark curls falling over his forehead.

“How long have you been sitting there?” Phin demanded.

FitzRoy seemed to ponder this question. “Longer than either of you.”

Phin looked to his left. “Did you know he was there, Stratford?”

“No. He must have disguised himself as a chair.”

“I don’t need a disguise. You two are wholly oblivious.”

Porter entered with the bottle of brandy and three snifters on a silver tray. He set the tray on the table beside Phineas. “Anything else, Your Grace?”

Phin gestured to the brandy. “Three snifters?”

“In case you would like to share.” He turned and left them.

Phin poured three fingers for Fortescue and three for FitzRoy. FitzRoy waved it away, so Phin took it. The brandy was smooth and had an earthy flavor.

“You asked about the Wanton Widow.”

Phin stared at FitzRoy, a burning beginning in his chest. He’d felt this burning before, the night he’d first seen her. “You know her?”

“We’re not acquainted, but I know of her.”

“Go on,” Phin said, the burning cooling a bit. Must have been the brandy, he decided.

“She married the Earl of Longstowe twenty-five or more years ago. My grandfather had dealings with him and always said he was the worst sort. It gave him pleasure to be cruel. When the earl died, no one could blame the countess for seeking a diversion or two.”

“But this is the *ton*,” Fortescue said darkly.

FitzRoy eyed him. “So they did blame her. Thus, the sobriquet.”

“Her standards can’t be very high if she took Richard to her bed,” Phin said, annoyed at how much that one fact bothered him. “I don’t necessarily think she had anything to do with his death, but I’ll feel better having spoken to her.”

Colin met his gaze with light green eyes framed by dark lashes. “Is that what you’ve told yourself?”

Phin finished his brandy. “Explain.”

“She’s a beautiful woman.”

The burning in his chest began again. “And?”

“Maybe you hope to take her to bed.”

Phin laughed, but the laugh sounded false even to him. “I don’t want Richard’s seconds.” He turned to Fortescue for support, but the man was eyeing him curiously over his snifter.

Phin rose. “It’s late. I should go.”

As he stalked toward the door, Colin called after him. “A word of advice?”

“I don’t need *your* advice on women.”

FitzRoy put a hand to where his heart should beat. “Ouch,” he said without emotion. “Lady Longstowe is not like the debutantes your mother foists upon you at dinner parties. She won’t be awed by your title or your money.”

“Good. I’ll like her all the more for it.”

An hour later, after summoning his carriage and braving the cold again, he peered out the window of the conveyance and studied the cold, barren streets of Mayfair. The *ton* was in the country for the Christmas holidays, and the town houses were shuttered and dark on this late January evening.

Phin sat back, disliking the pretension of the Mayne ducal coach, but with four older brothers dead in less than a decade, his mother had asked him not to risk riding in the dark on horseback. What she did not say was, “Don’t give the curse a chance at you, dear.” But that’s what she’d meant.

After all, a tree branch might fall on his head, killing him instantly. Or perhaps a deranged squirrel would attack him. Did squirrels hibernate in the winter? Phin had no idea. He felt like he’d been losing his mind for the past three weeks. He couldn’t even walk to his club without fretting about falling pianos.

The coach slowed and stopped in front of a modest town house on the outskirts of Mayfair. The address was still fashionable, but Phin knew the property would lease for far less than its sisters in Berkeley Square. Still, the building was well-maintained. With all the coal in use in Town, it didn’t take long for the limestone buildings to become gray with soot. But this

house was white, which meant the paint was fresh. He also noted the windows were clean, and the walk had been swept free of the leaves and trash that tended to gather when the winds kicked up as they had lately. He thought he saw a curtain on the ground floor twitch, but other than that, the house looked quiet.

The coach door opened, and a footman lowered the steps. Phin could have jumped out easily, but he was the duke now. He was supposed to act ducal. And so he made use of the steps and, holding his hat on his head so it wouldn't blow away, made his way to the door. His solicitor, who Phin paid to gather information, had said Lady Longstowe was in Town. Her knocker was still in place, so Phineas had reason to hope his visit tonight would prove fruitful. A proper duke would have sent a note to the lady requesting a meeting, but Phin hadn't wanted to give the lady time to think of answers to his questions. He hoped to surprise her and observe her reactions. It wasn't that he did not want to give her a chance to reject the meeting. No one would dare turn down an audience with a duke.

Except someone unimpressed by dukes.

Damn Colin.

Phin turned to look back at his coach. The footman looked quickly away, pretending he hadn't been watching him. He was being ridiculous. Of course, she would see him. He had legitimate questions. He didn't know what, precisely, they were, but they would come to him. Because he hadn't come to seduce the countess. He didn't want to seduce her at all. He knew many beautiful women, and *he* wasn't impressed by a woman like her.

