

About *Moonlight*

Alex McHenry Fall, Lord Dane has unexpectedly inherited a title. When he comes home after his time abroad, can he win the heart of the older woman he loves?

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This story can also be read at my website, accompanied by artwork by illustrator Seamas Gallagher.

Thanks for downloading the story, I hope you enjoy it! You can contact me at carolyn@carolynjewel.com

MOONLIGHT
BY
CAROLYN JEWEL

CHAPTER 1

June 3, 1815, The ballroom at Frieth Hall, The Grange, North Baslemere, Surrey, England

By the time Alec McHenry Fall, who had been the third earl of Dane for a very short time, made his way around the ballroom, Philippa was by herself. She sat on a chair backed up against the wall, her chin tipped toward the ceiling. Her eyes were closed in an attitude of relaxation rather than, so Dane hoped, prayer.

Her position exposed the slender column of her throat to anyone who might be looking, which was almost no one besides him since the room was nearly

empty. Her hands lay motionless on her lap with the fingers of one hand curled around an ivory fan, the other held a corner of a fringed shawl the color of champagne.

He continued walking, not thinking about much except that Philippa was his good friend and that he was glad to have had her assistance tonight. He stepped around the detritus of a hundred people jammed inside a room that comfortably held half that number. A gentleman's glove. A bit of lace, a handkerchief, silk flowers that had surely started the evening pinned to some young lady's hair or hem.

Dane stopped in front of her chair. "Philippa."

She straightened her head and blinked at him. Her shawl draped behind her bare shoulders, exposing skin as pale as any Englishwoman could wish. Her legs were crossed at the ankles and her feet were tucked under her chair. Dane was quite sure she smiled before she knew it was him. He didn't remember her eyes being quite so remarkable a shade of green. An unusual, light green. How interesting. And yes, disturbing, that he should notice any such thing about her.

He grinned and reached for her hand. He'd removed his gloves for the night, but she still wore hers. "A success, my little party, don't you think?"

A concoction of lace, ribbons and silk flowers covered the top of her strawberry blonde hair, a fashionable color among the young ladies of society. That he was now the sort of man who knew such things as what was fashionable among the ladies remained a source of amazement to him. He'd known Philippa his entire life. Her hair had been that shade of reddish-gold before it was fashionable.

Philippa was no girl. She was a mature woman. Thirty-one, though she could easily pass for younger. Her features were more elegant than he had

called to mind during the time he'd been away. The shape of her face and the definite mouth above a pointed chin balanced out her nose, and her eyes, as, for some reason, he was just noticing tonight, were striking. Her smile, in his opinion, came too rarely.

"My lord." Her eyes traveled from his head to his toes, and he quirked his eyebrows at that. She meant nothing by the perusal, after all. Another smile played about her mouth. "How dare you be so perfectly put together after dancing and entertaining all night."

Dane knew he was in splendid form. His clothes fit with the perfection only a London tailor achieved for a man of means. He wasn't a sheep farmer anymore, except by proxy when his steward forwarded the income, and he was inordinately pleased that Philippa had noticed the change. Made him feel a proper sort of aristo.

"I was about to ask you the very same question." He bowed, returning her smile with one of his own.

Philippa had agreed to act as his hostess tonight because he was a twenty-five-year-old bachelor, his mother was in Bath with his eldest sister, and he was alone at Frieth House for the first time since leaving four years ago. He made a mental note to send her flowers tomorrow. Was there even a florist in North Baslemere? Gad. He might have send to Guildford for roses. Pink or white, he wondered? Or perhaps tulips if they could be found.

"Flatterer." She opened her fan and waved it beneath her chin. Her eyes twinkled with amusement. He did like the sound of her voice. Definite, controlled. And yet, there was a fullness to the tone that made him wish she'd keep talking. "Do go on, my lord."

He laughed, but that he'd said such a fatuous thing embarrassed him. He'd been in London long enough that empty words came to his lips without

thought. There was no good reason for him to flatter Philippa, particularly when doing so made him look a bloody damn fool.

Was it flattery if what he'd said was true?

The only other people in the room now were servants, most of them hired by Philippa on his behalf since he no longer made Frieth House his primary home. He'd come back to North Baslemere for a number of reasons. This was his birthplace, for one, and he had deep and lasting connections here despite the changes in his life. For another, Philippa was going to remarry, and he wanted to celebrate the happy event when she and her prospective groom formally announced their news.

"Not too tired to walk a little more, I hope?" He cocked his head in the direction of the terrace door and looked at her sideways. She'd taken a great deal of care with her appearance tonight. Something he hadn't noticed before, what with the excitement of a party so perfectly managed he'd had nothing to do but enjoy himself. Pink roses. "Did I remember to compliment your appearance?" This wasn't flattery, he told himself. "If I didn't, you have permission to shoot me."

"No, Alec, I don't believe you did." These days Philippa was the only person to call him by his given name. He rather liked the informality. From her. She held out her hand, and he took it as she rose. "A breath of air would be delightful."

Now that he'd spent time in London, he saw Philippa with a more experienced eye. She was not quite beautiful, but she had something that appealed. Her looks were in no way inferior, but her confidence, her utter satisfaction with herself as she was, made her interesting for more than her face and figure. During his time away, he had learned that even perfection was tedious in a woman one did not otherwise admire. She glanced at him,

mercifully unaware of his inventory of her physical attributes. Christ. London and its courtesans had made him a lech before he was thirty. What business had he noticing her that way? Before she tucked her hand in the crook of his arm, she adjusted her shawl and in the process gave him a flash of bare shoulder. He hadn't seen her in an evening gown before, and, well, this close to her and with none of his earlier distractions he could see her skin was perfectly smooth and white from her forehead to her bosom.

They continued to the set of double doors that led to the terrace, leaving the servants to the task of cleaning up. If it were daylight they would be able to see the roses that had been his mother's pride while she lived here, before his sisters had given their mother grandchildren upon which to dote.

"I've asked a maid to make up a room for you," he said. They were outside now and crossing the terrace. He'd also never realized she was as delicate as she was, though one also had to take into account the fact that he was a bigger man now, taller and broader through the shoulders than when he'd left North Baslemere.

"It's not so late," she said. "I'll walk home."

"Nonsense." He put his hand over hers. "I won't hear of it."

