

Lord Lucifer's Little Bride

By

Viola Morne

©2016 by Blushing Books® and Viola Morne

All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Blushing Books®,

a subsidiary of

ABCD Graphics and Design

977 Seminole Trail #233

Charlottesville, VA 22901

The trademark Blushing Books®

is registered in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Viola Morne

Lord Lucifer's Little Bride

EBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-842-9

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book is intended for adults only. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual spanking activity or the spanking of minors.

Table of Contents:

CHAPTER ONE	5
CHAPTER TWO	19
CHAPTER THREE	32
CHAPTER FOUR.....	45
CHAPTER FIVE	58
CHAPTER SIX.....	71
CHAPTER SEVEN	82
CHAPTER EIGHT	93
CHAPTER NINE.....	107
Viola Morne	117
EBook Offer.....	119
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	120
Blushing Books.....	121

CHAPTER ONE

London, 1825

The Earl of Daneshaw fixed his only son with an arctic eye. "You, sir, are a scapegrace and a wastrel."

Lord Lucian Beaufort yawned and crossed one leg over the other. "So you have told me, Papa, repeatedly."

"And yet you have to still learn your lesson. This last disgrace is beyond the pale!"

Since the incident the earl referred to included public drunkenness, seducing the wife of the publican whose bar he had patronized, the wanton destruction of property, and, finally, being taken up by the Watch, Lucian could hardly disagree. He sighed.

"How long?"

"I don't take your meaning, Lucian."

"For how long will you cut off my funds this time?"

His father smiled coldly. "If you don't marry Miss Wincham, your allowance will be stopped until you come of age."

"Papa! That's two years from now."

"Precisely."

"But Miss Wincham has a limp," Lucian protested.

"I don't care if she has a harelip. She is the only respectable heiress that I could find to take you off my hands. Besides, you haven't even met her."

"So she's desperate then."

"Apparently."

Lucian thought rapidly for a moment. There must be a way to keep his father happy and ensure his own independence. Perhaps if this Miss Wincham met him and then refused to wed him, it would buy Lucian a reprieve from the horrifying thought of marriage.

"Very well, sir. You have me at a disadvantage. I will meet with Miss Wincham and attempt to win her hand."

The earl left the window to pour himself a brandy. "How timely. You have an invitation to the Duchess of Cheverell's ball tomorrow night. I am told that Miss Wincham will be in attendance. You can make her acquaintance then." He nodded his dismissal and Lucian plunged out of the study without slamming the door, although he longed to. He didn't dare.

Blast the old man, he had planned the whole thing. Lucian was conscious of an unwilling respect. When his father wanted a thing to happen, it usually did. He picked up his hat, jammed it on his head, and stormed through the front door as the footman leaped to open it. To the devil with family. He was young and still free and he wanted to celebrate. Pity old Nicky had up and gotten married, though his wife, Jemima, was a lovely thing. His old friend had neither the time nor the inclination to go carousing any more, especially not since Jemima had produced a son and heir. That was to be his own fate, Lucian considered gloomily as he turned his steps towards St. James.

Duke Street was a perfectly respectable address, with the exception of one building which housed an expensive brothel known as *The Nursery*. Here the wealthy rakes and Corinthians could take their ease with lovely ladies who dressed up as young girls. They wore their hair down and clad themselves in lacy pantalettes, their legs on display in girlish white stockings, their bosoms revealed by short stays and transparent chemises. Lucian felt a surge of lust.

"Good evening, Lord Lucian," the butler greeted him as he answered Lucian's knock. "The ladies are in the salon."

Lucian grinned. "Are we having a parade tonight?"

"Indeed, sir. Mrs. Fisher will be so pleased that you have come."

Pleased to see the guineas in his wallet, Lucian thought with an unusual cynicism. He was usually too intent on his pleasure to have much thought for those who provided it.

Mrs. Fisher glided across the elegantly furnished room, her improbably red hair cut and curled in the latest style. She must have been quite the high flyer in her day.

"Lord Lucian, how pleasant to see you again. My girls have been asking after you."

He was not that much of a fool. "Been busy, you know."

"Of course. Please join us, the parade is about to begin and I have the loveliest new girl. Her name is Rose and she is adorable." Mrs. Fisher led the way into the drawing room, where other men of his rank and fortune milled about, drinking the house champagne. She mounted the

low stage and welcomed her guests. "Tonight's theme is *Serving Up Bits o' Muslin*. Gentlemen, may I present my little maids?"

