



Chapter 1

*September 17, 1816
Heild House
Pensax, Worcestershire*

"ARE YOU CERTAIN ABOUT THIS? I know I said to find a wife, but . . . Philippa?" Marcus leaned against the mantel in the library of Heild House, country seat of the Earl of Thorndike, Bertie's brother. It was the only room in the manor not completely overtaken with wedding preparations. "While I am not opposed, I must confess I am surprised."

Sir Bertrand Thorndike tried not to take exception to the incredulous tone. The Duke of Haverly had every right to question Bertie's decision. And to be concerned, as Philippa was his much-loved sister-by-marriage and under his protection.

"What can I say? She's a beautiful, kind, intelligent woman." Bertie spread his hands. "As a standing member of Parliament, I can no longer pretend to be an idle dilettante with a fondness for drink. Having a wife will show maturity and steadiness of character."

"I'm well aware of the benefits of marriage, but I thought you would choose some debutante on the marriage mart with a titled father, someone who would look nice on your arm and be quite biddable."

Bertie shot his friend a skeptical look. Something ironic played about Marcus's mouth. "Stop baiting me. You know I want no such

thing in a wife. An empty-headed bit of fluff to say ‘Yes, dear’ and ‘Whatever you want, dear.’” He gave an exaggerated shudder. “You certainly didn’t get that with Lady Charlotte. She matches you in both courage and intelligence. Much as my brother and his wife are aptly paired. Melisande is a fit partner for Tristan, as good a countess to his earl as she is an agent on his team. That’s the sort of match I am looking for, and Philippa fits in every respect.”

She did too. If only Bertie could convince her of that fact. She was, at best, a reluctant fiancée. At every turn, she was plotting how to get out of the agreement.

Bertie shrugged. “We would not have said anything about the betrothal until after the wedding tomorrow, but I’m afraid word has already spread. I had no desire to rub the bloom off Juliette and Daniel’s big day, but the first person to know of the engagement spread it like chaff in the wind. Everyone should be focused on the bride and groom, not this news. We will be circumspect and try not to draw attention to ourselves at the festivities.”

“It is unfortunate, but it cannot be helped. I’m still surprised this engagement came about at all. Philippa has never given any indication that she was interested in matrimony. Completely the opposite, in fact.”

“Perhaps I swept her off her feet.” Bertie lounged on the settee, his legs stretched out, his boots crossed at the ankles. He would not normally be so relaxed in the presence of a duke of the realm, but he and Marcus had been friends for years and had an informal relationship when not in the public eye. “I’m not a terrible marriage bargain, you know. I’m financially stable, the second son of an earl, knighted by the Prince Regent for services to king and country, passably good-looking.” He grinned. “With very few vices. I don’t gamble—at least when I’m not working—I’m not disgustingly cheerful in the morning, and I am kind to children and animals.”

Marcus inclined his head. “What more could a young maiden ask?” Dryness coated the duke’s tone. “You know that I care a great deal for my sister-by-marriage, and I admire her courage, but you surely rec-

ognize that marrying Philippa Cashel will do nothing to nudge you toward respectability. Not with her history hanging over her.”

Bertie drew himself upright, sliding to the edge of the settee, indignant on Philippa’s behalf. He opened his mouth to defend her, but Marcus held up his hand.

“Before you bluster at me, you know neither Charlotte nor I hold her past against her. She was a victim of terrible circumstances. But you also know what those in society will think. You must prepare yourself. If you burst into flames every time someone broaches the subject, you will be a pile of cinders at every gathering.”

“Since when did you or I care what society thinks? If ever there was a hypocritical body of humans, it’s the *ton*. They ignore real wickedness in their midst while picking away at so-called breaches of etiquette.” Bertie leaned back again, but his jaw muscles remained tight. “Philippa has more class and breeding in her little finger than a coterie of titled aristocrats. She’s the daughter of an earl and now heiress to a fortune that could buy and sell most of London’s elite several times over. She is kind and self-sacrificing, a diligent worker, intelligent and—”

“Stop.” Marcus interrupted his flow. “You do not need to list her virtues. I am familiar with them.” Marcus studied Bertie. “You really have fallen for her, haven’t you? Melisande said once that, if you ever fell in love, it would be catastrophically, pate over toe-caps.”

Marcus was uncomfortably close to the truth. Bertie *had* fallen for Philippa, but their engagement was a sham, a temporary cover to protect Philippa from the unwanted attentions and gossip of her malicious cousin, Mr. Coppin, the new Earl of Tiptree. What had begun as a philanthropic gesture on Bertie’s part, however, was proving to be more complex than anticipated.

Thankfully, in that impulsive moment, Philippa had played along. They had agreed to keep up the pretense for the time being and end it all quietly at a later date. But they had also agreed to keep that bit of information to themselves. To the outside world, their engagement must appear normal.

“Why else would I propose?” Bertie shrugged. “It happens even

to the best of men, I suppose.” His friend and brother’s wife had discussed his romantic status?

“Then I am pleased for you both. Charlotte will be delighted.” Marcus pushed away from the mantel and seated himself opposite Bertie. “As long as you are prepared for the scrutiny that will come from society regarding your choice of a bride.”

Bertie tamped down his conscience at not being straightforward with his friend and direct supervisor at the agency. Sometimes one had to keep one’s own counsel, and the truth of the situation was between Philippa and himself.

“I am pleased to have some time to meet with you before the wedding hordes are upon us. I have a new mission for you, if you are not too distracted by your own pending nuptials.” Marcus’s voice grew serious.