Philippa tilted her head in his direction. "I'm not sure that's wise, my lord."

"What isn't wise?"

"My staying the night."

"Why ever not? You're family." Even before the words were out, he understood, with a disconcerting thump of his heart, what she meant. He'd thought of her as an older sister for years and years. Twenty-five years, to be exact. But she wasn't his sister. Appearances were everything, and if she stayed the night, a youthful widow in the home of a London buck, there might

be unpleasant speculation.

A rather explicit image popped into his head. Him covering her, thrusting into her, while she held him tight against her naked body.

Good God. Had he gone mad?

“And yet, not family.” She adjusted her shawl.

“If not family, then fast friends.” Dane had the oddest conviction that he’d somehow stepped out of time and that now nothing was familiar to him. Not his childhood home. Not this terrace or the garden he’d grown up with. Not even Philippa, who he admired as a friend.

“Yes,” she said, tightening her hand on his arm. “We are friends, aren’t we? Lifelong friends.” They stopped at the furthest edge of the terrace. She took a deep breath of the night air.

Dane who, by coincidence, happened to be looking down, saw the swell of her breasts against her neckline. In his out-of-place mood, he thought of sex. With Philippa. And that sent another jolt of heat through him.

CHAPTER 2

Jesus. He'd gone mad. Thank God she had her eyes closed because he was still looking and thinking thoughts that ought not be in his head.

She lifted her hands toward the night sky. "It is lovely out, isn't it?"

"Yes." He clasped his hands behind his back and tried to ignore his so awkward awareness of her as a woman instead of as Philippa, who, in the pages of her letters to him, had often possessed no gender at all.

The bodice of her gown was green satin with a matching bow beneath her bosom and two wide, tasseled ribbons hanging down to nearly to the hem of her white muslin skirts. Her slippers matched the green. The hue complemented her hair and eyes. As for the bare skin on display, well, in London he'd learned he was a man who admired a woman's bosom. Maybe that explained his plunge into madness. Long legs were nice, of course, but to have one's eyes and hands and mouth engaged with a woman's breasts, there was his particular notion of sensual paradise.

What he could see of Philippa's breasts was very nice.

"My lord?"

"Mm?"

She tapped his arm with her fan. "Gathering wool, Alec?"

He tore his gaze from her chest and his thoughts from the bedroom in which he had privately ensconced them while he undressed her. She was too polite to let on if she'd noticed him leering at her like some satyr from the forest deep. "I beg your pardon." He cleared his throat. "Lost in the clouds, I suppose."

"Did I see you speaking to Captain Bancroft earlier?" The crack of her fan opening startled him.

Captain Bancroft was the man she was going to marry. "Yes," he said carefully. "We did speak."

Inside, the servants were putting out the candles and lamps that had made the ballroom blaze, so their spot on the terrace was slowly receding into darkness. She glanced toward the roses. "To think I held you in my arms when you were hardly three weeks old. I was six, and so proud to be allowed to hold the baby."

Yes, he thought with immense relief. This was exactly the direction their conversation needed to take. Talk of him in nappies and his hair all curls. "Did you ever imagine I would turn out as I have?"

She faced him, her expression serious. Composed. How had he never noticed her mouth before? Such a lovely, soft mouth. "I've loved you since that day," she said. She was so sure of herself. So certain that her opinion held weight and consequence. She was right, of course. He cared very much what she thought.

He found that attractive, this confidence of hers. In fact, he'd sought that very quality in the lovers he'd taken. The few there'd been. Dane was certain Philippa would be confident in his arms. She would do exactly as she wished, convinced she was entitled to her pleasure, too. God save him from women who merely accepted.

Her shawl slid off her shoulders, and she brought the ends forward so more of the material hung from the crooks of her elbows. "I loved you as if you were my own." She tipped her head toward him. Philippa, he was quite sure, had no difficulty keeping him in his proper place. "And yes, I expected all along that you would turn out well. I never doubted for a moment."

"I did."

She cocked her head. Always so serious. "I suppose we all doubt ourselves to some degree or another, don't you think?"

"Or else we're insufferable, yes." He brought her closer to his side, and she leaned in toward him. Philippa rarely smiled, and she did not now. He wondered what he could do to change that. She lifted her chin, eyebrows arched when their gazes locked. The deep awareness in her eyes was exactly as he recalled. "I've never thought you doubted yourself," he said. "Why?"

"Oh, yes," she said, and he fancied she sounded sad. "Quite often."

"But why?" he asked in a low voice. He lifted a hand to touch her cheek, but didn't. "Why so sad, Philippa?" he whispered. "What's made you so melancholy tonight?"

She kept her torso turned toward him. His heart skipped a beat. "If I ask you a question, Alec, will you answer me honestly?"

Dane considered that. While she awaited his reply, in the distance, someone's hound bayed. He'd learned a thing or two in London. "I cannot promise you that, Philippa." Her fingers remained on his arm, and he reached over and placed his palm over the top of her hand. "There are subjects about which no gentleman should ever be frank." Somehow, that seemed the wrong thing to say. "When a lady is concerned."

Her mouth thinned. "It's London that's done this to you. Isn't it?"

He froze in fear of her remonstrance against his immodest leers. Hell, he

was looking even now. She knew the inappropriate direction of his thoughts. She'd always been one to divine his thoughts. "Done what?"

She looked . . . wistful. "Made you so infernally wise." She studied him. "I felt it in your letters, you know." The edge of her mouth quirked down. "Such wisdom in a man so young."

He laughed. His amusement didn't bring a smile to her mouth and it didn't dispel his odd mood, either.

She shook her head. "I'm serious, Alec." She took a step away, almost as if she were dancing with him. Her gloved hand fell slowly to her side. They hadn't danced tonight. Not once. That seemed a pity to him now. "Your opinion matters a great deal to me."

He pulled on his cuffs, but he looked at her from under his lowered eyes. "What wisdom I have is at your disposal."

"It's about Captain Bancroft."

His heart sank. If he told her the truth, she might never forgive him. "Ask me something simpler. Please."

Her mouth curved; at last a smile. For a moment he succeeded in making her back into the Philippa he'd been writing to all these years. The older woman with a life completely separate from his own. The illusion did not last. "What would be the good of that, my lord?"