The girls were all lovely, of course, clad in childish versions of what women in service wore. It was the stuff of many a young boy's fantasy. A dark-haired parlor maid wore a skirt so short he could see the curve of her buttocks. The ample breasts of a woman dressed as a cook and brandishing a rolling pin spilled out of her brief bodice. Another pretty thing, clad as a nanny, wore black stockings, her dress cut so high that her bare pussy peeped between her thighs. Lord, she looked just like his sister's governess, Miss Roper. Lucian had taken himself in hand countless times while alone in his bed dreaming of the pretty governess. Mrs. Fisher was a very clever woman.

Ah, that must be the new girl, Rose. She was blond and pretty with large breasts and a roguish look in her eye. Just the remedy for his current state of mind. Lucian nodded at the girl and she winked at him. He grabbed a glass of champagne and tossed it off as he sauntered across the room with a practiced smile.

"You look like a little girl who needs a spanking."

Rose fluttered her eyelashes. "Oh, sir, I really do."

Lucian grinned, not caring that all this was sheer artifice. "Let's go to your room." He squeezed her plump bottom and she moaned obligingly before leading Lucian up the stairs. Another night in Paradise.

#

Phoebe Wincham was twenty-three years old and, it was commonly acknowledged, well on the shelf. In spite of a generous dowry, society held that it was extremely unlikely that the second Wincham daughter would ever marry. She was pretty enough, to be sure, and clever, though no one in the *ton* except her family knew the true extent of her intellect. Society knew only the quiet manners and charming smile which concealed a spine of steel and a lifetime of hurt. Because Phoebe also had a limp, the result of a childhood accident that had never healed properly. Why would any gentleman on the hunt for the perfect wife want one who was so clearly deficient?

Phoebe knew what everyone thought, as she sat at the table in the supper room. Her sister and stepmother had gone to fetch her a plate because her ankle was tired after all the standing

and walking around in the ballroom. She had longed for a chair with the rest of the wallflowers, but Lady Thornhill had been adamant.

"You must never give up, Phoebe. Somewhere out there is the man who will love you for yourself. It is our job to ferret him out. You will never find a husband mooning over your animals in the wilds of Essex!"

Phoebe had wanted to point out that a husband was, in fact, the last thing she wanted. But she had argued that point with her stepmother until she was blue in the face without result. Her step-mama wanted Phoebe to marry, ergo, Phoebe would marry. She had already succeeded in marrying off Phoebe's elder sister.

"Have you been deserted by all your beaux, my lady?"

Phoebe glanced up from her fruitless musings. A tall gentleman, lean, with broad shoulders grinned down at her. His gold hair hung over his brow in a careless manner and his sleepy eyes were a dark, limpid green--not unlike the color of the deep sea. She blinked.

"My beauty has rendered you speechless, I see." Candlelight danced in the gentleman's eyes, like the sun sparkling on emeralds. "May I join you?"

Phoebe nodded, dazzled and quite unable to speak. Who was this handsome man and why on earth would he want to sit with her, of all people?

He sat down and shoved a loaded plate towards her. "May I recommend the lobster puffs?"

Phoebe found her voice. "You may indeed. I am very fond of lobster."

"Ah, I knew it. I saw you sitting here, like a lovely mermaid alone on a deserted shore, and I said to myself, I'll wager she simply adores lobster."

Was he flirting with her? It was impossible, yet...

"Try one."

Phoebe picked up the puff and bit into the buttery pastry, stuffed with lobster and mayonnaise.

"Good, isn't it?"

She nodded. Truly, it tasted like ambrosia.

He popped a puff in his mouth and chewed slowly. "What's life without a little pleasure?" He grinned at her and Phoebe's heart beat just a little faster. "May I amend that to a lot of pleasure?"

"You may."

His beautiful green gaze warmed as the gentleman looked her over. "You are a pretty thing, aren't you? How is it that we have never met before?"

"I don't venture out into society very much."

"Why ever not? Is it all the old cats who sit on the sidelines and pass judgment? I never allow them to worry me."

"Of course not. You're a man, they wouldn't dream of judging you in the same manner. It is women who order the *ton* and their rules are implacable. I don't bother about them either. I prefer the country."

