

A Most Curious Courtship



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Chapter One

Three-Hour's Ride Southwest of London

1815

Country roads were deuced confusing at times, and this was one of them. Jonathan Avery, arriving at a dead end, wheeled Morocco back toward the hamlet he had lately passed. As he trotted along toward the huddle of dwellings hidden around the next two bends in the road, he might have felt the first edges of frustration. His destination was plainly in sight on a gentle rise beyond an expanse of open fields, and yet he seemed unable to get to it. However, if he was feeling any irritation, it was slight.

The quiet lane was dusty, and the sun fell heavily, prickling him with afternoon heat that struck past his coat of linen and shirt of lawn. He was aware of his growing thirst, but because he had anticipated an uncomplicated arrival, he had not thought to bring more than a bottle of water, which he had long since drained. In his pass through the hamlet earlier he did not remember seeing a public house, so he did not expect to find relief there. Nevertheless his thirst and the heat were minor inconveniences. He felt unhurried, even calm, and wondered if he was not also experiencing contentment – but then doubted he was capable of such a comfortable emotion. Waterloo was too recent. The roar of the cannons and the rattling moans of death still echoed in his ears, the stench of rotting flesh and burnt powder still filled his nose, and the sight of green fields turned into hellscapes of heaped corpses continued to haunt his dreams.

Whatever he was feeling, he was grateful, even surprised, to be alive. And here he was moving through a peaceful and prosperous part of world, surrounded by the pungent-sweet scents of mown hay and wildflowers and the rustic music of querulous jays and quarrelling crickets, the whole pleasantly sunk in the drowse of late summer.

He turned the next bend and set Morocco to clopping over a twee stone bridge. He came to a halt at the odd intersection of five lanes in the midst of the hamlet, the very crossroads that had befuddled him earlier. He already knew two paths he did not want: the one he had entered by and the one he had just taken to an abandoned mill. He looked up to his right. Over the rooftops, on the highest swell of land stood a graceful pile of stones, the ducal manor, perceptible but out of reach, like an elusive dream. He looked down at the three remaining paths and now judged the one veering to the right, almost due north, to have the promise of being the most direct. Or, at least, such would seem logical.

He remained immobile, well aware of the rambling illogic of country lanes. The next thing he knew the forceful backdraft of his memories sucked him into the horrors of that bright, black day in June where he dwelled for a while until Morocco became restive. The shift in his Arabian's haunches half-roused him from his dark reverie. At that same moment he heard,

“Can I help you, sir? You seem lost.”

Lost, yes, on the battlefields. Fortunately, the question served to bring him

fully back to the present. He looked down and into the upturned face of a young woman. Pretty. Very pretty, with a heart-shaped face perfectly framed by her bonnet. Her gray gaze was steady, he noted, and she was awaiting his answer. He gathered himself then gestured toward the stately house in the middle distance to the right and said,

“I’m trying to get to Bradford Manor.”

She nodded and pointed to the path on the farthest left. “Go down that lane, sir, and when you come to a fork in the road, keep going left.” She must have read the puzzlement on his face because she added, “Yes, your goal is to your right, but the left branch at the next fork curves around the back of the hill and will lead you straight past the alley to the house. You can’t miss the entrance. The gates are rather grand.”

He must have been more tired than he realized because he became aware of his rudeness in not dismounting to converse with the young woman. He made as if he were going to swing his leg over the pommel but she forestalled him. “No, sir, don’t get off on my account. It’s too hot to observe the proprieties, and you’ll want to be straight on your way.”

Not feeling much like dismounting, he settled back in the saddle. “Thank you, miss.” Her mention of proprieties recalled to his mind good British manners. The girl’s dress and speech were not those of a milkmaid. She was clearly a Londoner born and obviously well bred. With a sudden frown, he said, “And how is it that you are abroad alone, may I so inquire?”

Her chuckle was low and sultry. Her expression suggested she found his question as quaint as the lane they occupied. With a delicate shrug she said, “This is Hartsfield, sir.” She raised her arm in the direction of the left-most path. “The fork is a good mile down the road.” She trilled her fingers in an almost shooing gesture. “Make sure to take the left branch.” Then she turned and walked away.

He sat immobile another second while he absorbed the fact that he, the new and Sixth Duke of Bradford, had just been dismissed by a self-possessed chit of eighteen.

Chapter Two

Miss Beatrice Castle was, indeed, young but she was no miss of eighteen, having fulfilled the ripe age of two-and-twenty the previous April. However, she had the experience of a much older woman, owing to the fact that she had taken on adult responsibilities seven years earlier. Her guardian-angel-cum-general-factotum, Hugo, was wont to refer to her as an Old Soul. The new duke was correct to judge her to be self-possessed. He was soon to learn she was also a woman of possessions, given that she owned half the hamlet nestled at the foot of his southern lawn.

Once she had put the well-setup man on horseback onto the correct path, Beatrice continued on her way, a simple errand from her trim country house to a structure across the street dubbed the Hotel. She was going to look in on the new mother and the infant daughter who had arrived in the world the day before, red and wrinkled and very much desired.

This latest new mother shared much in common with other mothers Beatrice had brought to Hartsfield over the past two years. She was young, unwed, and had

fallen pregnant through no lapse of virtue on her part but rather by the lustful attentions of the lord and master of the establishment where she worked – or, perhaps, by the roving eye and busy cock of his son, an upper footman, or even an unscrupulous tradesman on a delivery who knew the tricks to corner and conquer comely serving girls. It was an old story. It was a tiresome story. But Beatrice had created the means to give these stories a happy end. She provided the fallen women with a place to go when their bellies started to show. In the barn-turned-dormitory behind the Hotel they spent their pregnancies in the fresh air, eating well and doing light chores, far away from disapproving eyes. At the Hotel they gave birth not under shamefaced conditions but rather under joyous ones.

She entered what had once been a shambling crofter's cottage now converted into a tidy room with two beds, two bassinets and a scattering of comfortable chairs for midwives, nursing mothers and visitors. Only one bed was currently occupied, namely by Anna who was holding the tiny bundle she had named Mary Claire, and one chair was filled by the stolid girth of Mrs. Hutchins, a midwife with the steadiest hands and longest fingers in southern England.

Beatrice greeted the occupants and was greeted in return. After inspecting the still red and wrinkly baby, she smoothed back Anna's hair to plant a kiss on her forehead then took a seat on the edge of her bed. She invited, "Tell me the latest."

The midwife took charge of the recital and informed Beatrice that Mary Claire had latched on with no difficulty and was suckling nicely. She further heard in detail the feeding schedule of the infant who was hardly twenty-four hours old. Mrs. Hutchins praised Anna's recovery, pronounced her fit to have as many children as she wanted – adding with a broad wink that she hoped Anna would be wed before further breeding occurred – and continued on about what the new mother was to eat and drink over the next few weeks. She ended with a deal to say about the three young women currently residing in the Dormitory, two of whom were to deliver relatively soon in September and the third in October. Mrs. Hutchins was plainly pleased by the current state of affairs of Miss Castle's operation, and she didn't think the bed in the Dormitory vacated by Anna would be empty much longer because "men being men never learn from their fellow's mistakes, and the reason is they're not held to account when one of 'em gets a decent lassie up the duff!"

Beatrice could only agree and spared no blush for Mrs. Hutchins' use of cant. From a young age her tender ears had been accustomed to hearing quite a bit stronger language.

Presently Cook sailed in with tea and sandwiches, bowls of fresh fruit and the latest neighborhood gossip. "The new duke has come!" she announced with great self-importance. Barely containing herself she explained how Jarod, Jem the blacksmith's brother, who worked in the Bradford stables, had spread the news, using the clever ruse of needing to exercise one of the mounts.

"His grace apparently has a very fine horse," Cook said, "so Jarod told Jem, and while Jem wanted to natter on about it to me, I had to tell him I did not care a pin if his grace's horseflesh is prime or not but wanted to know better things!"

"Yes," Mrs. Hutchins agreed, "like a description of his carriage."