She turned away, facing the garden and the shadowed forms of the roses. Her shawl drooped to her waist in the back. He found himself staring at the bare skin of her neck and shoulders. Another green satin bow nestled below her shoulder blades. A tendril of her hair had loosened from the curls at the back of her head and dangled just above her nape.

He stood behind her. Close enough to touch that so pale skin. Enough that he could see the curve of her breasts. "Ask me your question, then, and I'll

answer as honestly and politically as I can.”

Philippa bowed her head, then faced him again. Her tongue came out and tapped her lower lip just once. Dane steadied himself. They were friends. They'd practically grown up together. There had never, in all those years, been so much as a hint of sexual attraction between them. Not once.

“I think you're my only friend.” Her eyes opened wide, and she was looking at him. Really at him, and he knew whatever she asked, he would give her the truth. “The only one whose opinion I trust.” She came close enough to rest her hand on his arm. He breathed in the scent of her perfume. “Is it not peculiar that you're the only person I can think of who understands?”

“What is it you want to ask me about Captain Bancroft?”

She sighed and for a moment looked so miserable his heart broke for her. “You met him tonight. Spoke with him for a while?”

Dane nodded.

Her eyes surveyed his face. There was really no hope of him getting out of this. She'd always been able to tell when he was lying. “What was your opinion of him?”

He steeled himself against a reaction that would betray him before he had a chance to understand why she was asking. “Answer me this first, do you love him?”

She looked away, and he put a finger to her chin and brought her face back to his. His finger had a mind of its own for it slid along the edge of her jaw from the underside of her chin to the point just beneath her ear. Such soft, soft skin.

A part of him was aware that in touching her like this he'd begun a slide into intimacy that would take them well past friendship if he let it.

“Come now.” He was aware that his touch was a lover's touch and that

his voice— Well. He'd spoken to lovers in just such a voice, hadn't he? "Your letters mentioned him often enough. If you love him, you don't need my opinion."

"Why not?" Her mouth firmed. "Why shouldn't I ask your opinion of the man I might marry?"

Might.

"If you feel guilty for loving a man who is not your late husband, you shouldn't."

She blinked several times, and he felt like a heel for every one of his inappropriate reactions. He pulled his clean handkerchief from his pocket and put it into her free hand while she sniffled. "I don't know. Sometimes I think. . ."

He took his hand away from her face and, somehow his errant fingers ended up on her shoulder. On the skin bared by her gown.

The lights in the ballroom were doused now, and he and Philippa stood in shadowed night. He stroked her shoulder and ended up following the line of her collarbone. He shouldn't be touching her, and yet he was. And she wasn't moving away. Curious. Or else deflating of his pride.

"It is difficult to be a woman alone," she said. She gazed at him. "What was your opinion of him?" Her fingers squeezed the life out of his handkerchief. "The truth. Please."

Dane sighed. The raw truth was that he hadn't liked Captain Bancroft at all. "He struck me as reserved."

Her hand tightened around his arm. "Unvarnished truth, Alec."

God, yes. If he took her to bed, she would take what she wanted from him. For the first time since the thought had come into his head, he thought perhaps he ought to.

Philippa's gaze was steady on him. "I am a grown woman and quite capable of coming to my own conclusions whatever you say about him. You won't convince me of anything I don't already suspect."

"Very well." He ought to put more space between them. He didn't. "I thought him cold and condescending and insincere in his interactions with me."

She sighed. "He is a proud man. That is a fault of his, I know. But he admires me, and I suppose I am to be flattered by that."

"He would be mad not to admire you." There. Unvarnished truth. "It's a good match, Philippa. That's what others are saying."

"And you? What do you say?"

"That a man like him will do his duty." He wanted to help her, to make her life turn out as it should; with her safe and happy and secure. She was right, a woman alone, especially a beautiful woman like Philippa, well, there were always difficulties for a woman in her situation. "He'll look after you."

She gave a tight nod. "He's an honorable man."

"Yes."

Philippa looked at the sky as if a consultation with the moon would help her through whatever she was thinking. "Shall I make you a confession?"

He took a step closer to her. "You know you may."

"I do not admire him as I ought."

He didn't answer right away, and when he found words, they weren't the ones he'd planned to say to her. "Do you love him, Philippa?"

She walked away from the house. He went after her, stopping her with a hand to her shoulder. She halted, head bowed. In a low voice, she said, "Life is often more complicated than one wishes it to be."

Dane stood behind her, scant inches between them. He put his hands on her shoulders. "Don't marry him, Philippa," he said into the dark. "Not if you don't love him. Not if he can't make you happy."

"There's a great deal to admire in him." Her voice stayed low. "He commanded a ship of the line and was twice commended for bravery, you know."

Again he trailed his index finger along the top of her shoulder. His watched the

tip of his finger moving along her skin. So soft, her skin was. "More unvarnished truth for you, Philippa." He breathed in. "I didn't like him."

More lights inside the house had been extinguished. They were now standing in full dark with the moon bright in a cloudless sky casting shadows onto shadows. And he was touching her as a lover might.

"I've met officers who served with him." She didn't move. No shrug to dislodge his fingers. No step away. "They were sincere in their admiration of him."

He thought of Captain Bancroft, his dreary gray eyes and the disdain that oozed from him whenever he smiled. Daring you to believe the smile when the truth was in his eyes. "He's a prig."

Philippa turned around and they gazed at each other in the dark, with moonlight and the quiet falling soft around them. The light silvered her hair and deepened the shadows beneath her collar bones and between her breasts. Her mouth twitched. "I daresay he is."

He slid his finger along the side of her throat and by now there was really no denying his caress. She didn't move. And he didn't stop touching her. The rest of his fingers followed. Along the side of her jaw, the top of her cheekbone. Beneath the ripeness of her lower lip.

"I ought to marry him." She turned her head away, toward the dark, and Dane drew a finger along the neckline of her gown and after a moment more, he leaned in and pressed his mouth to the side of her throat, breathing in the scent of verbena that clung to her skin, and after one more moment, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

CHAPTER 3

Frieth House. The Rose Garden.

Philippa thought she was doing quite well managing her conversation with Alec. He had, after all, given her his honest opinion of Captain Bancroft, and that was something. She had successfully ignored the trip in her pulse when he touched her or when their eyes met. Her reaction was not proper. They were friends. Not lovers or even potential lovers. So she had suppressed all her inconvenient admiration of his person.