"You do? I like to visit the old estate now and again, but the boredom? How do you bear it?"

"I am rarely bored. There is always something to be done."

"The horror! A lovely girl like you entombed in the country. You should spend more time in London."

Phoebe was conscious of disappointment. He sounded like every other young man on the strut, chasing after new sensation.

"I will be, until I can find a husband. My father's new wife is quite insistent on that head."

There, she thought with satisfaction and a tiny bit of regret, that should send him running to the hills.

"Husband hunting, eh? How goes the hunt?"

Phoebe stabbed her fork in her plate. "Not very well. I don't want to get married."

"Very sensible," he said approvingly. "Alas, I find myself in similar circumstances. My father is demanding I marry. He thinks it will settle me, though it seems that the reverse is true. I would be kicking up my heels even more if I was entangled in matrimony." He shook his golden head and Phoebe blinked at his impossible beauty. "Devil of a coil, isn't it?"

"Devilish," she agreed with feeling.

"In fact, I am supposed to meet her tonight." He shuddered visibly. "I don't know if I can stomach it."

"Lucifer!"

A young sprig of fashion hurried over to their table. What had he called her companion?

"Damned glad to see you, old man." The other man seemed to notice Phoebe for the first time and blushed, his Adam's apple working nervously. "Please pardon my language, but I need to speak with you, Lucifer. Immediately."

"Dash it, Binky, I'm eating my supper."

"Sorry, but it's urgent. Would you excuse us, madam?"

The golden-haired gentleman stood and dropped his napkin on the table. "Pray excuse this untimely interruption." He lifted Phoebe's hand kissed it lightly. She blinked again, feeling the warm imprint of his lips through her thin gloves. "May I claim a waltz later?"

She nodded, speechless, and he left, his friend still babbling as they walked away.

"Phoebe!" Her sister, Dorothy, dropped into the chair beside her. "We're away for ten minutes and you're already in a scrape, talking to a notorious rake. How wicked you are." A note of admiration sounded in her sister's voice.

"Who was he, then?"

"Phoebe! How can you be so ignorant? That was Lord Lucian Beaufort, Daneshaw's heir." Dorothy lowered her voice. "He is a rake of the first order. They call him Lucifer."

"Because he is so beautiful?" Phoebe asked wistfully.

"Because he is so bad! Phoebe, pay attention. He is not for you."

"Of course not. I was only funning."

Dorothy looked relieved. "Good. Don't worry, I won't tell Step-mama. She's like a dog with a bone over this marriage business."

Her sister chattered on about weddings and china patterns and Phoebe's thoughts strayed back to the lovely, wicked man who had singled her out. He hadn't seemed so bad. In fact, Lord Lucian had seemed quite wonderful. She picked up the remaining bit of lobster puff, but it had lost its charm.

"I think I'll go home early. I have a headache."

"It's your ankle, isn't it, dearest? Never mind, I shall go with you."

"I'm not a child, Dorothy. You are enjoying yourself and I am not. I shall be quite fine on my own."

Dorothy hesitated and Phoebe tried to control her spurt of temper, counting to ten silently. Would they never stop treating her as an invalid? She smiled determinedly at her sister and Dorothy wavered.

"Well, if you're sure..."

When Phoebe nodded, Dorothy flitted away in search of her new husband. Phoebe waited until she saw a lull in the crush of people and made her way to the door, walking slowly to disguise her limp and not meeting anyone's eyes. Her few moments with the beautiful man had been quite delightful, but all that would be at an end when he found out about her disability. Easier to leave before that happened. She would convince Papa to let her return to Heron's End and leave the husband-hunting to those girls who were actually interested in that sort of thing.

#

The cold slap of water brought Lucian sputtering to his feet as he leaped off the bed in a panic. He rubbed his eyes and peered through a tangle of wet hair at the icy countenance of his father. The earl's valet stood nearby, an empty bucket clutched in his hands.

"It smells like a whorehouse in here."

Lucian blinked. Of course, it dashed well did. He had spent the better part of last night enjoying himself at *The Nursery*.

"What in blazes is going on, Papa?"

His father curled his lip. "Get yourself cleaned up and dressed and come down to my study."

The door slammed behind them and Lucian groaned. Miss Wincham. He was supposed to have made her acquaintance last night. He shed his wet nightshirt and rung the bell. He was going to need more hot water. That little minx, Jane, used a strong perfume. Lucian rubbed his jaw. He had better shave as well. His head ached and his stomach felt a little uncertain.

