

LITTLE FRANCESCA



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



Sir Anthony Bennington had to smile to himself as he mounted the stairs to number three Beekman Street and reached for the bell, although the sounds that conjured such strong feelings in him wouldn't be considered ones that would inspire such a reaction in most people.

They were, instead, the unmistakable cries of someone in great distress, someone distinctly female who was relatively young—especially in comparison to him. As he paused before ringing the bell—that he had no doubt would not disturb the unrelenting rhythm of those lovely, unfettered utterances in the least—he realized that not only could he hear those unhappy feminine moans, but he could also hear the crisp strokes or swats that prompted them, causing him to look up and discern that the noises were coming from the room on the next floor that was directly above the doorstep, its window wide open—as were all of the other windows in the house that he could see, except those on the servants' floor.

At that, he had to chuckle out loud at his friend's evil ingenuity while pressing the bell. Any time—*anywhere*—that particular female was chastised, anyone who stood outside the front door of the perfectly normal seeming house in a fashionable part of town

would be serenaded by her loud, undoubtedly unavoidable, blubbing.

When he'd begun to think that it might be out of order, and just before his immaculately gloved finger would have hit the button for the second time, the door was opened by Evans, the butler, starched and stalwart as always.

He was already in the act of doffing his coat, gloves and top hat when the older man asked for them.

"Where is Sir Bertrand?"

"In his study, Sir Anthony."

He wasted no time in crossing the large, opulent foyer, but the little butler still managed to beat him to the door, opening it and announcing him, as was the proper thing to do.

Bertrand Holloway stood as soon as he entered, coming out from behind the desk to offer his hand to the younger man.

"Ah, Anthony. So good of you to come."

Anthony inclined his head. "I had nothing pressing on and was quite happy to have received your invitation."

"Tea?"

"No, thank you. And, although I always enjoy your company, I have to admit that I'm quite curious as to why you wanted to see me. You didn't mention anything in your note."

His eyes darting away, Bertrand gestured to the divan, where Anthony sat, then seated himself close by.

"I know, and I shall come right to the point so as not to waste either of our time." He cleared his throat, then began, "You had occasion to meet my ward, Francesca, at the dinner party I hosted last weekend."

"Yes, yes, I did. Quite a pretty...girl." He hesitated about how to politely refer to someone who was definitely an adult, although her guardian had not allowed—and he gathered subsequently, did not generally allow—her to dress that way. So much so that the women in the party—and the majority of the men, most of whom were

single—were quite surprised when he had mentioned that she was almost nineteen years old.

In fact, although he and Bertrand were old friends, he had been amazed to meet the girl at all. He had always known there was a ward, but had never actually met her, and any gentle questioning he had done—when they'd first met—in regards to the girl had been quashed immediately, although he had, on occasion, like today, been privy to hearing certain small glimpses into the girl's life which had enticed him in the extreme.

"She is, yes, thank you. And she's been most strictly raised, I promise you that."

Considering what he'd heard before entering the house—and, if he admitted to himself, he could still continue to hear, if he strained but a bit, and he was ashamed to admit that that was exactly what he was doing, so much so that he was following their conversation only distractedly—he could hardly be surprised at that revelation.

And then the sounds ceased abruptly, and he forced himself to concentrate on the very interesting matter at hand. "You are to be congratulated on that, Sir—"

"Bertrand, please. Haven't we been acquainted long enough that we could discharge such formalities?"

Indeed they had, but Bertrand's personality—even in friendship—invited rigid formality and correctness, which was something Anthony was quite sure the young lady in question was excruciatingly familiar with.

"Bertrand, then. You are to be congratulated on maintaining standards, sir, when so few parents or guardians are doing so these days. Young girls—and boys—are being allowed entirely too much leeway to do as they please, as far as I'm concerned."

"There are those who would say that I have been too strict with my ward—especially since I have not relaxed the rules by which she lives even as she has grown older and is, technically, of an age where she would normally be allowed much more freedom."

Bertrand rose, headed for the bar, turning back to Anthony when he reached it, asking, "Whiskey?"

"Yes, please."

When they'd both had sips of their drinks and he had settled back down in his comfortable chair, Bertrand continued, "As a matter of fact, it was recently pointed out to me by a trusted employee that she is more than old enough to be married."

Anthony nodded but held his tongue, wanting to see exactly where the older man was going with this.

"And I had to agree with that assessment, although I have obviously put it off as long as I could, simply because I cannot allow her to be married to just anyone. Francesca has been raised in a very particular way, and it is my deepest desire that her husband continue her...well, for want of a better word, upbringing, in as close to the same manner as is possible—with a few necessary changes, of course." He cleared his throat, giving Anthony a considering look.