"Well, as to that, I'm sure he has one," Cook said, "but he didn't come in it. Simply rode up to the manor alone, no fine equipage with liveried postilions and

like! No, it seems the most he brought with him was a bedroll slung on the back of his horse.”

While Cook, Mrs. Hutchins and Anna explored the mysteries surrounding a duke who arrived for the first time at his principal seat with so little fanfare, Beatrice was left to figure she’d already met the man. When the Fifth Duke had died a few months past, little was known about the Sixth Duke. The male line of Averys had been so very strong that no one could have predicted the astonishing series of unexpected deaths that had led to a distant cousin inheriting the dukedom. Beatrice was given to wondering whether the new duke’s very quiet arrival arose from his lack of sense what was due his consequence. Or was he a sly one, getting the lay of the land before revealing himself?

Beatrice added the detail of his bedroll, which she had not noticed, to the picture she had of him with his sun-tanned features, his erect carriage and the faraway look in his eyes when he had looked up from his contemplation of the scrabbly intersection in the center of the hamlet.

“He may be an army man,” she ventured.

“Hussars!” Cook affirmed. “Distinguished himself at Waterloo he did, so everyone at the manor is saying. They’re also saying he’s a fine looking man!”

Beatrice could not deny it, although she wouldn’t call him classically handsome. He was certainly attractive with dark hair, blue eyes, a masterful nose and firm jaw. Thinking back on their encounter, she decided what had impressed her most was his presence, his air of self-containment. Keeping her own counsel she said nothing to the women about having met him, and conversation about the new duke was eventually exhausted, there being only so many times the same spare facts could yield fresh interpretations.

Into a small pause Anna said, “I’ve made my decision, Miss Castle.”

Beatrice laid her hand on Anna’s arm and replied, “There’s no hurry, you know. Take all the time you want.”

“But I know what I want to do,” Anna said earnestly. “I want to say here, and I’ve persuaded Mama to come join us.”

“What good news!” was Beatrice’s immediate reply.

She had found Anna in the girl’s fourth month, frightened and rejected by her own family. Over the months Beatrice had paid scribes to exchange letters between Anna and her mother, since neither woman knew to how to read or write. Beatrice heartily applauded Anna’s mother’s change of heart. She could always use another pair of capable hands to carry out her work in Hartsfield.

In the wake of this happy report she said her good-byes, returned to her house and went through the documents she had brought from London concerning various properties she was eyeing to buy. She was not one for airy speculation on ‘Change. She liked down-to-earth parcels of land and the solidity of the structures built on them.

Chapter Three

Avery surveyed the fearsome battalion of papers on his desk. He swallowed a ball of fear, considered a strategic retreat and thereby stubbed his toe, mentally speaking, against a hard and unexpected truth: no man truly wanted the duties of a

duke, but once a man assumed the exalted position he was forbidden from complaining because no one would believe he didn't want the power and prestige that came with it. Until this moment he, too, would have scoffed to hear a wealthy duke say, "By Jove, never wanted this bloody job! Why couldn't my elder brother's wife have pushed out a few sons?"

Good army man that he was, he knew, when holding a field position with no way but forward, it was *Charge ahead!* with everything he had. Over the next few days he ran rough-shod over the accounts until he began to make sense of the columns of numbers coming at him in endless waves like lines of enemy soldiers. He struggled to keep up correspondence with his immediate family in Wiltshire. He spent hours in the saddle with his bailiff touring the grounds, meeting his tenants and listening to their needs, their grievances, until his head was dizzy. He clutched a sheet of paper tightly crossed and recrossed on both sides with the names of his staff and consulted it regularly. He took his supper in solitary splendor and spent the rest of his evening in similar state. He awoke more than once in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. Sitting straight up in a magnificent bed in an equally magnificent chamber, he was unable to utter the words that terror had frozen on his lips: *I do not want to do it! I cannot do it!*

After two weeks of what he acidly termed the Siege of Bradford – the irony deriving, of course, from the fact there existed no terms of his surrender – he was given to understand by Marlow, his steward, that perhaps it was time his grace met with the inhabitants of the villages in his neighborhood. This gentle suggestion was accompanied by a list of names of the people who could expect to be recognized by the duke and by Marlow's kind offer to set up his grace's schedule of visits.

When, ten days later, this tedium came to an end, Avery said to Marlow, "And the inhabitants of Hartsfield?"

A fraction of a second fell before Marlow answered, "I doubt anyone there expects to be recognized, Your Grace."

"I'll recognize them anyway," he said, thinking of the gray-eyed chit.

Thus it was the next morning he approached the odd intersection in the hamlet anticipating his visit with Miss Beatrice Castle. The most he had learned about her from Marlow was that she was likely wealthy and, in his words, "most unconventional." Avery would determine the case for himself.

The meeting certainly began unconventionally because Miss Castle was not waiting for him inside her house, as he would have expected. Instead, when he arrived, she was standing at the side of the lane where he had first encountered her. She was as pretty as he remembered, her dress modish but also modest, her bonnet a sweet confection of straw and flowers. Upon seeing her, he swung off his horse and greeted her.

"Your Grace," she replied with a very slight nod. She gestured to the boy next to her. "Take care of his grace's horse, if you please, Jimmy." To him he said, "He's the youngest brother of Jarod who is one of your stable hands. He shows the promise of his older brother, so you can be sure your horse will be well tended."

Eyeing the very young boy doubtfully Avery had little choice but to hand over Morocco's reins, after which Miss Castle gestured for him to accompany her to a cottage across the street. She opened the front door, and he followed, having to doff

his hat and bend his head to pass under the low frame. As she crossed the room without stopping she offered brief greetings to the two women inhabiting it.

He glanced at them and suffered a shock. The first woman was unremarkable and likely nearing forty. However, next to her sat a girl holding an infant. He caught sight of her at the very moment she was transferring the infant from one breast to the other. Her blouse was completely open, and he had a perfect glimpse of spectacular ripeness. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the moment was the lack of attention the two women paid him. Their focus was on the nursing infant.

Miss Castle led him to an open courtyard, which was defined by the back wall of the cottage they had just passed through and two long, low buildings on either side. The fourth side of the courtyard, which was opposite the back wall of the cottage, was open. Just outside stood a stone well, beyond which rolled well-tended fields to the far horizon. She led him to a table set with a lace cloth and two chairs and set in the mid-morning shade provided by the corner of the back wall of the cottage and the building to the east. With a smile she gestured for him to sit.

"I thought it best to show you what we do at Hartsfield," she said, taking her place, "rather than tell you." She paused, holding his gaze steady, then continued, "It's not a Magdalene I run, because none of the girls are reformed prostitutes. No, it's rather a home for girls who have nowhere else to turn in time of need."

He had the fleeting, slightly aggrieved feeling that Miss Castle's choice of showing rather than telling was not quite fair, because how was he supposed to think about anything but breasts, having just seen such a glorious pair? Not to mention the fact that Miss Castle herself had a very attractive figure, and it was difficult, if not impossible, to suppress a vision of her holding an infant with her blouse open. He cleared his throat, knowing he needed to say something.

He managed, "Tell me."

"I find serving girls in London who have been mistreated, and I provide food and shelter for them from, say, their fourth month of pregnancy to several weeks after delivery."

"I see," was the best he could do.

"After that the girls have a decision to make. They can either join my staff here or they can return to London, with or without their child, and go back to work. It often depends on the situation in their family. Some of the families welcome their daughters back – and I make great efforts to reconcile a family faced with a child born on the wrong side of the blanket through no fault of their daughter. I am not always successful, but largely."

Still struggling to master his surprise – and whatever other emotions were swirling through his chest and tightening his gut – titillation? embarrassment? – he plucked what he could from the explanation. "With or without their child?"

"It's not easy to earn a living while raising a child alone, especially if the girl's family has rejected her. So I've established a crèche, which will develop over time into a school for the children who have been left here. No mother ever wants to abandon her child, but some see it's for the best. Of course, they can visit as often as they like. Whatever their choice, there's plenty of work here to be done."