He had gone to the ball with the best of intentions. Well, he had gone to the ball, anyway. But then he had met that perfectly lovely girl and ate supper with her, until that bloody idiot Binky had dragged him away with some tale of woe and gambling debts. She was gone when Lucian returned, and, although he had scoured the ballroom, he hadn't found her. That little bird had flown and he had been conscious of a rare disappointment. As much as he liked women, they were mainly interchangeable. As long as they were pretty and willing, he didn't bother to get to know them much better. And this one had been so pretty. And she didn't want a husband, even though she looked quite young. It was an intriguing combination, but, dash it all, Lucian hadn't even asked her name. Still, he knew everybody in society. It should be possible to track her down, but right now he had to face his father.

Twenty minutes later, dressed and shaved, Lucian knocked on his father's study door. The earl bade him enter and Lucian drew a deep breath. His father sat behind his desk, his hands clasped in front of him. He looked up when Lucian walked in and frowned.

"Sit down, Lucian. I have ordered coffee and toast." His shrewd gaze traveled over Lucian's face. "You will feel better after you have eaten."

The housekeeper entered with a tray and Lucian applied himself to strong coffee and hot, buttered toast. He did feel better.

"Now," said his father in his familiar, cool tones, "Perhaps you will explain why you left the ball without speaking to Miss Wincham, after I expressly told you to do so." Before Lucian could protest, the earl held up a manicured hand. "I received a note from her stepmother, Lady Thornhill, who informed me that the meeting did not occur." He dropped his hand back on the desk. "Tell me what happened."

Lucian pulled on his cravat. Blast it, he had tied it too tight. "I did go to the ball, but did not encounter Miss Wincham or her stepmother, for that matter. Then Binky..."

His father raised a single, devastating brow.

"Lord Edmund Breckness. We always call him Binky. Anyhow, poor old Binky had a problem he needed help with, and I couldn't desert a friend in need, so I had to leave the ball to help him out."

"How touching. I had no idea you were so altruistic, Lucian. How much does...er...Binky owe?"

"I didn't say anything about debts."

"You need not. You and all your friends do nothing but fornicate, drink to excess, and gamble. Unless Lord Edward had impregnated some unfortunate maidservant, I imagine his problem would involve gambling debts."

"Well, you're right. But I had to tell Binky I didn't have money to pay my own debts, let alone his." Lucian met his father's cold gaze. "That is, if I were to have any debts, which I, of course, do not." He tugged at his cravat again and swallowed.

"My dear Lucian, do you take me for an idiot?"

"No, sir, of course not. I am the idiot."

"True. Now, tell me exactly what happened."

Lucian suppressed a sigh. There was no point in trying to fool his father. "I went to the ball and danced with a few girls. Then I went into supper and I..."

"Yes?"

"I saw a very pretty girl and I went over to sit with her. She was by herself and looked a little lonely. She was...I don't know...sweet and appealing and we spoke for a few minutes before Binky blundered by and I left. When I returned, she was gone and I couldn't find her. I was disappointed and I left. Sorry."

"Who was the girl?"

"I never had a chance to find out her name. She had brown hair, I think, and speaking eyes. Brown or green. No, hazel. A straight little nose and a very pretty mouth. Perfect teeth. A lovely smile."

"Quite the paragon, in fact."

Why was his father so interested in this girl?

"Except that she said she preferred the country to town." Lucian shook his head. "Anyway, it doesn't matter, does it?"

"No. I have asked Chadwick to pack a bag. You have an invitation to Heron's End and you will be leaving directly after this conversation."

"What? Dash it all, Papa!"

"This is not a discussion. Lord Thornhill has kindly invited you to one of his estates where you will meet Miss Phoebe and, I am sure, convince her to marry you. That is all."

The earl picked up a letter and began reading it. Lucian was dismissed. He considered arguing some more, but there was no point. He headed towards the door and looked back over his shoulder. It must be his imagination, but his father looked like he was smiling. Lucian sighed and wandered back to his room to supervise the packing. Apparently he was going to get married. Damn it.

#

"Lord Lucian has accepted our invitation to Heron's End, my love."

Lord Thornhill stared at his wife for a moment, before he clasped his hands behind his back and turned to gaze out the window. "I won't have you marrying off Phoebe to just anyone."