"I realize that my attitude towards Francesca is anachronistic in the extreme, what with females likely to get the vote soon," he said with a less than delicate shudder. "But I am of the firm belief that girls should be kept quite strictly out of the public eye; that they were designed to be taken care of by their men within the confines of their own homes, seen to quite closely but not heard from, kept modest and pliant and submissive to them in all things, and that it is not seemly in the least that they should be granted any kind of power over themselves or their fate, lest they be drawn into all manner of wanton, disgraceful behavior. Females are ever young and irresponsible, prone to sin and often dragging others down with them into that disgraceful state, and thus they will always need a firm, male hand guiding them that will be a constant reminder of those facts, that will keep them chaste and pure of sin through frequent scourging of the flesh when they do not measure up to the necessarily rigid standards of behavior that must be maintained for them."

He eyed Anthony sharply. "Consistent punishment and regimentation, a very specific, conscious enhancing of their lack of maturity by rules of comportment and so forth that might be applied to someone much younger, coupled with nearly impossible to meet goals which force them to strive to constantly do better, along with almost complete isolation, is just what every girl living needs to feel safe and cared for. Contented, I dare say, in such a restrictive environment, perhaps despite herself."

There was a silence between the two of them once he'd stopped speaking, but not an awkward one at all.

"Would you be at all surprised to hear that, when you were all introduced to Francesca, it was the first time she'd met anyone outside this household—beyond the occasional changes in staff—since I took her in?"

"Only a bit, since I've never been introduced to her, either." Anthony's brow furrowed. "Although she was very well behaved and polite."

"She daren't be anything but."

"She didn't say much—"

"Taught to speak only when spoken to, my boy," Bertrand interrupted. "A wonderful, overlooked tenet of a child's behavior that is tailor made for girls in particular."

"Yes, I gathered that. But when she did speak, she seemed well educated for one so isolated, and who appeared to be so young."

The other man chuckled. "And that surprises you, too, does it?"

"Well, yes, considering your, well, old fashioned views of women."

"Yes, but there is something that trumps that, if I might paraphrase from the Good Book: idle hands—idle *minds*—are the devil's playground. I never once said that I think females are stupid. They're not. Francesca, in particular, is very smart, although she has a tendency—like many a girl—to be stubborn and lazy, to dislike working at something she isn't interested in or finds hard to do. Both traits I have striven to disabuse her of, I can assure you,

although with varying results." He rose to look out the window of his study. "No, in fact, I feel very strongly that young girls must be challenged, both mentally and physically. It might interest you to know that Francesca has been home schooled, using a curriculum designed by me and implemented by her nanny. When she came to me, I assessed her educational strengths and weaknesses immediately and began to shore up the knowledge she had already acquired, while challenging her in areas where she lagged behind—not because she couldn't understand them, but because she refused to apply herself in order to succeed at them; higher mathematics, chemistry, physics and, surprisingly, languages, were her worst subjects. I am happy to say that she is now fluent in all of those subjects, although, of course, the bar has been raised with every success so that she is always compelled to try to meet my standards—in every area of her life."

He leaned a bit forward, towards the younger man. "As you might have surmised, there are many times when she fails to hit the mark and is punished accordingly for her failures."

Anthony was suitably impressed. "You are to be commended, sir. Apparently, your methods are tremendously successful. Perhaps they should be implemented much more widely."

Bertrand chuckled. "I would be quite happy to settle for seeing them continued for the rest of Francesca's life, which means that I shall be very particular about what type of man she marries."

His eyes widened. "I am amazed to hear that you intend she should marry at all, sir."

"Well, I am, above all things, a pragmatist, Anthony. I am over fifty, and it is likely that I will predecease my ward. Therefore, I am already searching for the man who will take over the raising of her for me."

"You are?"

"Yes. And I wondered if you might have an interest along those lines." Bertrand's eyes narrowed as he gazed at the younger man. "I could see how taken you were with my Francesca, and, even more

so, with the fact that she will never be allowed to experience the maturity of her years, but instead will spend her days as an adult child—sometimes a very young child—forever subject to the rigid rules—and harsh discipline—of the nursery."

Anthony listened intently.

"I'm aware of the fact that, following my explanation of her appearance, most of my guests thought that Francesca was being treated that way because there was something wrong with her, but I could see that you were the only one at the table who grasped the reality of the situation—and were thoroughly intrigued by it, unless I missed my guess."

