

Philomena shivered in the drafty dining room of the grand country house—and not only because of the snow swirling outside. The snow was light and feathery and would melt before noon. Her mother’s wrath would last much longer.

“Philomena, I simply do not understand what would cause you to do such a thing,” the duchess said for perhaps the third time in so many minutes. “Viscount Knoxwood is not yet forty, has all his teeth and a full head of hair, and is, if not wealthy, not in the poor house. Why on earth would you refuse his offer?”

Phil pushed her toast to one side of the plate and back again. The trick here was not to allow her gaze to stray to the other side of the room. She had to focus on her plate or her mother. “Mama, I do think marriage should be based on more than finding a man who is not elderly and has a full head of hair.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Her mother set her teacup down with a clatter. Phil cringed.

“I agree. Marriage should be based on mutual respect. Viscount Knoxwood has been courting you for the last six months and has shown nothing but respect. The sacrament of marriage should be entered into by equals, and you and he are of the same social rank.”

Phil stared very, very hard at her plate.

“And, though I know this is out of fashion, a marriage should forge an alliance. Viscount Knoxwood has several estates. Your dowry would help him make the repairs and improvements he wants, enriching both our family and his. So tell me, please do, what is your objection?”

Phil shrugged.

“Do not shrug your shoulders, Philomena. It is unladylike.”

Phil looked directly at her mother. “I don’t love him, Mama.”

This was really the wrong thing to say. The duchess looked as though she might throw her teacup across the room. “Listen to me, Philomena. I do not want to hear another word about love from you. I have had quite enough of that from your brother. If Phineas wants to ruin his life by marrying a woman old enough to be his mother then taking up with her in Berkshire, of all places, that is his mistake.”

“She isn’t quite that old, Mama.”

“She is too old to bear him an heir, and now what will become of the title?”

The Mayne title was in little danger of extinction, but Phil knew her mother did not wish to be corrected. Wisely, she kept her mouth closed.

“You are the last of my children. I have seen four sons put in the grave and one daughter whose husband has been disgraced. My only living son has made a *mésalliance* I have little choice but to accept. But you, Philomena, you will marry well, and you *will* make me proud.” The duchess rose. She was not a tall woman, but she stood very straight, which gave her the appearance of height. “Either make the decision yourself, or I will make it for you. You have one month from today.”

With that shocking pronouncement, the Dowager Duchess of Mayne strode out of the room, her skirts swishing.

Phil waited a full minute before raising her eyes to the sideboard. James stood there in his light blue livery. His back was straight, his eyes focused on an indistinct spot across the room, his face expressionless. Of course, the footman had heard every word, but one would never guess it from his behavior.

Phil lifted her teacup and drank deeply, all but draining the cup. As if on cue, James lifted the tea pot and came to stand beside her. “More tea, me lady?”

“Yes, please.” She held the teacup in place while he lowered the pot. By raising her arm just slightly, she grazed the underside of his wrist with the outside of hers. Of course, he wore white gloves, but she could see the slightly darker color of his flesh between glove and coat sleeve. He lifted the tea pot, and his gaze met hers briefly. She nodded and he withdrew, back to his spot across the room, though it might as well have been an ocean away.

\*\*\*

Phil worked diligently on her correspondence for the next hour or two. This was no easy task with her mother at the desk behind her. The two had often written their letters in the morning room in companionable silence, but the silence this morning was strained. Phil’s hand shook as she wrote and she blotted her ink several times, forcing her to begin letters anew. Each time she crumpled a sheet of ruined vellum, her mother would huff as though disappointed. Finally, the clock chimed eleven and Phil rose.

“Have you finished your letter to Aunt Joyce?” her mother asked without looking at her.

“I have, Mama.”

“It seems a bad idea to ride today. There might be ice.” Her mother continued to write, her pen scratching the paper in front of her.

“I thought I would take a walk. I trust that is acceptable.”

Her mother made a sound of acquiescence and Phil started away.

“Perhaps I shall join you,” the duchess remarked, looking up and out the window. The sun was shining now, glittering off the quickly melting snow making a thin covering on the grounds.