"My dear, I would never do that. I am simply trying to help," his wife insisted. "Lord Daneshaw first approached me last year. His only son has yet to marry. You have two daughters and, until I arrived here, neither of them had any inclination to marry. It simply won't do, sir."

"Why not, if they're happy?"

"You can't tell me that Dorothy was happy as a twenty-six-year-old spinster with no prospects. She was miserable."

"Yes, my love, you are correct. But Phoebe is different."

Lady Thornhill's voice softened. "I know how much you love her, but we have to consider the future. If we don't conceive a son, then the estate will go to your cousin Robert. The girls will be left with only their portion. They will be unmarried, without a position, and reduced in circumstance. Is that really what you want for them?"

"No, but Phoebe..."

"My dear sir, you trusted me enough to marry me. Will you not trust me enough to carry this task through? I have Phoebe's best interests at heart."

"Perhaps she simply doesn't wish to marry."

Lady Thornhill shrugged. "All girls wish to marry--it is in our nature. Our task, as parents, is to ensure that she makes the best marriage possible to a worthy man who can give her children, provide for her, and make her happy. It is a difficult goal for any parent, but in Phoebe's case..."

"You mean because of her limp."

"You and I both know that Phoebe is a wonderful girl, with the kindest heart in the world. But other people see only her disability. We must find a man who will see Phoebe for what she is--and not for what she is not."

"Are there any such men in London?" he demanded.

"I can only pray that there are." Lady Thornhill stood on her toes to press a kiss on his cheek before fluttering away to one of her many engagements.

He turned back to the window and smiled a little. His new wife had brought him a happiness he had never expected to feel after Emily died. His first marriage had been a love match, surprising in the upper echelons of society, but he had seen Phoebe's mother on the night of her debut and no other woman had existed for him afterward. Her early death had almost shattered him. Only the knowledge that their daughters depended on him had kept him going.

And now, Phoebe...she was so like her mother, with that bright, inquiring spirit and a streak of rebellion that made her question conventions and drove him to distraction. But her love, like her mother's, ran true and deep. He sighed. His wife was right. Phoebe would never find a husband while she spent her days tending to stray animals and engaged in her research. She needed more and Lord Thornhill intended her to have everything--even if Phoebe didn't know she wanted it.

But his anxiety was not diminished by his wife's common sense. Phoebe was, quite simply, different. The world viewed her as a fragile girl with a cruel disfigurement, but Phoebe herself merely acknowledged and dismissed her disability. She viewed herself as a strong and capable woman, which she certainly was. But life could be cruel and he wanted Phoebe to have someone to care for her, especially once he himself was gone. And whoever that man turned out to be, he would have to be kind, patient, and strong enough to deal with his headstrong daughter. He wasn't convinced that Daneshaw's rakish son was the answer. Though marriage did steady many men, himself included. Lord Thornhill would bide his time and see what developed. Phoebe would be protected, whatever else happened.

#

Lucian's head ached as the coach rattled over the Essex roads. At least his stomach had finally settled. They had been driving for hours and he was heartily sick of the coach, the horses, and just about anything else in his vicinity. He desperately needed a drink. But the coachman had orders from Papa. Lucian wasn't even permitted to step into a taproom. They had made only one brief stop and Lucian had devoured the sandwich and coffee delivered to the coach. Blast. There would be ale inside, he thought dreamily, great tankards of home-brewed ale, brown and refreshing. And platters of roasted meat and buxom serving wenches with an eye to a...

"Heron's End, my lord."

The coach had stopped in front of a long, low building of red brick dotted with mullioned windows and pitched roofs. A clock tower rose above the central door. It looked old, to Lucian's jaundiced eyes. He heaved a sigh and climbed down to the graveled drive. No sign that he was expected. Lucian rapped firmly on the front door and wished, fervently, that he was anywhere else but here. After many long minutes, the door finally opened. The elderly butler peered at him doubtfully from the interior gloom.

"I am Lord Lucian Beaufort. I am here to see the Honorable Miss Phoebe Wincham."

The butler stared at him without speaking while Lucian waited. Was the man hard of hearing?

"Miss Phoebe Wincham?"

The butler blinked. "Ah, yes. Miss Phoebe. You will find her in the gardens at the Sanctuary, I dare say."