He looked around and became aware of mild activity. He saw three girls in advanced stages of pregnancy involved in various tasks. One was drawing water

from the well just beyond the courtyard. Another was carrying what looked to be a pile of folded cloth. The third had a basket in the crook of her arm and was heading toward the cottage. None of them paid him any attention. Nor did Miss Castle attempt to attract their notice. Young women with bountiful breasts, swollen bellies, curvaceous hips and shapely arses surrounded him. He paused to take in the slow, pleasant rhythms of activity, the peace and quiet of the courtyard, the promise of new life that was Hartsfield. He was alone with a beautiful young woman of good birth without a chaperone, and she was speaking to him of things beautiful young women of good birth did not.

A girl with the beginning of a belly came into the courtyard from the side building nearest them and approached Miss Castle. When she came close Miss Castle reached out and took the girl's hand in hers.

"What can I do for you, Sarah?"

"I've finished the mending, and I've dug up the vegetables for Cook's stew. What would you have me do next, miss?"

He listened, beguiled, while soft voices discussed gentle activities. His gaze rested on their clasped hands. When Sarah left, he asked, "How old is she?"

Miss Castle's expression was serene, but he could guess her feelings when she said, "Fifteen."

He looked away. He felt as if he were a newborn, washed upon a foreign shore. At the same time he was a grown man, aware and aroused in this bower of fertile femininity. Unmistakable feelings of desire gathered in his gut, their most logical and immediate target being the woman seated next to him. For a moment he wondered who he was and where he was. His first, feeble understanding told him he was not a soldier and he was not at Waterloo.

Then it came to him: *I'm a stranger in paradise.*

Chapter Four

Beatrice saw her unlikely guest was disconcerted, but he was doing a worthy job of keeping his composure. For her part, she was never missish about the facts of life, whose fruit surrounded them. To smooth things along she lifted the little bell on the table and rang it.

She heard him clear his throat a second time before asking, "How do you find the girls?"

"They come to me now," she told him. "Yes," she said, in response to his expression, which seemed to betray further surprise, "my work has become known by word of mouth, and I have more requests for assistance than I can handle. I could fill a good sized town with girls from all over England in similar circumstance."

He quirked his brows and shifted in his chair. His possible discomfiture at her frank statement was covered by the appearance of Cook bearing a tray with a teapot, two cups, cream and sugar, a plate of cakes and a bowl of berries.

She prepared his tea and handed it to him, saying, "Because the nature of my work is delicate, I've had to move very slowly to let the good folk of Hartsfield adapt to our presence." She arranged a piece of cake and some berries on a plate and put it in front of him. "I began with one girl two years ago and now add another girl every six months, which means in the New Year I'll have five girls here at one time."

He sipped his tea. She was content to let him take as long as he needed to adjust to what must be unusual circumstances for him. She had not invited him, after all, and she would not have been the least offended if he had not come calling. But since he had, she saw no reason not to be forthright.

After a long moment he put his cup down and looked at her, his gaze now as steady as her own. "You say the girls were mistreated. How can you be sure?"

She accepted the question as fair. "I have turned away a bold and indignant girl or two," she informed him, "who, upon investigation, was motivated to come to me to spite a lover or to help her entrap him. More fool she! However, when a girl comes to me bewildered and scared and fearful of naming the father, I am determined to get to the bottom of things. What I invariably find is some unscrupulous man with a hold over the poor girl." She paused. "And then I get to work."

She saw she had his full attention. He asked, "Which means what, exactly?"

"If the culprit is not a peer of the realm," she was happy to inform him, "it is rather easy to persuade domestic agencies not to fulfill vacancies in the houses where my girls were molested until significant changes have taken place." She made an equivocal gesture. "If it's a man with a title, my job is a bit more difficult but still not impossible, and several of my investigations have led virtuous noblemen to purchase officer commissions for their less virtuous sons."

"Let's hope their sons did not end up dying for their – " he stopped short.

"Indiscretions?" she supplied with an arched brow then added coolly, "If they did, at least they left legacies of themselves behind."

He blinked then commented, "Harsh."

She did not back down. "So are these girls' lives."

His mild grunt seemed to acknowledge her point then he stretched out long legs, drew a breath and seemed to ease into his surroundings. "It's a new world you've opened up to me," he admitted. He looked down at his hands – nicely shaped, she noticed, with long fingers and well-kept nails. He seemed to be engaged in internal debate. Finally he looked up and said, "I hope I'll be able to see you again."

She felt a split second's surprise before she realized *I feel it, too*. Ah, so this is what attraction with the stirrings of desire felt like! The flutter in her breast was a new and welcome experience. She would have to think long and hard about the implications of his stated hope, but that was for later.

Her immediate response was to chuckle and say, "I would look forward to it, Your Grace, and now you've told me a good deal more about your reception in the neighborhood than you had perhaps intended."

His brows rose in inquiry.

"If you are seeking my simple company, I can only imagine our neighbors have force-fed you roasts and creams and cakes and toasted you with wines and ports and brandies, not to mention made you converse with toadying squires, vicars seeking your patronage and every eligible woman within fifty miles."

He was unable to conceal his pained expression. "Very good, Miss Castle!"

She shook her head. "Not so difficult, Your Grace. I had the advantage to see you arrive without an elaborate entourage and concluded you aren't high in the instep. So I imagined you would prefer" – her gesture encompassed their

surroundings – “to see us as we are.”

His smile momentarily took her breath away. The man had dimples! “And if you had seen the new duke arrive in a fine carriage with outriders fore and aft and another carriage solely for his trunks? What then?”

She laughed at the thought of such an august personage condescending to visit her and answered honestly, “I’d have mustered all the pomp and circumstance I could contrive! Let’s see.... Everyone would line up in the street to greet him – decked out in their finest! – the pregnant girls shielded in the second row to soften possible offence. Mrs. Hutchins and Anna’s mother would sit with us to play gooseberry, and Cook’s husband would serve us a sumptuous mid-morning tea.”

He shuddered delicately clearly in reminiscence of the grand receptions he had lately endured, causing her to laugh again. “But if you wish for a simple visit and frank conversation with me,” she said, “it will have to be soon, because I leave for London in the next few weeks.”

He seemed surprised. “That’s rather early, isn’t it? Well before the opening of the Season.”

How misguided of him to think she was a respectable member of Society who would attend springtime balls and galas, Venetian ridottos at Vauxhall, Almack’s and all manner of entertainment for the Upper Ten Thousand. And how sweet of him to imagine her as such while sitting in these far from respectable circumstances. His assumption was almost touching, but she had no compunction disillusioning him.

She shook her head and replied, “I’m in trade, Your Grace.”

He looked startled. “Trade?”

“Property,” she said. “I manage properties. Not unlike what you do.” She smiled. She needed to make her position clear. “But yet again worlds apart from what you do.”

He stared at her, unblinking, for a long moment. What he chose to say at last was, “Are you good at it?”

He took her announcement rather well, she thought. Now she had even more to mull over later. She answered, “Tolerable, but I’ve had years of practice now, while I’m guessing you’re just getting started. Before you take your leave, tell me how you’re adapting to your new role.”

“It’s a damnable business,” he said, making no apology for his language, “and nothing I’ve done in my life until this point has trained me for the duties.” He paused then shrugged. “No, not nothing. I’m at home in the saddle where I’ve been spending a good third to a half of my days.”

He went on to outline how he’d passed the preceding three weeks. Learning the names of his staff, his tenants and his neighbors alone was a Herculean task he had not yet mastered. On the whole the saving grace of the enterprise, he acknowledged, was the fact that the Fifth Duke had left this estate, at least, in good heart, and his bailiff, steward and head housekeeper were knowledgeable and competent. He had not yet thought ahead to attending to the other properties he had inherited, the ones in Devon and Hampshire and somewhere else, one he momentarily forgot. Recalling it to mind, he said rather glumly, “Ah, yes, Yorkshire.”

“You object to its climate?”

“I’ve slept in a tent in the midst of snow, so I’m no stranger to cold,” he

informed her. "I object to its distance."