And then, well. Things simply went wrong. How it happened, she didn't understand, but Alec, whom she had known since he was a boy, who was still, in her mind, unconscionably young, took her in his arms and kissed her.

Not on the cheek. Or the forehead.

On the mouth.

There really wasn't any misunderstanding his intent.

She'd been thinking about kissing him for some time. And, when it happened, God save her soul, her stomach took flight.

She had a single moment of clarity during which she understood the enormity of her mistake in coming out here with him. One moment when she might have put a stop to whatever madness took her over. One moment, and all her good intentions dissolved like sugar into tea.

She was caught up, swept along by the way he wrapped his arms around her as if he had every right to, as if this was something they ought to do. As if doing so were actually a good idea. Surely it wasn't. But if he thought so, who was she to object when she was so lonely without him?

He felt delicious. Warm and strong and certain of what he was doing. And she, she didn't feel quite as alone anymore.

He fit his mouth to hers and in her last moment of sanity and good sense, she recalled that he wasn't even twenty-six and she was six years his elder, a mature woman who ought to know better.

Alec cupped the back of her head with one hand and slid the other tighter around her waist, and for the first time in her life, she had to lift her chin in order to be properly kissed. He was taller than her husband had been, and he was kissing her increasingly as if he wanted to do more than just kiss her. Something inside her wanted that. And more.

She gave up because Alec had grown into a man, and he knew, she quickly discovered, how to kiss. She had not been held like this since William died. Until this very moment, she hadn't known how terribly she'd missed the physical intimacy; the knowledge that someone found her physically desirable even though she was no longer young.

Not to mention the unsettling discovery that she could be aroused by another man. She'd begun to think she would never want anyone but William. In Alec's embrace, the grayness that had enveloped her since her husband's death vanished. Her body came to life with a selfish desire to be touched, caressed, and even, Lord save her soul, to be penetrated. She was mad. She must be mad. Lulled into foolishness by the moonlight.

She wanted Alec Fall inside her, this young man who had grown up and become so much more than the handsome boy he'd been.

His mouth opened over hers, and she responded in kind. His chest was solid

against hers, his arms strong, and she melted against him because he felt so good, because she missed a man's embrace. He smelled of bergamot and lemon and, oh, how lovely, he wasn't tentative at all. His tongue was in her mouth, and she wasn't sure she could support her weight on her trembling knees. She wasn't sure she wanted to.

She was aroused. Sexually. Carnally. Wickedly, thoroughly aroused for the first time in months and months. All this time, she'd been afraid Captain Bancroft would do more than kiss her cheek, to the point where she'd concluded there was something wrong with her. Alec forced her to confront with the lie of that. She wanted him to do more than hold her. A very great deal more.

Somehow, she found the strength to push away. "Alec." Her mouth felt bruised, her body alive. She swallowed. "My lord."

He kept his arms around her as if he had no doubts. "Mm?"

She closed her eyes, shivering. "You are so young."

"But not too young." He kissed the top of her cheek, just below her eye. "And not too inexperienced, I hope."

"I didn't imagine you were." There was no way earth a man could kiss like that and be a virgin. The thought of Alec in bed with a woman shocked her into stillness. He had been. Of course he had been. Some other woman had been his first. And there had been others after that, she was certain. He seemed to have guessed what she was thinking because his beautiful mouth curved. She tried for dignity and suspected she'd failed. "You must have been very much in demand in London."

"Oh, yes," he said, a laugh in his voice. His fingers splayed over her lower back and kept her close. "All the young gentlemen are put to stud in London."

"That isn't what I meant." The whole time, she stroked his face, tracing the outline of his mouth, the slant of his cheekbones, the soft depression just beneath his eyes. She wondered about the woman who'd been his first and imagined him touching her, kissing her body, the first time he slid into a woman. "Was she very beautiful?"

His hand on her waist slipped to the small of her back and his fingers angled

down and tonight, of all nights, she'd worn a short corset and there was, in fact, very little material between his hand and the side of her hip. "Yes. But not as beautiful as you."

Alec kissed her again and she buried one hand in his lovely, thick dark hair, while the other clutched his shoulder. Her shawl was tangled between them with one corner dangling to her feet, which she knew because she was stepping on the end. She let her neck relax until the moment his palm supported the weight of her head and imagined how the moonlight must be silvering her face, seeping into her blood, into the marrow of her bones.

His breath fell warm on her cheek. "Philippa."

Her name was a whisper. Soft as a petal. Calling to her in a way that made her heart feel too big for her chest. No one had whispered her name like that since William. An endearment, his whisper was. So achingly sweet. She did not release him. In such moments of inaction were momentous decisions made.

He lowered his head again, and his lips slid down her throat, soft kisses. Gentle kisses. Needful kisses that brought tears to the back of her throat. His hand on her hip moved away, but only long enough to gather up her shawl and drape the end over her shoulder. He took a step forward, holding her, moving them, she realized, deeper into the garden.

Philippa's eyes fluttered open and her gaze locked with his. She understood the look in his eyes, the touch of his fingertips, the reason they were now standing completely out of the circle of light from the house. If one of the servants happened to look out the window, they would not be seen.

She shivered. Not because she was cold. These feelings were wrong, but oh, since he'd been away he'd become a lovely man and they had written to each other, holding back so little of themselves. She knew so many secrets of his. And he the same of her.

Not a boy any longer. A man fully grown. And her friend, too. She trusted him. She knew him to be thoughtful. Principled. A gentleman.

"Don't go home tonight," he whispered. "Stay with me. Even if only for a while, Philippa." His voice slid between them, a low, enticing whisper. In the dark, in just the light from the moon, she had to strain to see him. He wrapped his fingers in the folds of her shawl and pulled her closer.

She missed the passion of her marriage and now that this so very young man had awakened such longing in her, she wanted to say yes. She wasn't sure she could do anything but assent. Seconds ticked away.

"Christ," he said, his voice low and dark. And he sounded like a man who knew what he wanted and intended to have it. "Don't say no."

She cupped his face in her hands, leaning against his torso. "Alec, how can we?"

"The usual way," he said. "The way any man and woman do."

