

PHAZE FLARE

FREE FICTION



SONNET SEDUCTION

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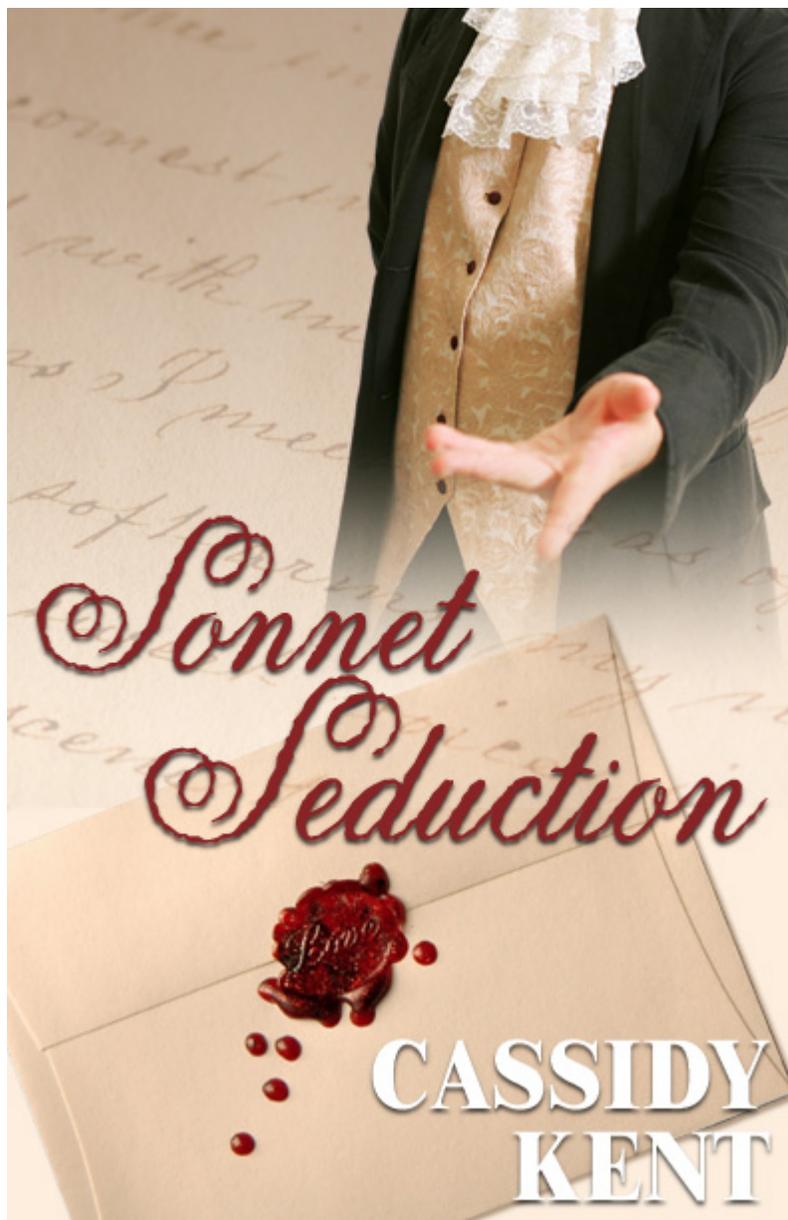
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Sonnet Seduction



Cassidy Kent

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By

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Sonnet Seduction

Brrrrring!

Harper Alcott looked up from her dog-eared copy of Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*, startled away from a particularly juicy fantasy involving herself and one Mr. Darcy.

"Okay, time's up, people!" she shouted over the ringing of the school bell and a collective groan from her students. "Please leave your quiz on my desk. I'll have them graded for tomorrow morning."

The kids filed out one-by-one, and she mentally cursed their slow-footed, apathetic teenage selves at the moment. *I have to get out of here*, Harper thought as she hustled them out of her classroom like a madwoman escaping the asylum.