As she listened she realized his need to unburden himself. Still a soldier at heart he clearly chafed under his new responsibilities. There were moments while he was talking when she felt he was on the edge of being overwhelmed by them. When she had planned for his visit and decided to openly present to him her work and her girls, her idea had been only that honesty was the best policy. Added to which it would have been ludicrous to attempt to dress up the courtyard in a style befitting a duke. Now, however, she saw her lack of attempt to impress him had been a boon for him. In not striving to make the occasion about him, she opened a space where he need not play an uncomfortable role and could relax enough to confide. It was impossible not to like this attractive, battle-hardened man who cared as much about those under his aegis as she did about those under hers.

Presently he recalled himself and, with a hint of a self-conscious flush, begged her pardon. "I have bent your ear beyond the bounds of good taste, I'm afraid. A social call is not an occasion to open a nasty budget. I have unforgivably traded on your good nature, Miss Castle!"

"No, Your Grace," she said, by way of excusing him, "as I was listening to you, the thought occurred to me: *Well, it's a big job and someone's got to do it.* I'm sure you're just the right person to carry on."

"You wouldn't say so if you knew the number of times I tally a column twice and do not get the same number both times."

She smiled. "Tallying twice shows you're careful."

His laugh was wry. He stood up. "Enough! You cannot coax me into thinking myself fit for the job."

She stood up too. "No, but perhaps you'll become accustomed."

They turned toward the back entrance to the cottage. As they moved through the little room she noticed that his grace kept his eyes fixed straight ahead and spared no glance for Anna or her mother or even Mrs. Hutchins who had now joined them. When they were in the lane he took her hand and looked into her eyes. The gleam in the depths of his dark gaze was particularly warm.

"You've given me a bit of respite, and I thank you," he said with a bow.

He bent his head down but not far enough for his lips to touch the back of her hand, and she felt that flutter in her breast again. She suddenly wished to feel that chaste kiss on her hand, wished for it on less chaste places, as well. Imagining his lips on hers forced her to control the blush she felt blooming on her cheeks.

He straightened and said, "I'd like to see you again before you leave Hartsfield." As he looked at her she saw his gaze gather determination. "I will see you again."

She hardly knew what to do other than to nod and say, "You'll find your horse three cottages down on the left." Then she returned to the Hotel, sending him a small wave in parting.

Mrs. Hutchins, making no bones about having spied out the front window, greeted Beatrice's entrance into the room with the words, "I saw how he looked at you." Her eyes wide with canny interest, she added, "And I saw how you looked at him."

Beatrice laughed, only slightly abashed. With a meaningful glance at Anna

and her baby she opined, "How ironic to fall for a peer of the realm after spending so much time among their sins."

Anna perked up and exclaimed dreamily, "Ooh, imagine our Miss Castle marrying a duke!"

"Marriage," Beatrice repeated, wryly. "No, dear, marriage is not for me and definitely not to a nobleman."

Mrs. Hutchins would have none of such talk from her, but Beatrice knew her background made impossible any kind of respectable relationship with the new duke. But now the impish possibility of an unrespectable relationship with him suddenly popped up and winked at her. For the first time in her life she gave a thought to acting on her unsuitability. A delightfully devilish plan sprang to mind.

Chapter Five

As Avery took the reins from Jimmy, he flipped the lad a coin. He swung into the saddle with wholly new emotions roiling through his body and vivid images sifting through his brain: a Madonna's beautiful breasts; fifteen-year-old Sarah – a child herself! – bearing a child forced upon her; an exotic feminine realm where men, their duty done, were thereafter irrelevant; Miss Castle's unshakable self-possession. She had said many remarkable things, even shocking things, in the space of his morning visit. The one utterance he had felt like a bullet to the heart was:

"I'm in trade, Your Grace."

He didn't know which part of that utterance angered him more: her mention of trade, as if to suggest they could not pursue an acquaintance, or her use of his title as one more way to distance herself from him. He wanted to see her again, and he didn't think he was wrong to think she had flirted with him, nothing coy but rather in her own direct way. The charming blush he saw on her cheeks upon parting further convinced him, and he wondered why she could not have earlier framed her station in life in another way. But how? And what could such a relationship between them be?

For the rest of the day, as he ground through his obligations, the matter of Miss Castle churned in the back of his brain. He returned again and again to his desire to see her again. He thought it best if they met away from the courtyard in Hartsfield. He needed to know if he would feel differently about her when he wasn't aroused by so much womanly fecundity. He went to sleep imagining and rejecting various stratagems for where and how they would meet. He woke up with the perfect solution.

It was easy enough to plant into the heads of Mrs. Thomas, the wife of the mayor of the village of Brad's Ford, and Mrs. Williams, the wife of the vicar of the selfsame village, the idea for an early autumn festival, which should take place the following week on the square in front of the church. Of course the ducal namesake of the village was prepared to stand all the expenses, and the ladies were not to scrimp. So preparations were made, announcements were posted in the village, and invitations were sent to notables in the surrounding area. Since the ducal staff was in charge of preparing and sending the invitations, it was easy enough for Avery to snag one of them, to scrawl across the fine vellum the words *Miss Castle, Please come, B.* and to send it on to Hartsfield.

Next Saturday arrived. The weather was perfect, with only the suggestion of a far-off nip in the air. Gay Chinese lanterns lit the square. Garlands of flowers festooned the tables groaning under platters of meats, cheeses, breadstuffs, mushroom pies, shepherd's pies, steak and kidney pies, and all manner of savory pastries, creams, trifles, fruit compotes and nuts. Barrels of ale were tapped, wine was flowing, and the youngsters drank their fill of lemonade. Avery made sure the menfolk knew where the spirits were stashed. All manner of games involving hoops and balls and beanbags were set up around the perimeter, and hayrides pulled children singing songs and young couples hoping to snog. For miles around the general consensus was that this event was not to be missed. Accordingly the square was jammed with merry-makers, and the atmosphere was convivial.

When the sun was setting, turning the western sky a tropical shade of apricot marbled with clouds of autumn smoke, the local talent got out their fiddles and began scraping out tunes. Avery, knowing his duty, got the dancing going by bowing before Mrs. Thomas and asking in the grand manner for her hand in the first country set. She blushed and protested but finally yielded to his blandishments. When the set concluded he returned her to her seat and pressed what he called a restorative glass of wine into her hand. He kept an attentive eye on the glasses of the men and women he had identified as either the opinion leaders or the most accomplished gossips, and as the evening wore on he was satisfied that when Miss Castle came – if she was to come, and he was becoming worried – he would have no difficulty pulling her aside and having her to himself with none of the tabbies any the wiser.

The last glow of sunset sparked out below the horizon, and a velvety indigo sequined with stars spread across the sky. With the arrival of nighttime and the continuing absence of Miss Castle, he felt a pang of disappointment – no, it was sharper than mere disappointment, although miles away from the hollow despair that had gutted him in the past few months. This feeling was young and tender and more like the heart-heaviness of a boy who had done all his chores and then was denied a glorious day's fishing because of torrential rain.

By the time he worked through his emotional state he caught sight of a wagon approaching from the direction of Hartsfield. Relieved, elated, he made his way through the throng, attempting to betray no haste, and was in time to greet Miss Castle and lift her down from her perch. When her feet touched the ground he did not let his hands linger at the curve of her waist. He wished she wasn't wearing a bonnet. He had a desire to see more than a glimpse of her chestnut curls.

He offered her his arm, and she placed her gloved hand on it. Leading her around the edge of the crowd, skirting the pool of the lights, he said, "I feared you might not come."

"I wouldn't have missed it!" she said lightly. "We live retired in Hartsfield, as I'm sure you can imagine, but talk of an event this newsworthy penetrated even our bubble of isolation. Of course I received your kind invitation and would have come on the strength of that alone. But Cook heard about it from her relatives in Brad's Ford, Mrs. Hutchins has ears everywhere, and even Jem the blacksmith wants the full report on what must be the festival of the decade."

"I see," he said gravely, "and so Miss Castle chose to arrive fashionably late."

She rolled her eyes and met his gaze. "If you must know, I was attending

Dorrie's delivery. She gave birth less than an hour ago. Mrs. Hutchins is excellent, but the girls feel an extra measure of calm when I'm there as well, although I do nothing but soothe their foreheads with cold cloths."