She shook her head then realized he probably couldn't see her. Not well enough. His cheeks were smooth, but since he was so dark haired, probably that was because he'd shaved before he came downstairs for the ball. Once again, she didn't step away. She didn't even let go of his face.

"Good." He kissed her again, sweetly, cajoling her, keeping her close against him, and Lord save her, she kissed him back again. Foolish. So foolish. Even while she thought that, her hand slid around to the back of his neck, and she wished desperately she wasn't wearing gloves. She pulled back, and he drew in a quick breath.

He let go of her and dug into an interior pocket of his coat. "There's a private entrance round back. The stairs exit directly into my room. We can go there now and see where this leads us."

"No," she whispered. She pressed her palm over his hand, trapping it in his pocket. She could salvage this. Save them both the awkwardness of a moment lost to moonlight. "No. Alec," she whispered. "I can't."

"Why?"

"I never meant for that to happen. To let you kiss me like that."

He worked his hand free of his pocket and caught her hand in his. "Lie to me if

you like, but don't lie to yourself."

Good heavens, he was throwing her own words back at her. Words she'd said to him years ago whenever he said something dishonest. She took a step back and shook out her skirt. She was horribly aroused. Her body tingled with anticipation and desire. "Touché, my lord."

"I'm sorry you lost William." He caught both her hands in his and held tight, and her heart gave a twist in her chest. "I am sorry. Believe that if you believe nothing else I ever say to you. If he were still alive, I'd be happy for you." He lowered his voice. "But he isn't, Philippa. Don't live as if you'd died, too."

"I thought I had." To her horror, her voice hitched.

He pulled her into his arms again. "That's the reason you think you ought to marry that prig Bancroft, isn't it? So you won't have to love anyone again." He closed the gap between them and put his mouth by her ear. "Don't deny it."

And then, the wicked, wicked, man's tongue flicked out and touched the side of her neck.

"You're wrong," she said.

"Liar."

She didn't answer.

"I'm going to strip you naked," he said. "And ask you to do a hundred wicked things to me." The rawness of his voice set off a quivering need in her. He grabbed her hand and started walking and she, who could have objected, did not, even though he wasn't heading back to the terrace.

CHAPTER 4

A thousand times between then and now Philippa could have objected. She didn't. And the astonishing thing was that she wasn't the least bit conflicted, even though she'd let him make the decision for her. She'd done so even though since William's death she'd had to take control of her life and was now well used to dealing with her own affairs and making her own decisions.

She was perfectly capable of directing the course of her life.

Philippa followed him to the back of Frieth House and stayed silent when he fit his key to the door. For now, she resisted the urge to lay her hand on Alec's back. Instead, she imagined the warmth, the play of muscle underneath his coat she would feel if she were to do something so bold.

Snick.

Not a moment later, they were inside with the door closed behind them, away from the moonlight and enveloped in the darkness of the stairwell. He let out a breath, low and soft as silk and they stood there by the door. Alec didn't move. He didn't give her space. She didn't make any.

"It's been too long for me," she said.

"I know."

Time stretched to eternity. She might die from the anticipation of the next moments. Her stomach took flight when he leaned in. She did the same, leaned toward him. Alec took a step forward, putting his weight into the motion, and she took a

backward until there wasn't any farther she could go, and he kissed her there, with her head and shoulders touching the wall behind her. His kiss was slow. Tender. Thorough. She melted against him. Surrendered to him.

Of course she had. She wanted this. *This*. So fiercely. The electricity in her belly, the warmth between her legs, the ache in her breasts, the way her breath caught in her throat. His mouth on hers. The taste of him. The solidness. The maleness of him.

He planted his palms above her shoulders and pressed forward. His torso touched hers, and she put her arms around his neck and while he kissed her and while she kissed him back, she slid the fingers of both her hands up and into his hair and brought him closer.

The past with Alec was exploded and had been since the moment they'd stepped out on the terrace. Now, she thought, *this is Alec, this man who is holding me with such conviction*. She couldn't square this impossibility with her present condition, the heat that ran just beneath her skin, her desire to touch him, her desire to have him touch her. To do those hundred wicked things to him. And more besides.

They broke apart, not far, and he gripped her shoulders and rested his forehead against hers, waiting, she realized, for his breathing to settle. "I can't wait," he said, with them standing there like this, "I can't wait," he said in a low voice, "until I am inside you."

His bluntness shocked her. And aroused her. She wasn't a prude, not by any means, but William had never expressed his desire for her in such frank words. She didn't know if she ought to reply in kind and so said nothing in reply.

Alec held her hand while he led her up the stairs. At the top, she could just make out the faint outline of the doorway. Which meant there was likely someone inside. A servant. His valet most probably. He straightened his coat and ran his fingers through his hair before he glanced at her to make sure she would be out of sight when he opened the door. She stayed to one side, out of the crescent of light that appeared on the floor and ceiling of the landing.

"Burns," he said. He walked inside. His voice receded with his advance into the room. "I won't need you tonight after all."

She listened to the murmur of a male voice and then to silence.

"Good night, then. I'll call you in the morning. When I'm ready."

There was another silence, and then Alec appeared in the arc of light and reached through the doorway to grab her hand and bring her inside. Into his room. "Stay here." His gaze held with hers until she nodded. As if she were capable of withdrawing now. She wasn't that strong. He reached behind her and shot the bolt home on the staircase door.

He secured the other doors, too. He'd grown up in Frieth House, and this room, the master suite, had been his father's, a fact she knew because she'd practically grown up here as the Fall family's third daughter, even though she was no relation at all.

The room had changed very little from what she remembered. Alec's father had been a man of simple tastes. Spartan, even, but kind. He'd never forgotten her if he had gifts for his own children. She'd loved him as if he'd been her real father.

The desk against the far wall was oak with a fold-out leaf presently lowered to show the drawers and cubby holes that would otherwise be hidden. In front of the desk was a plain oak chair. In the corner, a washstand with a white and blue basin and ewer and a towel nearby. The red highboy and armoire with uncarved door were familiar sights. A tassel hung from the key still in the armoire lock. The bed was plain. No high posts. No canopy or hangings.

Frieth House was Tudor and, like the previous Falls, Alec's father had modernized very little. The walls and ceiling were square panels of carved mahogany. The wide plank floor was covered with a carpet that had probably been in place for a hundred years.