Bertie’s leather boots creaked as he sat forward. “Yes? Something to do with the government again?” They were not a month past the previous mission’s conclusion, which had hinged upon Bertie standing for Parliament and winning a seat in order to uncover scurrilous behavior on the part of several members.

“No. In any case, Parliament won’t convene for a few months, not until the Prince Regent calls the bodies together in the new year. You are free to pursue other avenues of inquiry until then. Just as well, as the halls of government have not yet settled after the upheaval of the latest scandal.” The duke smoothed his longish hair back toward the queue at the nape of his neck. “This is something entirely different. I’ve had word from one of my contacts on the Continent that someone may be attempting to infiltrate London’s scientific community. And there have been some strange break-ins at laboratories and offices. A laboratory in Scotland has been ransacked. An office in Bristol robbed of important documents.”

Bertie frowned. “Are the two incidents related? Could it not be thieves after whatever they could get?”

“Possibly, but both of those scientists had government contracts. In the first case, the laboratory, the thieves made off with an early iter-

ation of a munition that looks promising for ship-to-ship combat. In the second, the office held drawings for a new device to select range on a cannon before firing.”

“Neither of which is something a thief could sell for ready coin,” Bertie mused.

“Exactly. And with the rumors coming from central Europe, the two thefts are highly suspicious.”

“Where does one begin an investigation like that?” Bertie’s brows came down. “I know one scientist to speak to, Rhynewick Davies. He’s been helpful on several cases for Bow Street. I understand he’s arriving here sometime today to stand up at the wedding with Daniel. Not being a scientist myself, I cannot infiltrate the Royal Society the way I did Parliament.”

Marcus nodded. “The members are as exclusive and eccentric as any society in London, possibly more so. The government calls upon those ‘strange thinkers’ for various projects, more often than you might think. Often in the area of explosives and munitions, as well as new compounds and processes for metalworking, firearms creation, and the like—not to mention sail and steam power for the Royal Navy. If a foreign nation got its hands on some of that knowledge, we could find ourselves at a disadvantage, especially should war break out again.”

“Do you know where this threat originated?”

“Most likely central Europe. Our source works in Austria and Prussia. The investigation on the Continent has been ongoing for some time. Invitations for a symposium went out weeks ago in the hopes of bringing certain individuals together where we might observe them more closely.”

Weeks ago? Bertie marveled again at all the irons Marcus must have in the fire at any given time. He was like a general on a battlefield, directing troops and supplies and armaments and assets several moves ahead of his opponents. And often he was uncertain as to who the opponent was until they fired the first shot.

“Several of the scientists are British, of course, but a handful are foreign. It will be up to you to discern if the threat is from within or

without and whether any of the British scientists are working covertly with foreigners on anything that could be of concern to His Majesty's government."

"What I don't know about science would—and does—fill several books. Are you certain I am the best man for the assignment?"

"You may not know science, but you have a knack for identifying things that are not as they should be." Marcus's voice was droll, the corner of his mouth quirking up. "Which is why I have devised a scheme to let you rub elbows with several scientists who work in areas with military or industrial applications important to our government."

Bertie shook his head. "What is this plan?" he asked warily.

"I am in the mood to bestow a sum of money to some enterprising scientist to conduct further research. I'm calling it the Haverly Prize, and it shall be awarded at a symposium in London at the end of the month."

"A scientific conference?"

"Naturally. An excellent way to gather the relevant men in one place. The most brilliant minds in the sciences will assemble at the Overton Rooms on Swan Street, near St. George the Martyr Church in Southwark. Mere blocks from your new townhouse, I might add. The scientists will present their theories, hypotheses, and projects. After careful deliberation and scrutiny, one scientist will be selected to receive the funding necessary to research and develop his idea."

"And you will decide who the worthy applicant is?" Bertie asked.

"No. You will."

"Me?" He put his hand to his chest. Had Haverly lost his wits? "I just told you I know nothing of the sciences."

"You will be my proxy, as I will remain at my country estate until such time as the twins are old enough to travel. By placing the symposium in your jurisdiction, it will lend plausibility to your standing in for me at the event."

Marcus's duchess, Charlotte, had seen fit to present him with twin girls less than a month ago, hence the reason she had not traveled for Daniel and Juliette's wedding on the morrow.

"As you attend the conference, you will listen, you will learn, and you will report. Like I said, you'll study the foreign scientists who attend, but there may be collusion going on, so watch the British ones as well. I had no difficulty in filling the conference. The prize is two thousand pounds."

"Two thousand?" Bertie knew Marcus was wealthy, but to casually toss around sums like that? Though, come to think of it, Philippa had fifteen times that much coming to her from her late father's estate. As word of their betrothal continued to spread and the news that she was an heiress became known, he was likely to be labeled a fortune hunter.

"The prize must be substantial enough to convince these men to have their projects discussed and questioned by their peers, allowing us to search for the possible spy in their midst."

"I am more than willing to search for a spy in the scientific community, but I have little confidence in my ability to award such a large prize to a worthy applicant."

"But I have confidence in you. Are you game?"

Bertie grinned. "Always."



Philippa Cashel walked sedately at Sir Bertrand's side, her hand on his arm, though inside she was anything but sedate. Gravel crunched beneath her feet on the path to the gray stone church. She glanced up at the Norman bell tower, taking in the moss growing on the slate tile roof and the zigzag arch over the church door.

Their first public appearance as a betrothed couple. And at a wedding, no less.

A sense of unreality wrapped itself around her mind. How had she gotten here? And how had everything gotten out of hand so quickly? The plan for a quiet betrothal for a period of time, followed by an equally quiet dissolution of the engagement, had exploded like a firework.

Everyone knew of the betrothal. The villagers of Pensax knew, the wedding guests, not to mention half of London.