Phil held her breath. Everything inside her screamed *no*, but she couldn’t very well say it aloud. Her mother would want to know why she shouldn’t go out walking with her daughter, and Phil had no answer for that.

Finally she said, “Shall I have Miss O’Malley bring your pelisse, gloves, and hat?”

Her mother made a face. “Never mind. That seems a lot of trouble to look at dead trees and grass.

Phil blew out a silent breath of relief.

“I’ll have Cook put out some cold dishes about one o’ clock. Help yourself if you’re feeling peckish.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“We will have guests for dinner.”

Phil paused, trying to remember who was coming to dinner. She’d ask Miss Dawson, her lady’s maid. Feeling lighter than she had in days, Phil rushed up to her chamber and found Dawson laying out several of her dresses. She saw a pretty green one she would have liked to change into as it made her eyes look even bluer, but it was a spring and summer dress, and winter hadn’t quite loosened its grip on the world. Phil decided to content herself with the warm dove gray dress she had donned this morning.

“What are you doing, Dawson?” she asked.

“I’m looking to see if these dresses need mending. I know we travel to Town in a few days to order your gowns for the Season, but you can still wear these from last year when you are at home.”

Phil sat on the edge of the bed and let her fingers trail over last year’s gowns. Each of them held a memory of dancing and music and garden parties. She had always looked forward to the Season before. But this year the riot of balls and routs held little appeal for her. She would have rather stayed in the country. Her mother’s pronouncement meant that by the time she attended her first ball of the Season, she would be engaged.

“Mama says we have guests for dinner. Do you remember who?”

“It’s Reverend Maypole, Mrs. Maypole, Viscount Knoxwood, his mother, and sisters, my lady.”

“Oh. That should prove awkward.”

Dawson gave her mistress a sympathetic look. “Perhaps it will snow this afternoon and the roads will be impassable.”

Phil rolled her eyes. That was about as likely as her mother agreeing to allow her to marry their footman. She stood. “I should take my opportunity to go for a walk now then. I don’t want to be out if the weather does miraculously turn. Can you help me change into my boots and cloak?”

That done, Phil pinched her cheeks to give them some color then lightly descended the stairs and went out the door.

\*\*\*

He hated how his heart sped up when he saw her coming. It wasn’t just because she was beautiful—though she was incredibly beautiful. And it wasn’t because she was rich—though she was almost as rich as she was beautiful. This was more than attraction or greed. This was something he hadn’t counted on and really couldn’t afford.

She spotted him a moment later, and he knew the exact moment because her smile widened and lit up her face. He’d heard that expression before, of course, but he’d never seen it actually happen until he’d met her. Her face actually seemed to shine brighter when she saw him. In those moments, he couldn’t even see her beauty. All he could see was *her*.

“Sure and ye take my breath away when ye smile like that,” he said when she was close enough to hear him.

It seemed impossible, but her smile widened. “You do have quite the way with words, Mr. Finnegan.”

“I save them all for ye, me lady.”

She stopped to stand under the eaves of the rear of the dowager house. She’d walked the long way around so that she approached from the back, not the front, which could be seen from the grounds of Southmeade Cottage. It always made James smile when he thought of the name of the sprawling country house. It was the largest, grandest *cottage* he had ever seen. Even the dowager house boasted eight bed chambers.

Lady Philomena wrinkled her nose. “Why so formal? You know I hate when you call me *my lady*.”

“Then call me James, and I’ll call ye—what did we decide? Mena?”

She shook her head. “Phil. That’s what everyone calls me.”

He could smell her scent. It was subtle, floral and earthy, and reminded him of heather. He wanted to move closer but forced himself to stay where he was. “It’s hardly a name that suits ye.”

“Neither is Mena. That’s for a petite girl with black hair like yours. I’m far too tall and my hair too yellow for the name Mena.”

He would have described her hair a thousand ways before he’d call it yellow; it was more gold than silver, more sunlight than starlight.

He almost made another quip, but he noticed she was shivering. It was a cold day, and they’d met on other cold days. Once or twice, they’d even gone inside the house. Lady Philomena had the key, but he couldn’t be the one to suggest it. “Yer shivering.”

“The damp, I think.” She fished in the pocket of her cloak and pulled out a key. “Shall we go in?”