Despite how little had changed since the last time Philippa had seen the room, there were signs everywhere of Alec's imprimatur. Books on the desk, for example, one of them still open. Alec had always been an avid reader. At the foot of the bed was a

black trunk with the coronet of his earldom painted on it in gold and silver, red and blue, with an occasional splash of yellow. A decanter of brandy sat on a table, a crystal tumbler next to it.

She walked to the center of the room just as Alec came back from locking the last door. He headed to where she stood and stopped too close to her for a man who was only a friend. Too close for safety. Not close enough for a lover.

Her stomach fluttered. Alec seemed at once ineffably familiar and a complete stranger to her. The boy she'd known her entire life, the young gentleman with whom she had exchanged frank and even intimate letters, and this handsome, unknowable man whose touch made her feel alive.

"You haven't changed your mind have you?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Good."

In all the time she'd known him, not once had she seen him the way she did now. As a desirable man. A man of substance and weight, of a surprising gravitas considering his age. She studied him now, trying to understand what had changed. However long she looked, she didn't think she'd ever know. Her eyes saw a man now. A man she desired.

His irises were nearly black and his lashes were a thick, dark sweep across his cheeks. His father lived on in the angles of his face, the length of his nose, the distance between his eyes. The shape of his mouth was his mother. Sensitive, his lower lip slightly fuller than the upper. There was a dimple in his chin. She very much wanted to make love to him. To Alec.

"Lovely Philippa." He pushed her shawl off her shoulders, catching it at the crooks of her elbows and pulling the cashmere away to drape over the desk chair. His touch, light as it was, sent a quiver through her body. "I can hardly believe you're here." He took her right hand and worked her glove off her fingers. "That it's you," he said as he did this. He drew her glove off her arm and glanced at her before he went to work on

the other one. He took the fan dangling from her wrist and set that on the trunk. When he drew off her other glove, she pulled her hand back. His gaze met hers and desire roared through her.

He dropped her second glove on top of the trunk with her fan and the other glove. A smile quirked his mouth, and she was reminded of the boy he'd been. His smile had always been infectious. The man before her had no hesitations about what he was doing. "You anticipate me wonderfully well."

"I am relieved, my lord."

He reached for her left hand. Their bare skin touched. Hand to hand. The tips of his fingers slid over hers, once, slowly, over the wedding ring she still wore. "Do you miss him?"

"Yes." She spoke over the lump in her throat.

"I miss him, too. His letters." He slipped his arms around her waist, and as he pulled her close, he made a low sound in the back of his throat. Because he was a young and healthy young man. Because he desired her.

The tension in her eased. She put her hands on his chest and slid them down to the first button of his coat. Her wedding band glittered on her finger. She unfastened the button.

His eyelids closed part way. "Mm. What wickedness is this?"

"Wickedness?" She darted a look at him before she started on the next button. "You are in your private quarters, my lord. Surely you can be comfortable here without thinking yourself wicked."

"Perhaps you're right." He shrugged off his coat when she was done, but her hands followed the collar until the fine wool was sliding past his shoulders and down his arms to the point where she could reach no further. He leaned away to drop his coat on the chair.

"I think, Philippa, that I am still not as comfortable as I might be. Tell me, what ought we to do about that?"

She couldn't help smiling. His waistcoat soon joined his coat. And there he stood, in his trousers, shirt and braces, and he was simply too beautiful for words.

"It strikes me," he said, still smiling that familiar smile of his, "that you must be uncomfortable, too. And here—" He gave a quick look around "—I think we may both be as comfortable as we like."

Philippa held up her hands. "I've already removed my gloves. And my shawl."

"Very bold." He ran his index fingers from the tops of her shoulders downward along the neckline of her gown. "But I worry that this lovely gown of yours restricts you too much to be at ease. Does it?"

"Perhaps you're right, my lord."

"Mm," he said. He moved behind her and began unfastening the hooks and ties of her gown. Before long, he was lowering the dress and she stepped out of her best evening gown. Her corset was next. Then petticoat. When he was done, he set his hands on her shoulders and his mouth by her ear to whisper, "Is that better?"

She could only nod. She was now wearing only her shift, and, of course, her dancing slippers and stockings. Alec stayed behind her and put his hands around her natural waist. She melted against his chest.

"What a slender woman you are, Philippa."

"Does that disappoint you?"

"No." His hands slid up, his fingers slanted toward the floor. His hands stopped just beneath her bosom. She held her breath, longing for him to touch her yet enjoying the building warmth. She was liquid inside, a pool of desire when she'd once thought she was no longer capable of that sort of reaction.

His fingers brushed the bottom curve of her breasts.

Philippa faced him, and he was looking at her as if he wanted to eat her alive. She pushed his braces off his shoulders. Alex shrugged, and they fell to his sides. She undid his neckcloth then the buttons on the placket of his shirt. He reached between them and pulled it over his head, turning a little to let it drop away from where they

stood.

“What a splendid animal you are,” she whispered. “So sleek. So well made.” His body was the product of youthful vigor and lack of indolence. She touched his chest, sliding a finger over his nipple.

“More,” he said on an intake of breath. He cupped the back of her neck and drew her toward him. She kissed him there, flicking her tongue over his nipple. One, then the other.

He gathered handfuls of her shift, and drew it up and over her head. She stood before Alec wearing nothing but her shoes and stockings. He stayed completely still, eyes on her body, lingering on her breasts. “So lovely.”

With her eyes on his, she touched her breasts. The effect on him was gratifying. The wide open eyes, the swift intake of breath. “Your hands,” she said, “need to be here.”

His attention fixed on her hands, on her fingers. He took a step forward and his hands came between them, one then the other, pushing away hers. And then his fingers covered her and she pressed forward and raised her face to the ceiling, eyes closed because she didn't think she could look at him and keep back the tears at the same time. She knew him so well. He would never do anything to hurt her.

“Like this?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“Tell me what you want.”

Slowly, she lowered her head, and when she opened her eyes, he was looking at her with that same reverence that made her throat close up. “To feel.” She covered his hands with hers. “To be alive the way I am right now. Like this.”