A grown woman of thirty-two, desperate to get to her mailbox for another taste of her secret admirer. Was she crazy... or just pathetic? Perhaps a bit of both, but the combination of a twelfth-grade English teacher's avid love for a good romance and cryptic, daily love notes from a hidden paramour proved to be irresistible.

She very nearly rushed out into the hall, before some saner part of her rang the warning alarm. Harper snatched the compact from her desk drawer and conducted a quick visual assessment of her pinned-up, russet curls, and the dark brows that slashed across the pale skin of her face. No mascara smudges, lipstick smears, or other disasters.

Check.

She shrugged and undid just one more button on her crisp white blouse.

Check.

Ready for combat, she marched down the seemingly endless hallway to the administration office. Upon arriving, she stood for a half a second in front of the mailboxes. Harper glanced around covertly and took a deep breath. Stepping forward, she exhaled.

There it is.

Just as always, the rough texture of the thick envelope thrilled her. She fingered the familiar red wax seal holding it closed.

Casually, Harper extracted the envelope and the other sundry items in her box. Her fingers tightened on the bundle and she

Cassidy Kent

headed for the water fountain alcove. A safe, secret place to read a love note at three o'clock on the afternoon.

With shaking fingers, she broke the seal and pulled out the sheath of parchment.

*A sil.ent scient.ist;
power.less to. .speak a line*

Sat

*down .and .penned. this
re.con.dite
rhyme, To tell an e.ther.eal peda.gogue just this:
"On Fri.day next,*

*en.chant me
with your sweet kiss."*

H.A.

This first segment puzzled her. It was no poem she had ever read, and English poetry was her forte. There were so many oddities to it, after all. H.A.? Those were *her* initials. She knew no one who shared them. There had to be some significance to the visual presentation... and the punctuation...

Maybe a clue?

Harper had never been much for acrostics and so she sighed, but then brightened. "On Friday next," she muttered. Would her admirer reveal himself then? Tomorrow? "Oh my God." The thought was both electrifying and utterly terrifying.

She went on to devour the invariable Shakespeare sonnet that followed.

*As an unperfect actor on the stage,
Who with his fear is put beside his part,
Or some fierce thing replete with too much rage,*

Sonnet Seduction

*Whose strength's abundance weakens his own heart;
So I, for fear of trust, forget to say
The perfect ceremony of love's rite,
And in mine own love's strength seem to decay,
O'ercharg'd with burthen of mine own love's might.
O! let my looks be then the eloquence
And dumb presagers of my speaking breast,
Who plead for love, and look for recompense,
More than that tongue that more hath more express'd.
O! learn to read what silent love hath writ:
To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit.*

Tears welled in her eyes during the reading of her absolute favorite sonnet. It wasn't so much that the verse was particularly touching, only that whomever had chosen it must have known it was the one she loved best. She might not have been able to decipher the puzzling first poem, but decoding the Bard was all in a day's work.

His love for her was so immense, so weighty; it had become a burden too large to carry. He wanted her to rescue him from his burden, interpreting his silent looks and unspoken love.

Harper wracked her brain.

Who? Who?!

A glance at her watch and she realized the staff meeting was already underway.

"Oh, hell." She set off for the faculty lounge on swift feet, her sonnet clutched in her palm. Slipping into the room's backdoor undetected, she silently thanked God for the full house. Principal Watson didn't appreciate latecomers.

Said gentleman currently went on and on about something or other, but Harper could barely concentrate. The situation called for careful attention to detail, and what better place to begin her investigation than with a meeting room crammed full of her colleagues. Unfortunately, the results of her efforts proved to be quite disappointing.

She scanned the crowd, lighting on a few possibilities.

Cassidy Kent

Darby Gates? The American History teacher was undoubtedly handsome, unpretentious, absolutely charming...

And absolutely married.

Harper sighed. Even if he was the culprit, it would be no use to her. She fervently hoped otherwise.