Before he could knock on the door, it was opened by an elderly man with only one good eye. Phineas looked into the cloudy blue of the other eye then at the sharp blue one fixed on him. "Yes?" the butler said, peering down his long nose at Phineas. "Were you planning to knock? I'm too old to stand here all evening."

Phin ignored the insolence. The man did look like he was about to fall over. "I'm here to see Lady Longstowe."

"She's not expecting you." The butler began to close the door, but Phineas stuck his boot between the door and jamb. The old butler looked feeble enough that Phineas could have pushed inward on the door and knocked him over, but that wouldn't have been very ducal.

"If you would be so kind, please tell her I'm here and ask if she'll see me." He held out his gloved hand, his cream-colored calling card extended between two fingers. The butler took

the card reluctantly, looked closely at the writing with his good eye then at Phineas then back at the card. “Tell her I apologize for arriving unannounced. It’s a matter of some urgency.”

“Very well.” The butler opened the door enough that Phin could squeeze into the foyer. “Wait here.” Taking a cane from where it rested against a wall, the butler hobbled away.

Interesting. A butler with one good eye and a bad leg. He’d thought Lady Longstowe a widow of some means, but perhaps he’d been incorrect if she could not afford a more proper servant. He made a mental note to have his solicitor look into it. He’d never had a solicitor before. The man came with the ducal title, it seemed, but Phineas was finding him quite useful.

He looked about the vestibule with curiosity. He’d expected the house to be, if not gaudy, overdone. After all, the countess was known as the Wanton Widow. The term wanton was not usually applied to a woman with good taste, but Phin could find nothing in what he saw to disapprove. The foyer was lit brightly by two wall sconces. It was neither too big nor too small, and it was furnished with a small table topped with a silver dish, no doubt for calling cards, and a stand for coats. There was no chair about, and Phineas deduced callers were not usually left to stand in the foyer waiting.

“Oh, there you are!”

Phineas looked up to see a girl—no, a woman—of indeterminate age descending the steps rapidly.

“Crotchett told me we had a guest, but I didn’t know it would be a gentleman. He should not have made you wait here.” She stopped before him and looked up. He was a man only a little taller than average, but this woman—the housekeeper, he assumed—was the size of a child. The height of one of his young nieces. “Let me help you with your coat, my lord.”

Phineas removed the garment, and she reached for it then brought it to the coat rack, where she managed to hang it high enough so it didn’t touch the floor. Phineas had the urge to help her, but he did not think his offer of assistance would be welcome. She then took his scarf and hat and bade him to follow her.

“I am Mrs. Slightley. The missus is ornamental. I’ve never been married. I don’t know why Crotchett didn’t show you to the drawing room. He’s been in a foul mood the last ten years.”

Phineas stifled a chuckle. He liked her pleasant demeanor much better than the dour butler. “Did something happen ten years ago?”

“Oh, no!” Mrs. Slightley waved a hand then opened the doors to the drawing room. “I just didn’t know him before that. I suspect he’s been in a bad mood all his life.” She put a finger to her lips. “But don’t tell him I said that. Now, I’ll fetch tea, and you make yourself comfortable. Her ladyship will be down shortly.”

Phineas turned from the center of the drawing room, where he was contemplating which pale blue seat to take. “She will see me then?”

“I can’t think why not. You’re a far sight more handsome than that stack of books she spends all her time with.”

Phineas inclined his head in thanks. Mrs. Slightley closed the doors, and he heard the patter of her feet as she rushed off to fetch tea. The Wanton Widow spent her spare time not in illicit trysts but reading? What had she seen in his idiot brother?

Phineas looked about the drawing room. Like the foyer it was well-appointed. The furnishings were modest but attractive. There was a pianoforte in one corner by the windows and a grouping of chairs in cream and pale blue in another corner near the hearth. A few paintings of seascapes hung on the walls. He didn’t recognize the artist, but they were attractive enough.

Phineas took a seat beside the hearth, which had been banked but still gave off some warmth, and decided this was not at all what he had expected. The Wanton Widow did not appear very, well, wanton. But then just because she had good taste in household furnishings did not mean she was not a libertine who was free with her favors. Not to mention, he had met her. That wasn’t entirely accurate as he hadn’t been introduced to her, but he had locked eyes with her and felt...the effects of too much alcohol, surely.

He doubted she was even as beautiful as he remembered. Regardless, the fact was he had not traveled all this way to admire Lady Longstowe. He had questions, damn it. He wanted answers, and the best way to accomplish that was to speak to the woman directly. He didn’t want to take her to bed. She probably had the pox.

The door opened, and Phin jumped up as the pox-ridden woman herself was there. Phin had a moment to think she looked quite well for a woman suffering from the pox.

“Lady Longstowe, the Duke of Mayne,” the butler said as though the words required tremendous effort. Phin felt his knees buckle and wished he could sit down.