He should have been shocked, once again, by mention of such an intimate subject never discussed between men and women, especially unrelated men and women. However Miss Castle's matter-of-fact tones defied him to demur from pursuing the subject.

"Dorrie," he repeated. "Would I have seen her last week?"

"Let me see," she replied, apparently giving the matter some thought. "I think her chore that day was to water the vegetable garden, so you likely saw her at times hovering around the well."

He nodded. A distant figure with an enormous ball under her shift came to mind. "And the infant, a boy or a girl?"

"A lusty boy," she said with a good deal of satisfaction, "with a pair of lungs announcing his destiny as town crier."

"I'm glad to hear he's healthy," he said, imagining some such was appropriate.

When he put them on the path leading behind the tiny Norman church, Miss Castle pulled back. "Shouldn't I pay my compliments to the organizers?"

"Ah," he said, urging her along the path he had chosen, "here's an advantage of arriving late. Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Williams, along with their good spouses, are, as the saying goes, a trifle above par. They would not notice your arrival one way or the other."

As if to underscore the truth of that statement, a crackle of raucous laughter split the air, and Avery wagged his eyebrows. Miss Castle chuckled the low, sultry chuckle that made him think she was a born temptress – and yet, for all her talk of unmarried pregnant women and her experiences with them giving birth, she seemed chaste. Or was he simply deluding himself, wanting her to be something she was not?

Behind the church he found them a bench off to one side of the cemetery that was the size of a handkerchief. Older children had already found the spot and were playing their games, chasing one another around the headstones. It was hardly a spooky place, perhaps because of its diminutive size, the freshness of the pines and the autumn flowers in bloom on so many gravesites. The festival organizers, anticipating the attractions of the location, had thoughtfully strung a few Chinese lanterns among the trees.

He disposed her on the bench, solicitously arranged her woolen shawl around her shoulders and, before seating himself, inquired whether she wished him to fetch her dinner and a drink.

She shook her head. "When Dorrie went into labor early this afternoon, Cook fixed me dinner. As far as something to drink, I would only take something if you wished for something for yourself."

"I've had my pint," he said, sitting down next to her, "and that's all I need for the moment." He paused then said, "Tell me, if you would, please, Miss Castle, how it comes about that such a young woman is involved in what seems to be an older matron's business."

Chapter Six

He's engaging me on my terms, she thought. And how charming! Especially since this past week she'd been considering him not as a suitor but as a potential lover, her first.

She had been flattered to receive the invitation with his personal message, but she had not flattered herself so far to imagine he would keep an eye out for her at the festival and be on hand for her arrival. As he had whisked her away to the relative privacy of the cozy cemetery, she realized he had not yet abandoned thinking of her as a respectable woman, one he could court. She needed to disabuse him of that notion, but she would have to wait until they were in the City – that is, *if* she didn't lose her nerve to introduce him to the dark, glittering world of pleasure that had bathed her uncle in an endless river of gold. She had a wicked thought the new duke might get caught in its undertow.

She said, "I was raised by my uncle, my mother's brother. He had no children but had the means to care for me when my parents died and I was hardly two years old. He was an excellent businessman, and he taught me everything I know. He also had a close relationship with a number of doctors, and through them I learned the plight of certain serving girls in London."

He nodded. "I see. Harley Street."

She looked down at her hands and suppressed a smile. Harley Street, Marylebone – this address was just becoming known for surgeries to the wealthy, since a fashionable countess had begun touting the wonders of a doctor who practiced on this street. Beatrice was dealing with less tonish medical men than those found in this exclusive part of town. However, this time, at least, his grace's assumption was not misguided. He might easily imagine a successful businessman such as her uncle would brush shoulders with the professional class of doctors and solicitors.

"Yes, well," she continued, "When I saw the urgent need to help ill-used serving girls, I drew up a plan, put the numbers together and saw that I could well afford what I wanted to do, especially if I started small, which I've done."

He took a moment to absorb this information. Then, "And your uncle? You speak of him in the past tense."

She sighed and confirmed inelegantly (for she intuited that her frank commentary about delicate and indelicate subjects fascinated him), "He dropped dead." Which was the truth, but at this distance she no longer experienced his sudden passing as a tragedy. "He never met a bottle of whisky or a thick custard he didn't like. He was" – she looked him in the eye – "a libertine who never denied himself a pleasure. I think he ate and drank himself to death, knowing full well what he was doing." She paused. "Dr. Stevens said so, and I think it was true."

"Are condolences in order?"

She shook her head. "He left this world seven years ago already. At first it was a shock, as you can imagine, but since he must have known what he was doing to himself, he had me surrounded by an army of accountants and advisors to cushion the effect of his passing, and none of his business interests suffered."

He asked tentatively, "You took them over?"

"Little by little," she said, "you see I was very young at the time."

“Miss Castle,” he rallied her, “you are still very young!”

“But old in experience, which is why I have made Hartsfield a colony for ill-used young women and make so bold to walk abroad there alone.”

He paused, as if considering which end of this meaty youth-versus-experience stick he would grasp then said, almost as if he could not help himself, “Would that I could return many of the experiences I have had!”

She thought she saw the trend and hummed a companionable understanding. She saw that, to him, she represented an oasis of relief, perhaps from what he had lately experienced on the Continent, perhaps from the weight of his new position, and very likely both. He became at every moment an ever more suitable target for her first adventure. Yes, he was the one, she decided, it was time, and next week it would be. For the moment she sat in strategic silence, absorbing his grief in what she hoped was the comfort of her presence. She guessed his need for a woman who put no demands on him, one who would take the burden of conversation upon herself and carry it into topics far away from endless flattery and ingratiation. She also guessed his need to speak of his own burdens, if he was moved to do so.

She was rewarded for her tact when he said next, “We’re not so very different, you see, Miss Castle. You have unusual experience for your age, and I at nine-and-twenty have already had more than a lifetime.”

He was gazing down at her with a rather sweet light in his eyes. He was trying to elevate her, to equalize their positions. *That* would never do, since she wanted to bring him down to her level, at least for the length of their affair. She changed the nature of her regard from honest exchange to something warmer – and suddenly there it was: an arc of desire quivering between them, with their faces only inches apart. The shift in his expression was swift and complex. She made a shrewd guess he did not yet fully know his own mind with respect to his feelings for her.

She knew hers. She smiled, as if disappointed. “And now I have to exercise the mature wisdom of my youthful years and suggest we join the others.” She stood up, and he necessarily joined her, bowing to her with respect. She made no display of maidenly modesty, although he might have interpreted her resistance to kissing him as such. She was satisfied she had him on her hook, and she wanted to reel him in, slowly and even kindly.

He offered his arm. She placed her hand on it as they made their way back around the church, saying, “I have to remember every place isn’t Hartsfield, where I can run free in the lanes. Day after tomorrow, I return to London and must begin to put myself in a more sober frame of mind.”

“You travel very properly with a duenna in the streets of London?”

“With Hugo, at any rate,” she said with a playful smile, picturing her gentle giant as a prim chaperone. “He was my uncle’s right hand man and has become mine as well.”

“So no women in Miss Castle’s London establishment?”

If he only knew! But this disclosure would be for later. Of course there were women in her employ in her London townhouse, however no women counseled her in her business life.

She replied lightly, “London is a man’s town. There’s power in the air. And speaking of which,” she continued smoothly, “I hardly need ask how things are going

Up On The Hill, as the locals refer to Bradford Manor. I receive nearly daily reports about you through our very efficient grapevine.”

He pulled a face and said on a sigh, “There’s no getting around it, I suppose.”

“None whatsoever,” she affirmed cheerfully, “but the gossip is harmless and even in your favor. You’re reported to be a good listener and to be fair, and you seem to want to do right in the position. Higher praise for a new landowner cannot be said!”

She was laughing when she looked up at him. His blue eyes glinted and she caught her breath. The devastating smile he bestowed on her caused her heart to spasm. And those dimples! “You are cruel, Miss Castle, positively cruel, in your kindness to suggest at every turn how well suited to the position I am.”