The door shut firmly in Lucian's face. Strange. He walked down the steps and around the side of the house, where he found a brick path leading to a wooden gate. He lifted the latch and continued on. To the left, Lucian could see a conventional garden with shrubs and flowers and parterres. To the right, was a row of fruit trees and beyond was a huddle of small buildings. She must be in the garden. He took a step to the left and a high-pitched shriek rent the air. What the devil? Lucian turned right and ran down the path, past the trees to a low wooden enclosure which contained a fox tangled in a snare. A young woman was attempting to free the fox by cutting away the twine, but the howling beast was not letting her anywhere near him.

It was *her*. The lovely girl from the ball. He couldn't get that lucky, could he?

"I am looking for Miss Phoebe Wincham."

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "I am Phoebe. What are you doing here?"

No indication of recognition. She turned back to the fox. Well, this was damned awkward. Why hadn't Phoebe's parents prepared her for his visit?

Lucian cleared his throat. "We have already met, Miss Wincham. At the Duchess of Cheverell's ball."

Phoebe set down the knife and sighed. "Yes, I know who you are. I wasn't sure if you would remember me."

His smile was carefully calculated to dazzle. "Do you think I forget every pretty girl I speak to?"

Phoebe looked him over coolly. "Yes, I'm afraid I do. Your reputation precedes you, Lord Lucian."

That shook him a trifle. He tried again. "Your parents invited me to stay."

"Here?"

"Indeed." Lucian fingered his cravat. Phoebe was quite unmoved by his presence. In fact, she seemed distinctly annoyed.

"Are you a party to all this, Lord Lucian?" She waved her hand.

"Need we be so formal? Please, call me Lucian."

Phoebe subjected him to a comprehensive scan. "Not Lucifer?"

A slight flush colored one lean cheek. "No, just Lucian."

"Well, *Just Lucian*, why don't you lend a hand while you regale me with your marriage proposal? I am rather occupied at present."

This situation was not at all what he expected. She didn't even seem to like him, much less want to marry him. Finally, a reluctant grin lightened his countenance. "Miss Wincham, you are a most unusual girl."

"Yes, so are the freaks at every country fair." She nodded at an old scarred table. "You'll need gloves to hold him."

Lucian pulled on the rough hide gloves, so different from the kid ones he usually wore while out on the town.

"What happened?"

"This fox got stuck in a rabbit snare and the twine has wrapped around his right front paw. He's quite young and still small, as you see. If you will grab his neck, so he can't snap, I will cut away the twine."

It was an odd way to begin wooing his future bride, but Lucian was determined to prove himself up to the challenge. He reached over the pen and firmly grasped the fox by the neck and shoved up his muzzle. Phoebe quickly cut away the twine as the distressed animal struggled to escape. The wound revealed was raw and red. Phoebe backed away and nodded to him. Lucian released the fox and it turned on him, his sharp little teeth missing Lucian's hand by a scant inch.

"What an interesting life you lead, Miss Wincham."

She snorted and stalked away, her very pretty nose in the air.

And Lucian, uncharacteristically bemused, followed her. Phoebe halted at one of the huts. A washbasin sat on an old dresser just inside. Phoebe stripped off her dirty gloves and began to wash her hands. "Let's get down to brass tacks, shall we? You are being forced to marry me and I am being strongly encouraged to accept you. This is not at all what I wanted."

"I understand. Truly, I do. But would it really be so terrible to be married to me? I would be a very tolerant husband. You would have anything you wish."

"Anything?"

Lucian shrugged. "When we marry, and I'm afraid my father is rather insistent on that point, I will gain access to my mother's fortune, which is considerable. I can buy you a house in London or an estate where you may care for animals, just like this."

"Really? You would permit me to carry on my work with the animals?"

"Why not?" Lucian cleared his throat. "There is the small matter of an heir," he told her with an air of apology. "Comes with the territory, you know."

"Of course. The titled gentleman's enduring passion--to provide an heir of his body to pass down his wealth. And a virgin bride to ensure there is no previous tampering with the merchandise. Will you require me to present you with a certificate of authentication?"

Lucian stared at her. "A what?"

"Proof of my virginity. In nature, the male of the species provides succor and food for only its own offspring. I assume you wouldn't want to accept any cuckoos in the nest that might taint your bloodline."

"What in blazes are you talking about?"

"Very well, you wish to examine me yourself. Come along."

Extraordinary girl.