Coach Kinsell? Balding and pot-bellied, the man was all testosterone and zero sensitivity. No way he could have written his own poem, let alone worked cryptic clues into it. He didn't have it in him. Unless he had help. *Bah.* She dismissed the notion.

She turned a critical eye to the man at the front of the room. Winston Watson spoke eloquently on the future direction of teaching at Lovell High. The man *did* love literature and art. In fact, he was the only man in the room with whom she could hold an engaging, pleasant conversation.

But, truth be told... she had often thought her boss was gay.

No. She knew in her heart it wasn't him, either.

It's a student, she realized. *I just know it. This happens every year.* She had no aspirations to awe-inspiring beauty, but rather attributed the occurrence to the dearth of attractive young female teachers. Resigned to letting the poor kid down easy, she leaned back against the wall.

"Ms. Alcott?"

She snapped to attention, wondering what on Earth the question might have been. How annoying to have been ensnared by the same trick she used on her own students.

"Um, yes?"

Watson looked pissed. *Damnit.* "Ms. Alcott, before your *late* arrival, we had been discussing the merits of a change in the teaching approach here at Lovell. Everyone's sort of gone off in different directions. What are your thoughts?"

Harper cleared her throat and glanced from side to side as every eye in the room lit on her.

"Well, of course, I support my own style of teaching. I treat my students as active participants in their own learning. I think there's a problem in schools today. A general apathy toward school." Nods and murmurs of approval lent strength and support

Sonnet Seduction

to her beliefs. “If we expose them to real objects and books instead of cold interactions with distilled information, we can capture these kids’ attention.”

Watson nodded. “How do you propose we do that, Ms. Alcott?”

Harper smiled, confident she was right. “Let’s encourage their curiosity, creative thinking, and a love of learning, rather than their abject fear of failure.”

“I think Ms. Alcott has a definite point, here. Anyone disagree?”

The silent lounge reflected concurrence and she felt a momentary delight at the support of her colleagues.

“Come on, this is a discussion, people. Let’s hear some opposition.” Watson scanned the room. “Finleah. What have you got?”

Harper cringed at the mention of Tyler Finleah. The wretch appeared to be dozing through the meeting, his legs crossed and head leaning into the back cushion of an aging armchair. Just like him to have taken the best seat in the room. He’s probably even gotten there early for just that reason, and his lanky build lounged all over the chair in flagrant defiance to anyone who might have wanted to sit there.

Known to his students as “Mr. F”, the no-nonsense calculus instructor had obtained the moniker through the high proportion of students flunking out of his class. For two years, he had consistently ranked in unofficial polls as the least-liked teacher at Lovell. Coolly arrogant, unfriendly, and known school-wide for his wicked responses to cheaters and loudmouths.

Pure humiliation.

“I’ll stick with the tried and true until forced to do otherwise, Winston.” He casually uncrossed his legs and sat forward. “In my mind, nothing works better than reading the text, working the assignments, and then testing. Pass or fail. No in between.”

Harper shook her head. Unbelievable.

His arrogance incensed her, even while his dark good looks and blistering intelligence secretly thrilled her. Finleah was just too

Cassidy Kent

smug. He had to be challenged. “I’d like to ask how well it’s really working if forty percent of your students fail the class?”

He turned his attention to her. His full mouth remained expressionless, but the muscles of his jaw twitched almost imperceptibly. He blinked, long dark lashes over cool azure eyes that appeared shocked by her effrontery.

“It’s fifty percent, actually,” he responded, apparently recovered from the insult. “And high failure rates mean high standards.”

Burning with embarrassment, she gasped, but couldn’t look away from Finleah’s smug expression.

Watson held his hand to his mouth in an attempt to cover the smirk on his own face. “All right, people, I know you want to get home. We can continue this discussion next week. Any last words before we adjourn?”

Harper broke from her face-off with Finleah to raise her hand. “Just one reminder. Chaperones for this year’s Valentine’s Day dance have been selected.” She shushed a collective groan and read from her list.

“Caroline Grady. Lucy Du Bois. Randall Cartwright.” She smiled. “And Tyler Finleah. See you tomorrow night, you four. Oh, and don’t forget your costumes.”