Alec swept her up in his arms and carried her the ten steps to the bed. He spread himself over her, one hand above her shoulder, letting the weight of his hips press against her pelvis yet keeping himself over her. His hair fell over his forehead and his lashes were black against his cheeks. He was looking at her body, her breasts, her

stomach. He stroked his hand down her body, from her shoulders to her toes and back.

"Jesus, Philippa. You're so lovely."

"The lights," she said.

He looked up. "What of them?"

"Don't you mean to turn them down?"

"No," he said. "I don't." He curled a hand around her upper thigh, pulling up so that her knee bent and his palm spread flat around the back of her leg. His other arm bore his weight and when she set her fingertips to his upper arm, she traced the shape of the muscles. "I want to see you. I want to put my mouth places that will make you scream my name, and I want to watch when you come apart in my arms."

Alec dropped his head and then his mouth was on her breast, his weight a little heavier on her now. She twined her legs around his, arching into the pressure of his mouth. Her body felt too full, the sensations too intense to bear. His fingers pulled at her garter and, after fumbling a bit, released one to slide her stocking down her bare leg, all without looking. When he'd done that, he shifted his weight to his other arm and his mouth to her other breast. Her other garter was soon gone, her slipper and stocking tossed off the bed which she knew because she heard the sound of her shoe hitting the floor.

She moaned when he pulled away. "No," she said. "Stay."

"I want to look at you." His voice sounded thick, and when she managed to open her eyes, he was doing exactly that, kneeling between her legs, pushing her bent knees apart. "Does this make you feel alive? Tell me."

"Oh, yes," she said on a breath.

He kissed his way down her stomach, to her belly and then his mouth was between her legs and she simply hadn't expected he would be willing to do such a thing, and he wrung her out. Completely and utterly.

Philippa let her body vanish into her arousal, the cresting pleasure and the damnable way he would bring her to the edge of climax and then stop.

She lost her mind.

"Alec." Her body bowed off the bed. His name was a groan, a long low note of all the pleasure that wound her body tighter and tighter. The silvery tremble of her approaching climax filled her. "Now."

She shouted, and she didn't care at all what he'd think of that. The spiral of pleasure peaked and she fell and fell and fell and she didn't care at all what he thought of her. When she came back to her body, he'd pulled himself over her and was grinning at her.

"Good?" His mouth twitched.

She touched his naked back with her fingertips, drawing them down the sides of his spine as far as she could reach. Until she touched his trousers. "You are still dressed," she said when she could trust herself to speak. "Why is that?"

"An excellent question." He pushed up and then away to sit on the edge of the mattress. She turned onto her side, watching him. Her marriage had been a passionate one, but William had never displayed himself in this unconscious, uninhibited way. Her husband had come to her room at night, and never without letting her know that he would. In the dark, he slid between the covers with her, and they made love with tender quiet.

Alec's skin fit close to his body. When he moved, his muscles flexed and bulged. He wasn't slender like William had been. She touched the top of his spine.

"Look at you," she whispered.

He turned his head toward her while he was pulling off one shoe. He smiled. "I'd rather look at you."

"What is it you do that keeps you in such health?" She moved behind him, kneeling and slipping her hands around his waist.

"Boxing." He dropped his other shoe and reached for the sagging waist of his trousers. As he pushed them off along with his small clothes, his erection was free to the air and her sight.

He was naked at last. Gloriously, splendidly naked. She reached around him and touched the dark coiled hair around his penis. Alec tensed and reached up and back to curl his palms around the backs of her arms. She cupped his sac. With a moan, he let his head fall back against her shoulder. He put one heel on the mattress, letting his thigh fall open. "Philippa, yes. More of that, too."

His skin was warm, and she held him like this, stroking him, touching him until, all in one motion, he slid an arm around her, turned them both around and then he covered her with his body.

CHAPTER 5

Dane set his hands above her shoulders and kept his weight on his palms. He was aroused beyond anything, but there was something more he was feeling, and he wasn't sure what it was, other than it had to do with Philippa. Obviously. And then, perhaps not so obviously.

"Have I told you how lovely you are?" he said. "How perfect? Exquisite?"

He dipped his head to kiss her shoulder. At this exact moment he elected to think more about the curves of her body, the shape of her breasts, the texture of her skin than his emotional state. He'd made love often enough without his heart being involved at all. This was different. She was Philippa, and she took his breath.

Philippa set her hands on his shoulders, her palms curving over to his back. Her eyes closed, her mouth parted. He shifted himself into place, and she knew exactly what it meant that he nudged aside her thighs. He knew what it meant that her hips shifted underneath him, that inviting tilt of her pelvis, the slight bend of her knees.

"Now?" he whispered. He was grateful to sound both calm and amorous when in fact he was hardly anything of the first and the second was a trite description of the emotion that made his chest tight. He hadn't ever *needed* a woman the way he needed to possess her, and that frightened him.

She slid her hands along his sides to his hips. Her fingers dipped in and out of the small of his back and then around to cup his backside. Every caress of her hands

made him harder yet. "Yes, Alec," she said. "Please. Now."

Her hands urged him forward, and he slid inside her, and he about lost his mind. She was wet and tight around him and as he penetrated her, his foreskin slid the rest of the way off the head of his cock. This moment, this moment was purely about the sensation of having his cock surrounded, except there was also the sound of her slow intake of breath and that shook him to his core, that she would make a sound like that.

He wanted, no, needed, her to find pleasure in his arms. He needed to see to her every satisfaction. He needed everything to be perfect. And then he just wanted to keep doing this, because this felt so good. She felt so good. His Philippa.

Dane groaned as the warmth of her body enveloped him. This was Philippa who was sending him crashing over the edge. She wasn't passively accepting him, something he'd worried might happen. She raised her knees so that her thighs slid up to his hips, and she rocked her pelvis into his. They were naked, both of them, and what they were doing was more than fucking. His balls tightened and the quiver of incipient orgasm pooled at the base of his spine.

All this time, since the moment this evening when he'd realized there was more than an intellectual spark between them, something physical that hadn't existed before, he'd been anticipating this moment. He sank down, pressing his forearms to the mattress above her shoulders. Her breasts were warm against his chest, her hips matched the rolling, rocking motion of his, her body utterly feminine, soft where he was hard, curved exactly so.