He took the key from her gloved hand and opened the door, holding it so she could pass through first. The fact that she trusted him enough to be alone with him humbled him. He did not deserve that trust. But then she didn’t know that, did she? She had no reason not to trust him. He’d never done anything she didn’t want, though adhering to that pledge—one he’d made to himself—just about killed him. As many times as he’d met her alone, he had only kissed her a handful of times, and most of those had been as chaste a kiss as a boy gave his grandmother.

He pulled back the Holland cover on the couch and eyed the dark hearth in the sitting room they usually sat in. “Sure and I wish I could light the fire.”

“That would give us away.” She patted the couch cushion beside her. “Sit here, and I’ll be warm enough.”

He did, careful not to touch her. The small distance between them didn’t stop him from feeling her heat.

“Do ye want to talk about it then?” he asked.

She paused in the act of removing her hat. “Talk about what?”

“Oh, so it’s to be that way. I was in the dining room, and though we act like we’re deaf, servants hear everything.”

“I know.” She surprised him by reaching over and putting her hand on top of his. He wasn’t wearing gloves. His gloves were for work. He had two pair, and they had to remain spotless if he was to serve at dinner and other meals. He couldn’t afford to soil them and had left them in his rooms before sneaking out this afternoon. He could feel the heat of her gloved hand on his skin.

“It’s just that I want to forget all of that for a little while.”

“We’ve forgotten it for months. I don’t think we can put it aside much longer. Ye have to marry, Phil. Ye should have said yes to Knoxwood.”

She made a face. “I don’t want to marry him. He’s a decent enough man, but…” She looked at James, and the implication was clear. Knoxwood wasn’t him. James should have been glad she thought herself in love with him. It was what he’d wanted. But he couldn’t rejoice.

“A decent enough man is nothing to scoff at. And don’t look at me like that. Ye know ye can’t marry an Irishman. And even if I wasn’t Irish, I’m a footman. I’m no match for a duke’s daughter.”

“I never said anything about marriage.” She tossed her head in an effort to look unconcerned, but he saw the sparkle of tears in her eyes before she looked away. “I may never marry. I may devote myself to the role of maiden aunt to my nieces and nephew or perhaps I’ll travel abroad and see the grand cities of the world.”

“Without a chaperone?” he asked, his brows raised.

She looked back at him. “You could be my chaperone.”

He laughed until he noticed she wasn’t smiling. “Ye can’t be serious. How would we live?”

“I don’t know. We’d find a way, wouldn’t we?”

They could. They would. For an instant he wanted nothing more than to take her away right that moment, but he couldn’t do that to her. He couldn’t ruin her life. She’d end up hating him for it, and he’d hate himself.

Christ Jaysus. When had he become so fecking noble? It was like a disease he caught when he was near her.

She was still looking at him with hope in her eyes. He shook his head. “Ye were born the daughter of a duke, and I won’t be the man who’s responsible for making ye starve. As much as I want to”—and Jaysus did he want to—“I won’t run away with ye.”

The hope in her eyes faded, replaced with an expression he found more concerning—determination. Her eyes could turn from the soft blue of the summer sky to the hard blue of sapphires in a matter of seconds. The sapphires glittered at him now.

“I wonder if I can change your mind,” she said. He looked down and saw she’d drawn off her gloves, revealing long-fingered white hands that were as soft as clouds.

“Sure and ye can try, but I care too much for ye to do as ye ask.” He sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. Now that he’d refused her outright, she’d probably storm out, angry at his rejection. He’d miss these clandestine meetings, but it was for the best. He could never be the man she deserved. He wasn’t even the man she thought he was.

She reached out, but instead of slapping him, she touched his cheek. The feel of her fingers stroking his skin from cheek to jaw made him freeze, even while his flesh heated where her fingers stroked.

“I love the feel of you under my fingertips,” she murmured. “Your beard is rough.”

“I shaved early this morning,” he corrected. Footmen were clean-shaven, forcing him to shave twice some days. He’d always had thick dark hair that grew quickly. Mrs. Johnson, the housekeeper, trimmed his unruly hair every fortnight.