The look on Finleah’s face was priceless.



A buzz of excitement filled the air as popular house music blasted from the overhead sound system and reverberated throughout the expanse of the gymnasium. The room no longer hinted at sweaty gym socks and scuffed hardwood floors indicative of any athletic venue. Instead, a rich bed of deep red carpeting paved way to two silver columns majestically lining each side of the small center stage.

Streamers of crimson and black swirled around the edge of the metal stage rails and along various metal posts. Various oddly shaped cellophane cutouts resembled a raging fire and fluttered

Sonnet Seduction

like rising flames from silent floor fans to lend atmosphere to the event. Hundreds of red and black balloons floated high above the rafters with strings of ribbons swaying over the crowd of enthusiastic students, chaperones and school officials.

Harper's eyes took in the morose, yet gorgeous decorations and soon caught a glimpse of a rather interesting banner. The wide vinyl poster hung securely against the back wall of the stage prominently announced the evening's theme, "Hearts Afire: A Valentine's Day in Hell!"

She didn't know whether to laugh or cringe at the student's choice of blending their current reading curriculum of Dante's *Inferno* with a holiday that encompassed passion and love. Perhaps this generation relished in the dark and demented combination of the cutesy and macabre. Indeed, Hot Topic had molded an entire business model around it.

It could have been much worse. The students might have chosen Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* and she would have to suffer the evening trying to avoid dozens of black feathers piercing plump, bleeding Valentine hearts. She shivered at the thought. Either choice was a bit melodramatic, but she could only sigh and relate, remembering her own warped sense of humor at their age.

Harper squinted her eyes to get a clear view of the blurred faces amidst the varying fabrics. Rose colored tinting covered the track lights, adding to the dark, sensual feel of the atmosphere. Her stomach knotted up and she suddenly felt queasy from the prospect of discovering the true identity of whoever had written all those exquisite secret love letters to her. She let out a short breath of anticipation and looked down at her gloved hands, remembering this event was not just any dance. This was a costume ball where every attendee represented a memorable character from the historical novels the students were studying.

The school's academic board felt this was a type of event that would provide a wealth of understanding to the students and hopefully keep them excited about their current coursework. Harper's academic vision included events like this in order to provide a strong sense of appreciation for great literature. She

Cassidy Kent

would chair the Valentine's Day dance for as long as the school would keep it on the schedule. She would fight to the death to keep the beauty of these stories alive to share with future generations.

Harper's own sense of romantic notions had been bestowed upon her since her youth when her own mother read bedtimes stories from such greats as Jane Austen, William Shakespeare, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott, George Eliot and Geoffrey Chaucer.

Her love of Jane Austen had propelled her to dress as the incomparable Elizabeth Bennet, a heroine well ahead of her time. She related to the strength of her character and her ability to be herself even when it was unacceptable to those around her. A very contemporary and admirable attribute, indeed!

Now, if she could only find the culprit that contributed to her weeks of sleepless nights and agitated desire. No matter who had written her the notes, it couldn't be good if the end result led to someone barely over puberty. Harper anxiously tried to calm her frazzled nerves as her thoughts wandered back to the enigmatic Mr. Darcy. If only she could meet a man who possessed such romantic, heroic traits.

She had read the tale a dozen times and each time she had found Mr. Darcy even more delightful. Although initially depicted as cold and aloof, the man actually had such a large sense of personal pride that it tended to express itself as arrogance. His apparently distant contemptful manner earned him the disdain of Elizabeth and her friends, but the end result proved the erroneous nature of first impressions. Darcy's seemingly arrogant character masks a sincerely generous, compassionate and loving nature.

Harper heaved another sigh and allowed herself to search for the man of her dreams. Her eyes drifted across a sea of faces too young for her to ever find attractive except in a maternal way. After endless minutes of looking, she frowned at the realization that she could possibly never meet *him*. Maybe this was all a hoax and she would be a laughing stock if the truth were to get out. She wrung her hands, angry at her own idiotic teenage responses to something as silly as a secret admirer.