She recovered and laughed again, patting his arm before turning away from him. She wondered, suddenly eager: *Could I engineer our first encounter before next week?*

She could not pursue the thought because they were back at the edge of the festivities, and Beatrice needed to distance herself from the new duke. Given the nature of her relationship to Society and her activity in Hartsfield, she was at all times self-effacing in the neighborhood and never put herself forward. She had established an amiable if occasional relationship with the vicar’s wife who must necessarily support, at least, the spirit of her work. So it was toward this paragon of village virtue she headed.

“Your address in town,” he said, quiet and quick, with an edge of desperation.

“Mayfair,” she said over her shoulder with a smile. “Curzon Street.”

He nodded, and she made her way into the crowd.

Two days later she arrived on Curzon Street with a lift to her heart to be back in the swirl of the City. Hugo was on hand to help her down from her carriage and accompanied her up the steps to her elegant townhouse with its dark green door and black shutters. For the first two hours she sat in the morning room and received a flow of information from any and all of her household who had saved up in her absence the topics they needed to discuss with her.

When she had a moment to herself she went straight to the library and opened the cabinet with her uncle’s meticulous records, which she always assiduously updated. She found the pertinent ledger, flipped through the pages and found what she was looking for. After that it was only a question of a few shillings to activate the network of information about the illustrious inhabitants of the grand houses their servants retailed.

Her seduction was planned and now would be set in motion.

Chapter Seven

Avery was happy to kick off the dust of Surrey and told himself that after cooling his heels in the country these weeks past it was high time he established himself in London. He tried not to think his journey was principally motivated by a desire to see Miss Castle again, but in this worthy endeavor he largely failed.

Because he had sent ahead notice of his arrival in Town, he was greeted at Bradford House with a gut wrenching display of his newly inherited wealth in the

form of ranks of servants lined up both on the square and inside the impressive foyer of his urban seat. He dreaded having to learn a hundred new names and began with his personal manservant, Nelson, who had been anxiously awaiting the demands of his new master to keep him busy. Avery, who still preferred to shave himself, was sure that Nelson was to be disappointed in the Sixth Duke, but he would try to soften the blow of his ordinariness by letting his man take care of his clothing. As for the reception itself, he thought it better befitting Wellington's triumphal return to London after Waterloo rather than a celebration of the existence of an Avery male who simply happened not to die in a riding accident, of cholera, in a foolish duel or on the battlefield. He spared a wistful thought for his casual reception in Hartsfield.

In the first few days his thoughts strayed on occasion to Curzon Street, and he wondered hazily when he would have a moment to send around a note and pay a morning visit. This background thought came to the foreground when he met with his banker at Lyons & Lyons. These hallowed offices were impressively housed on Threadneedle Street, City of London, known far and wide as the financial capital of the universe.

Mr. Lyons Senior greeted him at the front door with perfect and understated civility and ushered him into the spacious white marbled foyer. He was led to the reception desk where a large leather-bound volume was spread open with a pot of ink bristling with a quill squared off next to it.

"Everyone signs in, Your Grace," Mr. Lyons informed him, "even the Prince Regent! It's one of the many security measures, both large and small, for which our clients value us."

Avery plucked the quill from the pot. As he sought the next free line on which to scrawl his name his heart jolted momentarily to see, several lines above, the name *Miss B. Castle* written in a pretty hand.

When they were private in the senior officer's bureau, Avery inquired, "Miss Castle is a client of yours, Mr. Lyons?"

Mr. Lyons betrayed his surprise with a quick frown. "Miss Castle, yes. She is an esteemed client, but not one I would imagine would come to the notice of Your Grace."

"She owns most of a hamlet sitting at the foot of Bradford Manor."

Mr. Lyons's brow cleared. "Of course, I had not made the connection. You know of her work there?"

"I do."

"Admirable." The word was said with the merest hint of praise.

"Yes, admirable." He ventured, "What can you tell me about her?"

Avery immediately saw his mistake. Mr. Lyons' expression shut down before his very eyes, and this very correct banker arranged his features into a blank mask. "She is an excellent businesswoman. She inherited her uncle's skill with numbers." He cleared his throat then opened the file before him on his desk and proceeded to dazzle anew – or was it to further crush? – the Sixth Duke with the extent of his wealth.

Avery's experience with the account books during the past month and more

was helpful in the present session, but truth be told his mind had fixed on Miss Castle. He made it through the session with his banker, returned to Bradford House, cast about for some activity to distract him, found nothing then broke down and sent a note over to Curzon Street saying he would call on Miss Castle the next morning. The anticipation of seeing her again only made him more restless, so he decided to go to one of the exclusive clubs in which he had automatic membership. What he sought was companionship. What he encountered, as he went from one club to the next, were hearty greetings and fawning attention. He supposed this kind of reception was only to be expected, but his strong sense of self recoiled at being treated as if some great personal quality had brought him to his present position. He thought of his fallen comrades, men truly worthy of respect and admiration.

Finally, he took refuge at Horse Guards. Sure enough, as soon as he passed through the central archway across the street from St. James's Park and penetrated the interior courtyard he heard a familiar voice say,

"How quickly turns the wheel of fortune."

Avery turned and brightened immediately to see a man from his regiment. "Major Selfridge!" He took the man's left hand, since his right arm was in a sling.

"You outrank me now, Captain Avery," Selfridge replied then added with a humorous quirk to his brows, "and thus, henceforth, I'm to call you Bradford."

Avery bit off a sardonic laugh. "Join me in a pint, and I'll be happy to lord my new status over you." He pointed at the sling. "How's the arm?"

"I'm sure to regain at least partial use of it."

As the pair headed toward the main hall where the long tables were always occupied by an assortment of men drinking, playing cards and throwing dice, Selfridge offered a fluent account of his life since Waterloo. Because he was a gregarious and well-connected younger son of an earl, he was also able to relate the principal rumors circulating about the new and surprising Sixth Duke of Bedford. These were, fortunately, consistently vague, Avery being such an unknown quantity. However, two hard pieces of truth had become generally known: Avery's branch of the family resided in Wiltshire, and he had participated in the victory at Waterloo.

"In sum," Selfridge said, "you're a hero."

The look that crossed Avery's face must have expressed his horror because Selfridge paused. Both men bowed their heads and sat in silence as they passed in review the names of the men who had given their lives on the battlefield.

The sun went down and, much to his relief, eventually rose again. He was grudgingly grateful for Nelson who, upon being told the nature of his grace's morning visit, was able to outfit him in a way appropriate to the occasion. He drove his curricule to Curzon Street, with his groom in the tiger's seat behind, and when he tossed the reins to his groom and trod the steps to Miss Castle's front door, he felt his heart constrict, unsure as he was of his welcome.

The moment the door opened, however, he was drawn into an easy informality comparable to that of Hartsfield, thankfully minus the arousing sight of a nursing mother. The ancient butler led him through the hallway but not to a morning room or parlor, as he had expected, but rather to a pretty little garden at the back of the house. There Miss Castle was seated at a table set up in the shade. A

tray was ready with a teapot and a plate of biscuits.

When he stepped outside she rose and came toward him, holding out her hands. He grasped them and went so far to place a kiss on the back of one. He was pleased she wasn't wearing a bonnet. He wanted to admire the way the sunlight caught bright strands of dark honey and caramel in her hair.

When they had seated themselves she explained, "It's a beautiful day, perhaps one of the last, and I thought we should enjoy the warmth while we have it."

She drew his attention to exuberant rows of dahlias, asters, Michaelmas daisies, white gaura, hardy verbena, and Chinese plumbago. In and amongst the borders of Oriental fountain grass and under several fruit trees labored a gardener. He, evidently, was to serve as chaperone. Not for Miss Castle would a predictably dour woman swathed in black bombazine play propriety in a stuffy room.

He drew a breath and contemplated the scene gilded with buttery sunshine filtering through the leaves still clinging to their branches. He settled into his skin and caught, once again, a fleeting edge of inchoate contentment that had nudged him just before first meeting Miss Castle at Hartsfield. He looked at her and smiled. Her effect on him was consistent. In her presence he felt the delicious contradiction of being both aroused and calm.