“And yet, it scratches the pads of my fingers. I wonder…” She leaned closer, and James frowned. He should stand up, move away, but he didn’t so much as breathe as she pressed close, sliding the skin of her soft cheek against his coarse jaw.

“Phil,” he murmured, his tone a warning. He kept his hands on his knees, though they itched to take her into his arms. Her lips grazed his jaw, and he closed his eyes, willing his body to remain under control. When, after a long, teasing trail, her mouth finally reached his, she kissed him gently. Summoning all his fortitude, he kissed her back—a press of mouth to mouth. But when he pulled back, she followed.

“What are ye doing?” he asked, his brogue heavier now with the effort to contain his arousal. They’d never gone further than a quick touch of lips, and even that was dangerous to them both.

“Why don’t you ever kiss me like you want to?”

His brows shot up. “And what do ye know about what men want?”

She gave him a patronizing look. “I’ve kissed other men, you know.”

“Have ye now?” He’d never thought about her kissing any other men, but of course it made sense. She was no child, and she’d been to her share of balls and assemblies. Of course, one of the nobs she danced with would take her behind a potted plant and kiss her. But if that was the limit of her experience, he wouldn’t expand it. “And a few kisses on the terrace make ye an expert, do they?”

“It’s more than a few, and why don’t you be the judge as to whether I’m an expert? Put your hands on me.”

His lungs hurt at the quick intake of breath. He couldn’t seem to move, so she lifted his stiff hands from where they were clamped to his knees and put them on her waist.

Jaysus but she had a small trim waist. He’d imagined it would be, but it was almost impossible to tell when she always wore gowns where the waists tucked up under her bosom. His arms remained stiff as he fought to keep from spreading his fingers or allowing his hands to drop an inch or two and explore her tempting body. She wrapped her arms around his neck, bringing her body further into contact with his. He was glad they hadn’t lit the hearth now as he was too warm. The heat of her was burning him, raising the temperature of his blood to a boiling point.

“This is better,” she murmured, her gaze fastening on his. He wanted her so badly it hurt. Never had he been so tempted, and he had faced a great deal of temptation in his life.

“Should I kiss ye now?” he said, his voice low.

“Do you really need to ask?”

He didn’t, and he had reached the limit of his chivalry. The strain of playing the well-mannered footman in the house and the perfect gentleman with her suddenly felt too much. For just three minutes he would be himself—James Patrick Finnegan. Damn all the rules of decorum straight to hell.

His hands on her waist tightened and closed, and he pulled her closer so that her breasts pressed into his chest. Then he dipped his mouth to hers, but instead of the sweet kisses he usually bestowed, he nipped at her full lower lip. She made a sound somewhere between desire and shock, and he licked at the spot he’d bitten to soothe the slight sting. Then he pressed his mouth to hers, kissing and coaxing and seducing until she did as he bade and opened for him.



His tongue slid inside her warmth. Her own met his and tangled for a moment. She *had* been kissed before. But he was no fumbling, soft, lily-fingered nob. He stroked her, teased her, claimed her until she was breathing hard and her hands had fisted in the material at the back of his livery coat. And then he deepened the kiss, letting all the desire and darkness and velvety softness of her skin sink into him.

He could have bent her back, lowered her to the couch, and had her. She was practically trembling from want, and he hadn't even run his hands over her. He imagined she'd come quick and hard, her eyes a soft shade of blue and her lips a pale pink O.

He wanted her. He needed her.

But that small voice he'd always been able to ignore, up until now, whispered. *She's not for you.*

James pulled away, ending the kiss abruptly. Lady Philomena made a sound of distress and tried to pull him back, but he stood and gave her his back. He needed to get his breathing under control and looking at her would not accomplish that. Not to mention, if she stared at the erection tenting his breeches, he'd never regain control.

"I shouldn't have done that," he said. "I apologize."

"There's no need, I—"

Christ Jaysus, if she told him she liked the kiss, he would not be able to stop himself.

"If ye value yer virtue, Lady Philomena, ye had better go. Now."

He could hear the rustle of skirts, knew she'd stood. "But James, can't we talk—"

He rounded on her. "Get out of here. Now!" he roared.

And she did.