Sonnet Seduction

Her pulse quickened and queasiness swelled up from the pit of her stomach. Harper would not allow herself to pine away like a lovesick pup.

Breathe, Harper.

Taking in a lungful of air, she made a sturdy decision. By God, she would mingle with the crowd and have a great time tonight no matter what happened...*or didn't.*

Harper took one step and froze in place. Among the midst of variously dressed high school students bumping and grinding, there he stood head and shoulders above them. He sported an austere, black tailed overcoat, breeches with tall black boots, and dark, curling brown hair that barely touched his collar.

Mr. Darcy in the flesh.

Harper gasped. Surely it was *him*.

Suddenly afraid to meet her admirer, she backed away, even as the prospect of seeing his face warmed the skin of her cheeks and chest. Her back hit brick wall, and she sighed in the relief of her dark corner. She could watch him with impunity now.

The bass of the music throbbed in her stomach and as she crouched in her hiding spot, Harper allowed her gaze free reign over the man's body. Her hands shook as she imagined running her hands through his mass of dark, wavy hair. His expansive shoulders filled the costume's coat to capacity, and when he bent to retrieve a student's dropped cell phone, Harper got an all-too-good glimpse of his muscled ass beneath the split tails of his coat.

A slow liquid pulse began between her thighs, and she shifted in her position as its tempo increased.

Oh, God.

The man turned, and her world spun in slow motion.

No, no, no...

Her perfect Mr. Darcy was none other than Tyler Finleah.

The taste of disappointment and bitterness mixed on her tongue and she stood. Not only had he profaned her beloved hero, but he had destroyed her moment in which some gorgeous stranger would whirl around and come to her side, saying...

"Ms. Alcott?"

Cassidy Kent

She blinked. He had spotted her. *Damn it!*

“The name’s Bennet,” she tossed over her shoulder as she pushed through one of the sets of double doors at the back of the room. Her shoes clicked across the parquet floors of the locker-lined hallway.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps other than just her own and she groaned. “Go away.” Harper reached the end of the hallway and cursed as she realized the exterior doors were locked. The bastard had trapped her.

“Ah, you’re disappointed. Were you expecting someone else? Some Byronic hero, perhaps. Heathcliff, maybe.” His mild, sardonic tone irritated her to no end.

Harper folded her arms. “And who exactly are you supposed to be?”

“Whomever your active little imagination dictates.”

She sighed indignantly. “Leave it to a math teacher to be so generic. You’re *supposed* to be a literary character.”

“And who, pray tell, are you?” The corner of his mouth curved into a twisted mockery of a smile.

“Elizabeth Bennet. Go ahead, ridicule me.”

He closed in on her, the frills of his cravat brushing against the bodice of her simple dress. “Miss Bennet with no Mr. Darcy in tow? It hardly seems right.”

Her eyes widened and she gulped. Harper couldn’t believe the cold, calculating man even knew one iota of Austen’s lush, beautiful writing, let alone that one character without the other would seem a travesty. She didn’t know what to say.

“Yet another event out of sorts. Harper Alcott with not a caustic word to say to me.”

Her breathing increased as he moved still closer. He was suffocating her. She had to get away. If she could just slip by him, she could make it to her classroom and lock him out. Maybe re-reading the stack of love letters in her desk would help her swallow this bitter pill of disappointment.

A childish thought occurred to her.

Sonnet Seduction

Harper slammed her foot down on his boot and hoped she had crushed his toes. She took off down the hallway like the devil was at her heels.

And in truth, he was.

By the soft, red illumination of the emergency exit sign, she made it inside and dragged the door closed behind her, but not before Finleah stuck his big, booted foot between the door and frame. "I'm afraid it won't be that easy to rid yourself of my presence."

She backed into the dimly lit room, nearly tripping over her chair and falling into it in the process. "Get out." Heedless of her command, Finleah moved ever closer. Harper unconsciously grasped the handle of the drawer that held her most precious possession: the stack of sonnets.