Chapter Eight

She was happy he had come, and his attractive smile confirmed her choice of him as her first lover. He was vital and good-looking with a singular manner and no airs, for all he was one of the wealthiest men in England. Perhaps he would be spoiled over time. For now she would take him unspoiled.

"How do you like Portman Square?" she inquired when they had run through the preliminary civilities. At his slight hesitation, she added, slyly, "I didn't have to look up the address of Bradford House, because I know where all the grand houses are, since so many of my girls come from them."

He seemed at first startled then laughed, she guessed, in spite of himself. "I suppose I did not come here," he acknowledged with a wry grin, "expecting to utter polite nothings about the latest fashions and the insipidity of the entertainments at this time of year!"

"If you'd like to know," she said graciously, "no girl has yet come to me from Bradford House, and I'm hoping..." She trailed off delicately.

"Neither did I think," he continued in response to this provocation, "that I would be held accountable, in the first minute of my arrival, for the moral tone of my establishment."

She folded her hands in her lap. "Now you know otherwise."

He laughed again, this time shaking his head in disbelief. "This is outrageous. You are outrageous."

"How can you say so?"

"I am no longer deluded into thinking you an inexperienced miss of eighteen. Even so, you are still very young, as I have already noted, and our discussions have not once conformed to anything resembling the kind one has in polite company."

"Perhaps because I know little of the latest fashions and nothing of entertainments, spare or plentiful, I am unable to talk of such."

He eyed her toilette, which was, according to her dressmaker, charmingly suited to her figure and her coloring. "You have always struck me as modish enough, Miss Castle," he said appreciatively.

"I pay for fashion," she replied. "I have no eye for it myself. My businesses take up all of my mental energy and when I need to give myself a rest, a fashion magazine never holds my interest. I prefer to read novels."

"Novels," he said. "What a strange creature you are."

"Indeed, women – and men! – in all walks of life enjoy a stirring tale set in somewhere exotic, like Italy."

"Do you wish to travel?"

"Perhaps some day but not in the immediate future. I'm absorbed with my work. And you? Has soldiering given you enough travel experience to last for a while?"

He accepted the cup of tea she prepared for him. He gazed out over her well-tended garden. "Travel involves seeing the sights. Castles, painting, statues – that kind of thing, I suppose. What I've seen is camps and carnage and spoils." His voice took on a far-off quality. "I can't get away from it. The images haunt me."

"Describe them," she proposed.

He looked at her, his gaze coming into focus on her, and his expression once again betrayed surprise.

"If you're going to say the topic isn't fit for polite company," she said, "I'll simply point out what you've just noted: our conversations thus far have not yet conformed to dreary convention."

He fell silent, and she gave him no further prompting. After several long moments he began to speak haltingly of his experiences but not from reluctance. She understood it was difficult, if not impossible, to put the unspeakable into words. He did not describe the horrors but rather his feelings about what he had witnessed, the fallen friends, the confusion in the fog of war, the victory that came with relief but no joy. She listened, sat quietly in the pauses and began to see a bit of the world through his battle-weary eyes. She wondered if speaking of such atrocities would dull their ability to cripple his spirit. She hoped so. He was a good man.

At one point he stopped and looked at her. "Had enough, Miss Castle?"

"Have you, Your Grace?"

"I think you're a ... sorceress," he said, and she wondered if he had been about to say 'seductress,' "luring me to share what I have hardly admitted to myself."

She shook her head. "Merely a sympathetic ear. With your fellow army men you have no need to discuss what you experienced together. Your other male friends only want to hear the glories. It takes a woman to clear through the clutter."

He was still staring at her when he said slowly, "For all the restrictions of your sex, I feel that you, Miss Castle, are in a curious way freer than I am."

While he had been speaking she had inched closer to him and now raised her face to his. It was time to catch him in her net. She purred provocatively, "Only a woman with my background would have my curious freedom, as you put it."

"And what kind of background is that?" he asked, a little breathless, his lips just inches from hers.

"What would you say, Your Grace, if I told you my uncle had been the

proprietor of the White Chrysanthemum and that I inherited this fabled house of pleasure upon his death when I was fifteen years old?"

He said nothing. Of course he knew the White Chrysanthemum. His stunned expression said it all. Whether or not he had frequented this most exclusive of brothels she did not know, because he would not have been of a rank for her uncle to register his custom in the ledger. Either way, it did not matter. His shock was her advantage, and she was delighted. Now she would lead him on a merry chase.

"I suggest you meet me there this evening," she said. She parted her lips to invite a kiss but prevented him from giving her one by straightening suddenly, thereby breaking the mood, like the snapping of a stick underfoot. She said in a more normal voice, "Eight o'clock. Not at the front door on Market Mews, mind you, but go through the wrought-iron gate to the left of the entrance and follow the alleyway to the side door."

He blinked, evidently still not recovered from his shock.

"Will you meet me?" she asked. "I have things to show you."

He visibly mastered himself. "Yes, yes, of course I will meet you there. Eight o'clock."

The butler appeared just then to escort his grace to the front door. Beatrice remained seated. The only token she gave him upon parting was an enticing smile.

She had a reservation to make for the second-floor rooms at the White Chrysanthemum and then some of her own paperwork to do. When her accounts were completed she sought out Hattie, her maid, and confided her intentions for the evening ahead. Hattie had little to say beyond congratulating Beatrice on having at last found a man she wanted to bed. This former bird of paradise had worked at the White Chrysanthemum and knew how to prepare a woman's body for a night of lovemaking. The central activity involved Beatrice's bath after which came the application of creams and perfumes and the execution of various grooming rituals. Hattie chose a dress of slightly clingy satin with a neckline an inch below modest and above scandalous. Beatrice did not need to reveal masses of skin to heat her duke's ardor. He would have visual stimulation enough.

At five minutes to eight, Beatrice donned an enormous cloak with a generous hood and swept down Curzon Street, around the corner to Hertford Street and ducked down Market Mews to the side door of the White Chrysanthemum. She did not have long to wait. Presently a shadow materialized at her side.

"You've come," she said, looking up at him. Magical moonlight sculpted his features to beauty.

"Did you doubt I would?"

She had no desire to appear overconfident. "I was hoping you were suitably curious. I'm glad to know you are." She put her key to the lock, pushed the door open then held out her hand and grasped his. "Come."

She led him up a flight of steps in the back of the house, which took them to the second floor. She turned down a narrow corridor at the end of which was a young woman, generously endowed and scantily clad, waiting to take their cloaks.

When they had shed their outerwear she took his hand again and led him into a small room, closing the door behind them. She moved to the long wall, which was half-covered by an enormous mirrored glass and pressed a button that caused a

tiny bell to ring in the adjacent room, informing its occupants that viewers had arrived.

Candles came to life beyond the glass, illuminating an enormous bed piled high with cushions and comforters and dripping with silk scarves. A man and woman stood in the shadows, behind a semi-transparent curtain, in one another's arms. They began to kiss.

She had brought his grace to the first viewing room, and the scene was about to begin.

Chapter Nine

Beatrice had discovered the viewing rooms when she was seventeen. She had been intrigued by them but hardly shocked. It wasn't as if she had not known her entire life the basis of her uncle's wealth. She had grown up in the presence of his favorites, alluring young women as well as more mature beauties who knew how to display their charms to maximum effect: dimpled elbows glimpsed beneath a fall of lace, the shadowy hint of milk white breasts under a gauzy fichu, a dainty pink foot whose slipper had slipped. These lovelies had cosseted Beatrice since the age of two, had enthralled her budding senses with their perfumes and powders, their musical voices and the tinkling trinkets dangling from their wrists or, more intriguingly, encircling slim ankles. They didn't speak, they charmed. They didn't walk, they glided. They didn't sit, they lounged. They were – although the child Beatrice could not have expressed her observation in words – in a continuous state of sleepy half-arousal.

She was never told anything about them beyond an introduction. "This is Colette," her uncle might say, "she's going to keep you company tonight while you have your dinner. Then she'll tuck you up."

"My, aren't you a pretty thing," Colette would say, caressing her, "and such unusual eyes for a little one. Your uncle tells me you are very clever."

