

The Heart of a Scoundrel (at Christmas)

By Christi Caldwell

Edmund, the Marquess of Rutland had been blindfolded many times in his life. Always to improper ends, and for scandalous acts.

This, however, was the first he'd ever had a midnight strip of fabric tied over his eyes—by his wife.

Edmund knocked into something large, and something definitively furniture-like in nature, and grunted.

“No peaking.” A smile underscored his wife, Phoebe’s words.

“I wouldn’t dare,” he drawled, allowing himself to be tugged through the black labyrinth. He bumped against the wall.

“My apologies,” she said cheerily, and gave his hand another yank, leading him onward.

No one would dare believe that reformed scoundrel had been so tamed, and by the slip of a woman now guiding him down the long halls of his townhouse. Yes, blindfolds had once been for dark deeds and wicked acts...and...

He stopped, and attuned as he'd been to his wife's body since their first meeting almost five months ago, he reached for her and pulled her close.

Phoebe squeaked. “What are you doing?”

“Seducing you,” he whispered. And doing a deplorable job of it, by the lady’s inquiry.

“You are not seducing me, Edmund Deering.” He'd have to be deaf than a doorpost to fail and hear the stern reproach there.

Edmund let out a sigh. “You are certain?” He found the sensitive skin of her right earlobe and the air left her on a slow exhalation.

And then... She scrambled out of his arms. “I am certain. I told you I had a surprise.”

He turned his lips up in a wolfish grin that brought laughter spilling from Phoebe’s lips. “Not that kind of surprise. Come along.” She yanked his hand hard, and he followed.

Yes, a sorry day for rogues, rakes, and scoundrels everywhere when such a deliberate grin failed to seduce. Phoebe continued pulling him through the hallways.

“Here we are,” she came to an abrupt stop and he collided with her slender frame.

Edmund shot his hands out and gripped her by the shoulders, quickly righting her. He lowered his lips close to her neck once more. “Are you certain you do not wish—”

“Edmund, old chap!”

That cheerfully enthusiastic greeting from his brother-in-law doused Edmund’s ardor like a bucket of cold, Thames water being dumped upon him.

What in blazes?

“Your surprise,” Phoebe said, a smile in her words, as she untied the tight binding about his eyes.

Edmund blinked to bring his eyes into focus, and then blinked again. And then blinked some more. He took in the collection of guests smiling expectantly back at him, and well, it really wasn’t his young brother-in-law, dandified in his pale pink satin breeches and oiled hair that earned his attention. Nor was it his endlessly grinning sister-in-law in her frilled skirts, standing beside his mother-in-law...also grinning. But rather...he cocked his head, and looked past that trio of guests.

Emotion tightened his throat. Nay, not guests. Family. With the cold, lonely, empty existence he'd known as a pawn of his cruel parents, there had been no meaning of that word family. Rather, family merely happened to be people bound by blood and name, and not much more.

His wife slipped her fingers into his, and she gave a gentle squeeze. Edmund looked to their interconnected fingers. Except, his wife had shown him that there was indeed meaning to the word family, and love.

She gave him a slight, knowing smile; a smile that said she knew and understood his thoughts when he himself didn't entirely, and he loved her all the more.

Even if he wished for just a sliver of this moment that it was just they two and not the trio... even if he did *love* that trio.

"Welllll?" His sister-in-law Justina stretched out that impatient one syllable utterance yanking him to the moment. She tapped her slippered foot, prodding him with her eyes.

"Give Edmund a moment dear, it is much to take in," his mother-in-law said to the girl at her side, and gave him a commiserative wink.

Phoebe's slender frame shook with amusement, and she tugged him deeper into the room. "Come along. Perhaps you cannot see it."

"Cannot see it, gel?"

"It is a tree," his sister-in-law, piped in with her usual girlish cheer.

"Er, I see that." It was indeed, a tree. A tree, in his parlor, no less. The raging fire in the hearth cast a gentle glow upon the towering spruce decorated with lace bows and...

He squinted.

Were those...?

“Ribbons,” Justina said, wagging her fingers. “Those I contributed to the tree’s décor.”

A tree’s décor? Edmund scratched at his brow. In the course of his more than thirty years, he’d seen a good deal decorated; most of which never was, nor ever would be appropriate. But not once had it been...a tree.

Phoebe’s smile slipped. “Do you not like it?”

Edmund opened his mouth.

“Not like it?” Andrew flared his eyes and gave a tug of lapels. “How can he not like it? Why it is all the crack?”

Justina and Phoebe spoke in unison. “All the crack?”

Andrew rocked on his heels, a flush marring his cheeks. “Er, you know, all the rage. *Fashionable*.”

Edmund attempted to speak once more. “I—”

“You don’t like it,” Phoebe supplied, worrying her lower lip, drawing his attention to that generous flesh, and a desire filled him to kiss her not a sentiment born of pure desire, but because she cared for him, loved him, wished him to be happy.

He tried again. “I—”

“I read of it in my travel books,” his wife said on a rush, and Edmund’s lips twitched at the endearing way she prattled when nervous. “The Germans have a custom where they decorate a tree at the Christmastide Season.” She rang her hands together. “And the custom even exists in America and it seemed like such a splendid tradition and—”

“Phoebe?” he murmured.

“And it is a magnificent spruce.”

“Phoebe?” he drawled once more.

She stared unblinking up at him, while the trio observing them looked boldly on. “I love the damned tree.”

Phoebe’s lips formed a small moue. “You do?” she whispered.

“Six months ago I would have detested it. Six months ago I would have mocked it and jeered any talk or hint of Christmastide.” Emotion roughened his voice, and he dropped his brow to hers. “But you changed me, Phoebe Deering. You taught me love; for you, your family who is now *our* family,” He caressed the swell of her belly where their child rested. “Our child.” Tears filled her eyes, and a single drop slid down her cheek and he caught it with his thumb. “You’ve even taught me to love Christmastide season”

His brother-in-law groaned. “Don’t get all mawkish on me, chap.” Mother and sister shoved an elbow into his side and he grunted.

Edmund lowered his mouth and hovered so only a hairsbreadth separated them. “But you still haven’t yet realized.”

Phoebe furrowed her brow.

“You are all I ever want for Christmas, and every day, Phoebe Deering.”

The End