"Hmm, what have we got here?" he asked.

Harper gasped and stood, but stepped rather unfortunately on the back hem of her dragging Empire dress, promptly causing her to fall backward into the chair once more. Finleah easily yanked the drawer open and grabbed the envelopes. "Well, well, well. Sally Schoolmarm has a secret admirer, eh?"

She hated him. Truly. If she could have just one wish granted, Harper would fervently wish she had never met the man. Tears of embarrassment and humiliation threatened. "Please. Those are my private things."

He looked at her face and stilled. "My deepest apologies, madame."

Harper sniffed as he placed the stack of envelopes back in the open drawer. "Your apologies are worth less than nothing to me."

"I sincerely apologize for troubling you, Ms. Alcott."

"Ha. You don't trouble me," she scoffed. "I barely give you more than a second thought."

He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her up to him. "You don't mean that." His hands bruised her arms, but she couldn't seem to find words, or breath, or thought. "Tell me you don't mean that."

Cassidy Kent

His eyelashes swept across his cheeks as he wrapped his arms around her. Finleah threaded a hand through her artfully arranged mass of her curls while his other arm snaked around her waist to hold her against him. The curve of her breasts and stomach pressed against his hard frame and she felt she might die from the pleasure of it. *Of Finleah*. She dazedly wondered why he cared whether she meant what she had said, but it was the last thought she had before his mouth crushed down upon hers with a wicked force that made it feel more like an argument than an endearment.

His lips told Harper she wanted this and she could hardly be dissuaded with a man as convincing as this. When his tongue entered her mouth, the liquid pulse he had started from a mere look earlier now grew into a thundering cacophony of sensational need. God, he was making her wet with desire already! He continued to kiss her with a passion that nearly boggled her mind, making her question what century she resided in.

“Mr. Finleah, please.” Harper pushed at his solid chest, but the scoundrel wouldn’t budge.

She should be appalled by his rakish manners but all she could think about were those perfect lips that had swept her back in time.

He gave her a wicked grin. “I never professed to gentleman statues, though I’ve dressed the part tonight.”

“And I’ve never thought of you as a gentleman,” she quipped.

“*Mad in pursuit and in possession so...*” Finleah recited seductively, leaning in to kiss the soft area below her chin.

“*A bliss in proof...*” He continued his excruciatingly slow kisses, his lips trailing down the curve of her neck.

Proof?

Something clicked as soon as those words escaped his lips. Harper gasped at the revelation.

Finleah winked and undid his cravat with an elegant grace.

Harper leaned backwards, her heart pounding against her chest from the sudden thrill that her secret sonnets came not from the ghastly Coach Kinsell but from the handsome Mr. Finleah. She should despise this man, yet deep down she could not deny many a midnight fantasy in which his face had come to mind.

Sonnet Seduction

Her cheeks grew hot from her own admission.

“I do believe I’ve flustered you, Ms. Alcott.” Finleah’s rich laugh took her breath away. He didn’t give her a chance to speak but swiftly captured her lips for a gentle kiss. Running his tongue across the contours, he sampled every line and dip of her lips. Finleah increased the pressure, soon pushing his tongue through her barrier for a more thorough exploration. Harper did not know how or when he had managed to bind her hands together during their heated kiss, but panic seized her at the realization of being helpless. The sudden vulnerability and loss of control sputtered to the surface of her addled mind.

Finleah must have read her fear in her body language and broke away to look at her face. His eyebrows drew together as he gave her an odd look. When he finally spoke, his words dripped with sensual sincerity. “Never fear me, Harper. I would never do anything to hurt you. I’ve only ever wanted to make love to you.”

In that moment, she believed him. Trusted him.

Harper felt giddy with awareness and something more. A slow flicker of heat turned into a raging flame within her. *Hearts Afire...*

“Why me? Why now?” She looked deep into the azure depths of his eyes that reflected her intensity back to her.