Anthony choked a bit on his drink, then said, "And is that why you brought me here? To offer me her hand?"

Bertrand's smile was less than encouraging. "Not quite, I'm afraid. Considering what I would expect of a man who would—for all intents and purposes—be my son-in-law, I could hardly make it that easy to claim her, now, could I? I brought you here to discern your level of interest in that possibility. However, I feel it is only fair to inform you that you are not the only candidate for the honor and that, even if you were, you would still need to prove yourself to be what I would consider to be a worthy guardian—uh, husband."

Eyebrow up, Anthony asked, "How many other candidates are there?"

"A few," came the evasive answer.

"A few hundred?"

That earned him a chuckle, and he thought that was probably a rarity—the other man did not strike him as having much of a sense of humor. "Not quite that many, but a few others have expressed interest and, since I am at the beginning of my search, the playing field is quite level."

"You're meeting with all of them, just like this?"

"Yes, I am."

Fixing Bertrand with a narrow-eyed stare, Anthony asked pointedly, "And the little show I heard while I was waiting for

Evans to answer the door—that was a deliberate earful, wasn't it? To give me a taste and see if I'd run screaming or stick around to find out more?"

His slight smile revealing nothing, the other gentleman protested, "Of course not—Francesca must have been in need of punishment for some infraction or other. It is hardly an uncommon occurrence in this household that one hears her pitiful weeping as she is taught yet another lesson, one which she might well have been just as thoroughly punished for several times before."

"With the windows wide open?" Anthony noted slyly.

Bertrand remained unruffled. "Well, it is summer, after all, my boy. Or, perhaps her nanny thought the severe embarrassment of knowing that she could be heard by all and sundry who might climb the front steps—or, indeed, any number of nameless passersby—as she was being thoroughly corrected might prompt her to adjust her behavior accordingly. Although, apparently, she was proven wrong in that assumption, considering that was hardly the first time she's been corrected today."

Then he stood, almost abruptly, and began to walk towards the door. "Well, Anthony, although I am most anxious to get Francesca settled, I do not expect you to give me such an important answer immediately. Please take a few days and think about what I've said to you—think *very carefully* about it, indeed. This is not something that should be rushed into, and I intend to take my time and make a very informed decision about the man I choose to follow in my footsteps."

At that not so subtle signal, Anthony rose, downing the last of his whiskey and strolling past the door that was held open for him. It was then that he saw the subject of their discussion being marched down the beautiful central staircase in front of the woman who was apparently her nanny.

If she had been brought up as a normal woman—Anthony had noticed that Bertrand never referred to women as women; as

"females" occasionally, but "girls" mostly, using the diminutive word that reinforced their immaturity—Francesca might have swept dramatically down the stairs in a dress that would undoubtedly be the latest confection from Paris, wearing perhaps a bit of makeup and perfume, to stand before him and practice her feminine wiles on him while talking and flirting, trying to get him to agree to call on her, or even take her out.

Instead, Anthony found himself treated to another glimpse into her peculiar—and terribly interesting—world. Her face, which was downcast already, was red and mottled, still damp with traces of tears which were undoubtedly a remnant of the spanking she had been subjected to not long ago, soot black lashes standing out in stark, spiky relief against her white skin because of it. Her beautiful brown hair was kept long and straight and largely untouched—the exact opposite of a typical woman her age, who was likely to spend a lot of time trying out all sorts of new hair styles—its only decoration an enormous, babyish bow at the back. Her dress was severely modest with its starched, high button up collar, in a fine but plain dark blue fabric, but its skirt was as short as a very young child's would be, which was considered quite improper for someone of her age—coming only to her knees and displaying a disconcerting amount of her sharply white, plain bloomers, which ended just below her knees. And, he noted, she wore a crisp, white pinafore over it, which was considered necessary to keep a young girl's dress clean, but he suspected was required in this case only to reinforce her childish status in her own household.

This was a young girl who was unlikely to be given the chance to soil her pinafore.

And, although he noticed all of these things, they were not really what caught his eye, nor what caused the girl to brighten even further as soon as she saw him, tears beginning to drip again onto her otherwise pristine apron.

His eyes widened when he noticed what the tall, dour—surprisingly young—woman behind her was carrying, that her charge

obviously already knew about. It was a very large water bottle—empty, for the moment—with a long rubber hose that ended in some kind of nozzle he'd never seen the likes of before, but that looked as if it would be very uncomfortable to have to submit oneself to.

Considering her obvious humiliation, it was entirely understandable that she tried to skirt around him rather than having to acknowledge him in any way, but she was brought up short in her attempt by sharp reprimands—almost in unison—issued by both her nanny and her guardian.

