

MEMORABLE PROPOSALS

A
Daring
PROPOSAL



JENNIE GOUTET

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ISBN 13: 978-1-4621-3958-3

Published by Sweetwater Books, an imprint of Cedar Fort, Inc.
2373 W. 700 S., Springville, UT 84663
Distributed by Cedar Fort, Inc., www.cedarfort.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021950624

Cover design by Courtney Proby
Cover design © 2022 Cedar Fort, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed on acid-free paper

Chapter One



Phoebe Tunstall stretched a hand out from within the warmth of her fur-trimmed cloak, revealing a glimpse of her white spencer as she waited at the edge of Hyde Park's Round Pond. Two swans shifted course, leaving an arrow of ripples behind them, and swam toward Phoebe as she released a handful of large crumbs. The swans dipped their orange beaks repeatedly into the water to retrieve the feast before turning in one smooth movement and gliding away.

"I am glad they did not see fit to make our closer acquaintance," Anna observed from the path bordering the pond. "I am not sure our fingers would have survived the introduction." Anna was Phoebe's identical twin, distinguished at present by the telltale bump giving form to her redingote and by the accompanying fullness in her features. She pulled her muff closer to her middle and waited for her sister.

Phoebe stepped away from the water and trudged up the incline. The ground was stiff with frozen earth and grass. With a wisp of regret for a world that moved on without her, she glanced over her shoulder at the departing swans before regaining the path. The birds had swallowed up what she had offered, then left to pursue their own purposes and pleasures. Their flight seemed to mimic a certain pattern in Phoebe's life, and the gray, late winter clouds were a fitting parallel to her mood.

"The swans here are not aggressive." Phoebe rejoined the path and linked her arm through Anna's. "Shall we return home? If you are to get the timely start to your journey that Harry hopes for, you had best make haste."

"Nurse is caring for Peter, the trunks are packed, and Harry knows that the word *haste* does not appear in my vocabulary." Anna smiled at Phoebe but picked up her pace. Their breath came out in clouds as they followed the path leading toward the gates of Hyde Park. There was no one else about, which was not surprising, since it was early and cold.

Phoebe's heart was too heavy for her to speak, and in the mystical way of their twinship, Anna put Phoebe's feelings into words. "It is such a misfortune that you must endure the Season without any of your particular friends here to share it with you. What will you do? I cannot think Mrs. Morris an acceptable companion for you." Anna sent her sister a wry, scolding glance. "It was one thing for you to wait hand and foot on Aunt Shea. She was flesh and blood. It is quite another thing for you to endure the conversation of the likes of Mrs. Morris. Wherever did Stratford dredge such a woman up?"

Mrs. Morris, a hired companion, had come recommended by the aunt of Eleanor, their brother's wife. Phoebe knew Anna's rallying tone was meant to lift her mood, but her spirits were so uncommonly low she was not sure anything could. "It is meant to be a temporary solution. I suppose it serves well enough for now."

At age twenty-two, Phoebe had given up the hope of being married. She supposed it was ridiculous that she should, for twenty-two was not so very old in truth. But after being consistently overlooked for four London Seasons, she had begun to wonder if she were simply uninteresting next to her more engaging twin. Or perhaps the gentlemen sensed that Phoebe's heart was not entirely free.

This Season, there had been no one to sponsor her, as Stratford and Eleanor were about to welcome their first child into the world, and their brother and his wife were the only family left to Anna and Phoebe. Anna's life was now with her husband and son in the quiet town of Avebury, and that Anna was content with her lot surprised no one more than she. That left Phoebe, the only one of her siblings or friends yet unmarried. Despite the fact that Stratford had granted Phoebe the use of his house for the upcoming Season, nothing plunged her spirits more than the thought of attending all the ton events with Mrs. Morris as companion. The only silver lining to be found in the past months spent with Mrs. Morris was that she rarely appeared before noon, and Phoebe was an early riser.

Arm in arm, the sisters exited the park and walked along the flagway bordering the busy street that was crowded with hacks and the more humble carriages. The fashionable set would still be abed. Anna refrained from her usual light chatter, which Phoebe knew meant she was about to speak her mind on a weightier issue. At last, she did.