“Because you, my dear, are my perfect match in every way. You just didn’t figure it out quickly enough and I’ve grown impatient.” She let out a squeal when he scooped her up in his arms. “Now is the time for action.” Finleah carried her across the room, twisting the doorknob, all while balancing her in his arms. This was turning out to be quite an interesting night, truly exceeding all of her expectations.

“This is a side of you I’ve never imagined,” she breathlessly spoke.

He threw open the door and entered the sizeable cloakroom, lowering her down gently until her feet touched the ground. With a roguish grin he pulled her bound hands above her head.

“What are you going to do to me, Finleah?” Harper asked breathlessly.

Cassidy Kent

Without missing a beat, he proceeded to bind her hands to the tension rod that hung securely across the closet. “I plan to discipline you for your feisty insubordinate behavior.”

She quirked a brow at him. “I’m the one with tenure here. Shouldn’t I be disciplining you?”

Harper had to admit the man’s seductive demeanor enhanced her enjoyment of the devilish game he played. A shiver of anticipation ran through her body at the intensity of his stare. Some small part of her delighted in the unknown and his next action more than intrigued her.

His face was a mask of mystery, yet his eyes hinted at an underlying humor. “Perhaps, Ms. Alcott, you need to be taught a lesson in verbal restraint.” Finleah ran a finger along her jawline and she trembled with anticipation, growing moist between her thighs at the sensuality of the act.

“I...”

He pressed a finger to her lips. “Tut-tut. Such a stubborn woman deserves a punishment befitting your temperament.” His gentle warning made her swallow hard. Her mind raced, trying to decipher his meaning, while staring at his irresistibly handsome face in the dim moonshine from the small window above.

Harper gasped when he slid his hands to her waist, quickly turning her to face the darkened walls. He pushed up her dress, the material bunching at her back, and she was certain her scantily clad bottom was revealed for his viewing pleasure.

Embarrassment stained her cheeks when he covered up his chuckle with a cough.

“I don’t suppose they had thongs in the 19th century. Let me assist you in the shedding of your...er, historical inaccuracies.”

Before she could protest, he pulled off the offensive material and she felt it slide easily down to her ankles. She shuddered as a slight breeze of central air conditioning caressed her bare bottom, yet she had no time to prepare for what was to come. Harper felt Finleah’s free hand make contact with her backside, his fingers caressing the round mounds as he leaned in close to her ear. “*Before, a joy proposed; behind a dream.*”

Sonnet Seduction

She almost laughed at the double entendre, but the sting of the slap shocked her senses and a moan escaped her lips before she could repress her reaction. Somehow the mixture of his rich voice reciting the sonnet and the unexpected smack to her *derrière* unlocked something inside of her.

“All this the world well knows; yet none knows well,” Finleah continued in his low, soothing tone all while stroking her sensitive flesh. Harper closed her eyes and allowed his words to filter through her body. *“To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.”*

She had been so absorbed in his verse that when he smacked her behind a second time, she let out a whimper. Her eyes stung with unshed tears, not of pain, but of a kind of empowering release. Harper had never given up control to another person before and by allowing herself to trust Finleah, the man who had stolen her heart with a scowl... this was a major breakthrough.

“Fin—” His name died on her lips when she realized he had dropped to his knees. Desire washed over her at the knowledge of what he was about to do.

He quickly eased her legs apart before his mouth claimed a sacred piece of her. His warm breath eased around her, encasing her like a cocoon while his tongue and lips continued the silent rhyme through sweet, unspoken words.

The sensation was like none she had ever known. His expert tongue explored her swelling lips and soon he found the key to her pleasure, unlocking it with his fingers while he worked her orgasm. A wave of intense bliss made her cry out his name and he let go of the fabric he had been clutching against her back.

Finleah stood up and palmed her cheeks, kissing her fervently. She tasted herself on his lips and it only heightened the emotions swirling inside. He paused to undo her binding and once she was free Harper fell into his arms to return the kiss that he so deserved.