"Francesca!"

At that, she stopped and faced him, eyes never leaving the floor in front of her toes, still crying and, gripping a little the unfashionably full skirt of her dress to pull it outwards, she gave him a perfect version of a little girl's curtsy, lisping slightly, "Sir Anthony."

More charmed by the entire scene—in particular her obvious embarrassment—than he wanted to be, Sir Anthony found that he couldn't stop himself from taking a step towards her, towering over her, to cup her cheek in a gesture of familiarity he would never have used with a young woman who hadn't been raised so unusually, already treating her as if she really were a girl child.

"Little Francesca, I am delighted to see you. I do hope you are behaving yourself."

He was amazed to see her blush deepen even further. "Yes, sir."

He tilted his head and gave her a doubtful look. "You're not fibbing to me, are you, Francesca?" he asked sternly.

"No, sir," she whispered before finding her chin tilted up by one big finger.

"You must speak up, child, when you are addressing your elders," he scolded sternly.

"Yes, sir. No, sir," she babbled, obviously desperate to say the right thing.

Anthony decided not to worry her any further on that account

in favor of inquiring about a much more interesting item. "And just where is it that you and your nanny are going?"

She tried to put her chin down but he wouldn't allow it.

He watched her worry her lip, almost to the point of blood.

"Answer Sir Anthony, girl!" Nanny chided loudly.

The poor girl took a ragged breath and barely sobbed out, but remembering to do so at a suitably humiliatingly volume, "Nanny—Nanny says I'm fr-fractionous and that I m-must have a-a—" She was wringing her hands, obviously not wanting to go on, but she must've known the consequences of disobeying, so she forced herself to finish, "Milk and molasses e-e-enema to wash it out of me, sir."

"Ah," he pounced. "Then you did fib to me. You've been naughty enough to earn a good washing out. I shall remember that you lied to me, little Francesca, and, one day, I shall punish you for it."

All the girl could do was to stare up at him at his pronouncement, agog.

Especially when he smiled down at her, bending to kiss her forehead as if he were a favorite uncle and she was six.

Then he said goodbye to Sir Bertrand, collected his things from Evans, and made his way out the door to spend the rest of the week unable to stop thinking about how enchanted he was by big, little Francesca and the delicious dichotomies contained therein.



BUT IT DIDN'T TAKE him all week to call Bertrand back and let him know that he was interested. He could have told him that while he was still in the foyer, but he thought it might be wise to take at least a little time to digest what he'd learned and what had happened. And even though he'd made up his mind that he wanted her—and that he'd be willing to do pretty much anything in order to have her—by the time his chauffeur driven Daimler had pulled up in front of his front door that day, Anthony forced himself to wait what he

considered to be an appropriate amount of time—three days—before he called the other man and told him of his interest.

"Will you tell me now how many others I'm in competition with?" he heard himself ask when he'd promised himself he'd not do exactly that.

"Well..." Bertrand feigned reluctance. "I have not heard back from everyone I interviewed yet, but I believe there are around twelve of you, give or take."

That many! he thought but didn't say. Not that he was worried, but still. It was a larger field of candidates than he had imagined there would be.

"Well, let me say that I am honored to be counted among them."

Bertrand just chuckled. "Flattery, my boy. It never hurts. I will contact you about the next step in the process as soon as I have received replies from everyone."

"Thank you, sir."

It wasn't more than a few days before Anthony's butler handed him the evening post and in it was an invitation to the home of Sir Holloway for a white tie dinner the next week. He found himself literally dreaming about it until, at last, the night was upon him, and he found himself standing in the large drawing room he'd been in not so long ago, meeting the usual object of his affections—or perhaps the object of his unusual affections would be more accurate—for the first time.

As much as his eyes had strained to get a catch of Francesca since he'd arrived, she was nowhere to be found—there were not even any mewls or cries from floors above. Instead, he was surrounded by his competition, only a few of whom he was even slightly acquainted with, men of every appearance and age, although they were all of a particular background—all rich, propertied peers.

Most of the men, he was not surprised to see, skewed a bit older, but then that was to be expected, he supposed, considering who was conducting the search. Although, to his mind, it would

kind of defeat his host's purpose to choose a man who was not significantly younger than he was.

It was an odd position to be put in—for all of them—and, even though Anthony knew some of the men, it was quite awkward, and conversation was stunted at best.

At least until they got a few drinks into them, he thought.

Bertrand was not amongst them, which was unusual, and when he did appear, it was to announce that they were to go in to dinner.