"Phoebe, I am convinced that this is not your destiny." Anna squeezed her arm to emphasize the point. "You have spent enough years seeing to the needs of others. You have had four Seasons, and it is not your lack of beauty—if I may say so myself—nor your conversation that has made you ineligible. It is only that by your reserve you give off the impression you are unavailable. But I cannot see this as your life. To serve as companion to a disagreeable older woman instead of her serving you? For that is what the arrangement will become if you do not take care."

Anna's words were just, and Phoebe knew it. Her relationship with her companion had already begun to shift. Where Mrs. Morris had arrived, eager to please and propose entertainment, she had now begun giving Phoebe suggestions that surmounted to orders designed to curtail Phoebe's fun. *A morning call on Miss Harris is not convenient today; she is not likely to be home. It is too cold to attend the theater tonight; you will fall ill. The Maxwells' dinner party will prove to be insipid; wait until the Season is in full swing before attempting such a thing.* It took more will than Phoebe possessed to argue.

"There is truth to your words, I suppose. But I do not see how I can change anything now." Phoebe knew that deep down she feared missing a Season meant giving up her chance to be married. And she *so* wanted to marry, even if the man she had always loved had never once looked at her in a way that allowed her to hope. But he would be in London this Season, and perhaps at last he would . . .

No. She must give it up. After all, no one had ever guessed. Not even Anna—not even his sister, Lydia. Certainly not him.

Phoebe mustered a smile to reassure her sister and hide the melancholy plunge her thoughts had taken. "I don't suppose you have an eligible bachelor sitting around in the town of Avebury, pining away for a wife?"

"That we do not have, I am sorry to say. Nor are we likely to find one in Avebury when it comes time to securing matches for our children. Harry knows that several London Seasons are in his future when it is time for our daughters to make their come out. He has promised to bear it cheerfully."

"Supposing you have at least one girl," Phoebe said.

Anna rested a hand on her midsection. "I believe we may not have to wait long for that. This one is showing herself to be more capricious than Peter ever was. Demanding oranges every day!"

Phoebe laughed, filling her lungs with cold air and grasping at the flash of joy that came from humor and sisters who were increasing again. It was a short walk to Stratford's townhouse, where they had been staying for the past month. Anna's husband, Harry Aston, had not liked to leave his parish for such a length of time, so after having accompanied his wife and son to London, he left the sisters to their own company. He had returned only yesterday to escort Anna and Peter home.

As they drew near the house, Anna chuckled suddenly. "I had quite forgotten to tell you that I had run into one of your acquaintances upon our arrival in London. A short girl with a profusion of freckles and exclamations. She mistook me for you, so I am assuming she does not know you have an identical twin."

"Yes." Phoebe suppressed a sigh. "You must mean Martha Cummings. She is bent on a more intimate acquaintance, which I've been trying to discourage without much luck. She is most determined in her affection. We were introduced last Season, and for reasons unbeknownst to me, Martha has taken a liking to me."

Anna slipped her arm out of Phoebe's and grasped the railing of the townhouse to climb the steps. "I may have led her to believe you were above her touch."

Her sister's voice was entirely too mischievous, and Phoebe regarded her with misgiving as the footman opened the door to let them in. "Impossible. She will only become more determined. What did you say?"

Anna unbuttoned her redingote and turned smiling eyes upon Phoebe. "Well, she came rushing up to me out of nowhere on the street with exclamations of 'Phoebe!' before stopping short with a shocked glance at my midsection, adding that she'd no idea I'd been married. Since she had mistaken me for you, I merely answered that I had married the son of a *duke* and where had she been? Everyone in the ton knew about it."

A laugh sputtered out of Phoebe, and she turned to Anna, mouth agape. "Now Martha will tell everyone I'm expecting and will set all of London talking. There go my prospects for a match."

"No such thing," Anna countered. "All of London will observe you are *not* with child and see the joke. Or, you need only leave town and come to Avebury with this as your excuse to flee."