He broke away from her to growl hoarsely, “I want to be inside you. I need you, Harper.”

All she could do was nod her head, but his smile touched her soul and spoke the words she could not.

Cassidy Kent

Finleah yanked an armful of forgotten coats from their hangers and arranged them on the floor in a makeshift bed. They quickly shed their clothing and fell back into the pallet of clothes. He ran his knuckles across her cheek and she caught a glimpse of tenderness shining in his eyes. Harper tilted her head and Finleah took the opportunity to capture her lips for an affectionate kiss.

Their tongues danced to a ballad of discovery, exploring every secret and creating new ones. Harper ran her hands across his muscled back, reveling in the feel of each line and curve. Her craving grew with each touch and she arched her back, parting her thighs so he could slide between her, covering her body with his large frame.

Finleah tried to run his fingers through her hair and let out an irritated breath. He pulled the handful of hairpins from her hair, throwing them to the floor one at a time. Satisfied, he slipped his fingers through her thick strands while he continued bestowing her with passionate kisses.

“If you don’t make love to me soon, you’ll live to regret it,” Harper threatened him teasingly.

That was all the encouragement he needed and he slid easily into her. She groaned at the swiftness of his movements. Within seconds, they fell into a solid rhythm as Finleah took her higher and higher until she inched closer to the brink. With every stroke, she could hear the music filling her head, louder and louder, as if the volume increased with the beating of her heart.

Finleah paused and when she looked into those passion-filled eyes, she knew he was everything that she had wanted him to be. He was a better man than she had ever imagined. He was her very own Mr. Darcy. Inarticulate when it came to love, but a Cyrano at heart, he was the best prize of all.

As if he read her mind, Finleah plunged deep inside her to fill her to the hilt and in those few seconds he brought her to the happiest place she had ever been in a long time.



Sonnet Seduction

“Harper, I could never say in words exactly how I felt...but when you told me you never thought of me—”

“It was a lie,” Harper pleaded and shook her head.

He ran a finger over her cheek. “I know that now, but in that moment, I had to do something to let you know I cared, something to get through to you. I couldn’t keep my feelings on paper any longer.” He clasped her fingers between his. “You charmed me from the moment we shook hands that first time in the fall. You spoke with such elegance and conviction about everything. I couldn’t keep up with you.”

Harper laughed. “That’s not the first time I’ve heard that.”

“It was a bit off-putting,” Finleah admitted, pulling her close to rest her head against his naked chest. “I decided the only way I could truly make an impression was to speak to you in your own language...”

“Poetry,” Harper sighed.

Finleah nodded and ran a hand through her hair. “Yes, though I managed to work in a little of myself, as well. That didn’t matter much, however, considering you never even took the time to decipher my brilliant mathematics.”

Harper sat up and stared at him quizzically. “You mean those oddly punctuated verses? Are you telling me if I had just figured them out, we would have been together weeks ago?” She groaned and fell back into the bed of coats. “Damn my right-brained self!”

Finleah laughed and stood up, dragging her to her feet. He tossed the dress to Harper as he once again donned Mr. Darcy’s duds. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Ten minutes later, Harper puzzled over a dizzying display of number pairs and lines criss-crossing a page of college-ruled paper. “So, you see,” Finleah said, “once you have the stops lined up in rows and centered symmetrically, you can then read the words in a new sequence and follow the path among the stops which relate to the words.”

There in black and white was a jagged drawing of his initials.

T.F.

Cassidy Kent

She looked at him with shocked admiration. “You *are* a good teacher.”

“So I’ve been told.” His words were modest but his face showed the pride her admission engendered.

Harper looped her arms around his neck and smiled up at him. “I hope you know this doesn’t mean I’ll agree with you all of the time now.”

Finleah cupped her face in his hands. “I would sincerely hate it if you did.”

He kissed her sweetly once more, then offered his arm. They walked back to the gymnasium as Elizabeth Bennet and her Mr. Darcy, his admiration a secret no longer.



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