"Alec." Her voice was low and smooth, and she made him feel like he was the only man ever to satisfy her.

He wasn't so far gone that he didn't recognize the carnal element of this encounter, but he understood for the first time in his life the difference between taking a woman to bed for the physical pleasure alone and what he was doing now. To be honest, he was worried about what that meant; knowing he was making love to Philippa and that she might not be making love with him.

He said, "Look at me, Philippa."

She did and he could see the faraway look in her eyes and he panicked at what that signified. She might not feel as he did. For Christ's sake, she was going to marry bloody Captain Bancroft. He fell into her eyes, into those green depths, and he knew himself and her well enough to understand he wasn't going to come away from this with himself intact.

He thrust again and again, and she held him and matched him, and he kept remembering all the times he'd seen her, talked to her, laughed with her or simply sat at her side without needing to say anything. Or sat alone in his London apartments reading or rereading one of her letters or writing one to her. Never once had he thought she was someone he could have. Not once had he thought she was the woman he was destined to love. All this time, he hadn't known. He'd never guessed.

Why hadn't he?

He pulled out and turned her over, and she understood right away what he wanted because she went to her hands and knees. God, yes.

Dane cupped her hips, and he shouted when he was inside her again, because it was even better this time than the first. They were close to the head of the bed, and he shifted them again until she had her hands on wall above the bed frame, and he was on his knees behind her, one hand holding her breast, the other around her hips with his fingers between her legs, making sure she came to climax.

Her response was, quite soon, a long, low moan. He kissed the back of her neck, moving inside her, and feeling the tremor of her incipient orgasm around him and he stopped.

"Alec." His name was a sob of frustration.

He held her tight, not moving. "What?" he whispered. "What do you want?"

"Finish me."

"Finish you." He got a hand between her and the wall and covered her breast with his hand. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"You do," she said. She turned her head to him as far as she could.

"Like this?" He slid out of her almost all the way and pushed back in slowly.

"Harder."

"This?" A little harder, this time.

"More." She pushed her hips back.

"Like this, then?" Again. When he was inside her this time, she came, and, Jesus, he'd never felt anything like it, having her convulse around him. She called his name and what he heard was Philippa's voice. Philippa. The woman who knew him best. Who was kind and generous and thoughtful and who had always been able to make him laugh, to whom he had confessed some of his most intimate thoughts and concerns, and what if she didn't feel the same?

Something inside him broke. He felt the strings of his heart vibrating with the power of what he felt for her. He wasn't the same man as when this had started.

He drew out, and put her on her back again, and her legs parted and her knees lifted and he was inside her again and he was trying to just fuck her but he couldn't. He was rough, but she met that without reservation. She gave him back even more until he was the one rushing to orgasm.

Moments before his crisis, with his body quivering on the edge of release, he gritted his teeth and with his heart pounding at his chest as if his would break through his ribs it occurred to him that Philippa was not a courtesan whom he could expect to have taken precautions of her own or who had the resources to act after the fact if there were consequences.

He stopped moving in her. When he was certain the danger of ejaculation had passed, he grabbed her face between his hands. Philippa pressed the back of her head into the mattress. "Alec." She wrapped her arms around him and groaned. "This is unfair of you. What are you doing to me?"

"Look at me," he said.

Her eyes flickered open and slowly focused on him.

He swept his thumbs along her temples. "Philippa." He kissed her forehead, and he couldn't help himself, he pressed farther into her. Then he dropped a kiss on both her cheeks.

"What is it?" she asked. She reached to brush his hair off his forehead. "What's made you look like your heart is breaking?"

"Only you would know that."

"What is it, my darling Alec?"

Panic constricted his chest when he saw her eyes widen. He had himself in better control now, so he drew partially out of her then slowly in again. "You'll think I'm mad, but I'm not. And you know me. You know I'm not the kind of man who would put a lover at risk. I will not put you at risk of a child out of wedlock." He kissed the edge of her mouth. "Never you."

Her eyes went wide. "Hush, my darling. It's all right. You can withdraw, isn't that so?"

He started moving in her again. "I could, Philippa." Very quickly, he was near the edge again, and she sucked in a hard, fast breath when he was as far inside her as he could get. "I will if that's what you want." Her eyes never left his face which gave him hope. "You know I wouldn't ask that of you if I didn't mean every word. We're here, Philippa. Like this." He stared into her face. "You wouldn't be if you didn't love me."

He pushed up on his hands again, keeping up a slow thrust and withdrawal. Her fingers curled around his arms, and she matched him, moved with him, wrapped her legs around him. But he did not see any answer in her face, and he did not intend to take silence for consent.

"You can't marry Bancroft when we feel like this together. Not when I've made you scream my name, and I'm about to scream yours."

She put her arms around his shoulders and held him tight. Her eyes glittered with tears. But she was looking at him. "Alec."

"Say yes, Philippa." He thrust a little faster now and when he spoke again, his

words were breathless. "I'm very close. Answer me now, before we have to stop this." He felt his orgasm coming on, but he kept his eyes on her face. His heart twisted in his chest. He bent his head to kiss away a tear that escaped when she blinked.

She brought him closer yet. "Come, Alec."

"Is that yes?" He stared into her eyes, wet with tears and didn't know the cause.

"It's madness. The moonlight made us mad."

He stilled. "Answer me, Philippa." His gaze locked with hers. "Don't make me live without you. Don't make me spend the rest of my life bereft of you."

She closed her eyes and opened them slowly, and then she smiled. "Yes."

"Jesus." He surged forward.

Neither of them said anything more. Philippa made a tiny sound in the back of her throat as he gave in to all the physical sensations coming at him. He gave in to the emotions, too. He knew, dimly, that he was unlikely to get a child on her this time, but he still thought of how he would feel when held his first child in his arms, by the woman he loved beyond all others.

Her sweat slick body moved with his, her arms tightened around him and she kissed his cheek, his mouth, and then let her head fall back while he drank in her face, her parted lips until he had no choice but to give in to a climax that shook him hard and rolled him through a wave he wasn't sure he was going to survive.

He did, of course. As did Philippa.

They were married by special licence a week later by the vicar in a small ceremony in the rose garden of Frieth House. If anyone in attendance wondered why the bride and groom vanished through a blue door at the rear of the house, no one said a word.

About the Author

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