At the end of the corridor a door opened, and Harry came toward them in his brisk stride. "Anna, you have returned. Good morning, Phoebe. Let us eat, so we may be on our way." With an imperative gesture to follow, he turned to the breakfast room, giving—to the uninitiated—the semblance of a man possessing limited patience. Anna sent a droll look after his retreating form before trotting after him comically. "You heard the man. I must eat."

Phoebe laughed, but it sounded melancholy even to her own ears. How would she go on without the comfort her sister's presence had brought her these last weeks? And what lure was there to attend social gatherings without anyone comfortable to share them with? Only one hope dangled in front of her, enticing Phoebe and giving her the courage to attempt another Season. But even that hope had begun to fade with the years. If he hadn't noticed her yet, what chance was there, really?

They made quick work of breakfast, and then Harry dropped his napkin beside the plate. "I will go see that the carriage is brought around and Peter is ready to leave." He leaned down and kissed his wife on the cheek, and she reached up to clasp the hand that

rested on her shoulder as she ate her remaining bite of bread. He left the room.

Anna eyed Phoebe above her patterned China cup before finishing her tea. “Do you plan to see Lydia again before she and Fitz travel to the Continent?”

They had known Lydia Fitzwilliam from childhood; she was the sister of Stratford’s closest friend, Lord Ingram. Lydia was to accompany her husband to Brussels to join the 33rd Regiment of Foot where Lieutenant-Colonel Fitzwilliam had recently been assigned. “Yes. In fact, we have made plans that I should come today, so that I will not feel your departure so keenly.” Phoebe met her sister’s gaze and gave a soft smile. “But I will be much depressed without you to bear me company all the same.”

Anna came around the table and sat next to Phoebe, throwing her arms around her shoulders. “And my spirits will be low without you. Don’t keep yourself hidden from those who might otherwise see your worth. Let *this* be the Season where you make a love match and have the happiness that I have. Promise me.” She pulled back and fixed Phoebe with her stare. “Promise me that you will take a risk and let others see what a treasure there is in you.”

Anna was unusually serious, and Phoebe could only nod, swallowing the lump that threatened to rise in her throat. What her sister could not know was that making any sort of match at all would require giving up hope of the one man she truly loved, and that felt a little like death. But as Phoebe nodded her agreement, a new determination seized her, infused by her twin, who had always been the more outspoken and adventurous one. Anna was right. She must not fall into dejection or throw away her dreams of marriage when all it wanted was a little resolve. She could be as outgoing as Anna if she applied herself to the task, and she could find someone new. “I promise.”

Harry returned to the breakfast room and paused, his eyes softening when he saw his wife and sister pulling out of one another’s embrace. He came around the table. “Phoebe, I am sorry to tear Anna away from you. Please come to us as soon as you may, and know that you will be welcome for as long as you wish to stay.”

Phoebe stood and received her brother-in-law’s kiss on her cheek. Harry was naturally of a generous and loving disposition, and that—compounded by the fact that his love for his wife extended to caring for his wife’s sister—made him an ideal brother-in-law. She could not begrudge him his wife.

The door opened again, and Peter toddled over the threshold, followed by his nurse. A smile lit Phoebe’s face as she went forward and lifted the chubby, blond-haired child into her arms, nestling her cheek next to his and pulling back to look at him. “Are you going with the horses?” she asked him. “You will have an exciting adventure.”

Her nephew pulled at a curl that was draped stylishly over Phoebe’s shoulder—Anna’s influence. Then he put his other thumb in his mouth. Phoebe kissed his head and followed her sister and Harry to the door, where she watched the footman loading the last of the trunks. She went down the stairs to the street and handed Peter over to the nurse, who stepped into the barouche with the child.

Anna threw her arms around Phoebe for one last hug and pulled back to look her in the eyes. “It is a new Season,” she said. “But it can be a new season of life, love, and hope, as well. Write faithfully and tell me your news.”

Phoebe nodded. Anna was the last one in the carriage before the footman closed the door. She leaned out the window and furrowed her brows at Phoebe’s expression, which must have displayed just how forlorn she felt. The footman climbed up next to the coachman, and then they were off.

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