Clever enough to understand her world and her place in it. Her uncle soon recognized the canny head she had on her shoulders and made sure to scaffold her cleverness with the best education his plentiful money could buy. Her tutors were often in awe of the girl with the steady gaze, quick understanding and love of numbers. When her uncle's sudden passing put a period to her untroubled youth, she wallowed for a while in moody discontent to be a female of good birth condemned to the liminal world of the demi-monde, what the girls called "this side of town."

Her grief eventually ebbed, her girl's mind and body matured, and by the time she discovered the viewing rooms, she had already begun to feel her power – her curious freedom, as her duke had phrased it. No conventions to strain against, no man to please. Let the debutantes dance at balls and cross paths with suitors' carriages in Hyde Park. Let the matrons devote themselves to endless rounds of teas and affaires. She was happy to stride out onto the bigger stage of high finance, albeit known only as an investor – so Mr. Lyons Senior explained to those she did business with – who was jealous of privacy.

Taking the duke's hand she whispered with suppressed excitement, "Now the couple has come out from behind the curtain, and they're naked." She looked up at

him. "Have you ever seen such?"

He looked down at her. His eyes glittered with a complex combination of desire and, she thought, wariness. "Not a staged scene, no," he admitted. "Although it's impossible not to have fallen upon a rutting soldier outside a brothel a time or two. Do you bring men here often?"

She chuckled, hardly offended. "You're the first." She added, looking him in the eye, "In every respect."

"Ah?" he said then added, his voice a bit metallic, "I'll find out then, won't I?"

She caught a quiet undertone of cynicism. Still, she was not offended. "Oh, as to that, a bride has ways to deceive her husband of her purity on their wedding night," she told him easily. "I've heard all about them. But I have no wish or need to deceive you, since this isn't our wedding night, and my virginity is not at issue. It's simply a fact."

Emotions chased across his face too fleeting for her to name. He gave himself a slight shake, looked back at the embracing couple then asked, "And their masks?"

"Ah," she said, "they are unusual, are they not, the way they curve not only over their eyes and noses but also over their cheeks? These players" – here she lowered her voice, although no one was around to hear them – "are not in the employ of the White Chrysanthemum, and the masks protect their identities. This pair here could either be a married couple looking for a new adventure or two people who do not know one another and crave the excitement of both anonymity and exposure."

"Not in your employ? In whose, then?"

"No one's. The rumor is that very high born lords and ladies sign up for these rooms."

"How do they do so?"

"A member of the establishment – his identity is kept strictly confidential – arranges everything. My uncle surely knew his identity. I don't care to know and so leave that detail to Hugo."

"Your right hand man," he said, and she nodded. After remaining silent for several long moments, watching the scene, he added, "Now I can discern bits of cloth on them here and there, presumably to hide any moles or birthmarks, I'm guessing?"

She looked at the couple whose embrace was becoming increasingly passionate. "That's right," she said. "What do you think of it all?"

His response was a rather breathless chuckle combining amazement with desire.

She continued, "When I first discovered the rooms, I was fascinated by men's and women's bodies and the ways they could join. But with repeated viewing the scenes lost their allure. They struck me at times as mechanical, and I quit watching."

She had long wondered whether her knowledge of intimacy unaccompanied by experience had moored her on a dry shore above the high-tide mark of passion so that she would forever be looking down, sheltered from the seductive swing of the sea. She was happy now – maybe 'relieved' was the better word – to have found a man who inspired her to take the plunge. As the seducer, however, she knew to put his pleasure before hers and so had brought him to the viewing rooms. Men liked to watch.

She was suddenly aware of the effect on her of the amorous couple on the other side of the glass and, with a surge in her blood, felt a strengthening of the desire for him that grew with every new encounter. It seemed that women, under the right circumstances, liked to watch, too, so she added, "But being here with you has an entirely different effect, and I'm finding I like it."

"Indeed?" he said with another chuckle, this one bemused. "Although why I should be surprised by your continuing honesty, even – especially! – in this situation, I do not know."

"You may always be assured of my honesty."

"Well, then," he said, looking down at their clasped hands. "Why me?"

She covered their intertwined fingers with her free hand and drew their hands to her breast. Feeling her rising heat and his, she said the first thing to come to mind. "First, you took an interest in me and my work at Hartsfield, genuine I would say – and that got me thinking. Not," she added with a naughty smile, "that you could have guessed where my thoughts were heading!"

"Hardly," he interjected quietly. "And second?"

"I like you. In fact, I think you're perfect, so I thought to start with you."

"Am I to feel flattered?" he asked, with a disquieting gleam in his eye.

"Well," she said, creasing her brow, "perhaps not in the usual way you've been flattered since assuming the title."

His soft laugh sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine.

She looked back at the scene. "Do you like the way they're kissing and caressing? The light is designed to cast their bodies in silhouette, which I find alluring because it's suggestive."

"And yet I see an excellent outline of the woman's breasts, which are almost as nice as yours, and you can have no doubt about the man's endowment."

She caught her breath. "Yes, that's true. Oh, there now, she's lying down. Look how her arms reach out and beckon him to join her."

"You like that?"

"I do." She looked up at him. "Don't you?"

His smile was enigmatic. He looked back at the scene at the very moment the man's enormous cock was poised to enter the flexible woman whose knees spread open far enough, her pelvis tilted up, to allow the viewer to watch the penetration. However, before the man managed his first full thrust, Beatrice lost sight of the enticing scene. The duke had withdrawn his hands from her clasp and had put them on her shoulders. The next thing she knew he had turned her toward the door on the far side of the room.

Bending his lips to her ear he asked quietly, "What's next?"

"It changes from night to night – or, at least, it used to. I haven't been here in a while, as I've said."

"But you reserved the rooms for us tonight, did you not?"

"Yes, earlier today. I didn't want other guests with us. Naturally."

"Naturally," he agreed. He dropped one hand from her shoulder to open the door to the next room and shut it behind them. When he returned his hand to her shoulder he said, "And the bell?"

She made their way toward the wide pane of glass and pressed the button on

the wall. Candles quickly illuminated a scene that prompted the duke to swallow a moan and to pronounce, "Nice. Very nice."

A woman was seated on a man's lap, her back to his front and facing the viewing room. The drawstring of her blouse had been loosened to put the neckline in charming disarray, fully exposing one breast with its pert pink nipple. The blouse, being diaphanous, hid little of her other breast, whose raised nipple poked delicately at the fabric. The woman's legs were spread around the outside of the man's thighs. The hem of her skirt was hiked within an inch of indecency. The man's fingers were busy under the skirt at the juncture of her thighs. The woman's head had fallen back on the man's shoulder.

Beatrice was aware of warm breath on her neck and of the scent of lemon soap, fresh linen and a man's skin. He stood a few inches behind her, with only the tips of his fingers resting lightly on her shoulders, but she was surrounded by his muscle and sinew even without his body touching hers. Then she felt it – a stab of true desire, as if he had tapped her trunk and caused the sap to begin to flow in her body and to pool in interesting places.

"Ah, we just had a glimpse," he said low, "when the man flicked her skirts to reveal her pretty pussy and glistening folds. He's pleasuring her and teasing us."

His crudity caused her heart to fly to her throat then fall to her core where it pumped its blood double-time.

"And now, yes, another glimpse," he whispered. "How kind – or is it sly? – of him to let us see a flash of her swollen clitoris, plumped between pouting lips. She's very aroused." He paused then said, "I wonder. Would you care to trade places with her?"

Her breath hitched. "What do you mean?"

"The woman on the other side of the glass enjoys having an audience. It heightens her pleasure, and I wonder whether you would like a similar exposure."

The thought of baring herself in a semi-public way was so novel she could only say, "I have no idea since I'm so new to this" – and instantly regretted the admission, although she had already told him she was a virgin. This exchange had made her acutely aware of her inexperience as a seductress. *She* was the one who should have been whispering naughty things to him and playing to his desires. She tried to alter the dynamic by saying provocatively, "You like her legs like that?"

"Very much," he acknowledged. "I'll like yours even better when they're wrapped around my back."

So saying he turned her once again toward the door to the next room. This was the second time he had them leave the scene before it came to completion. It was her understanding that only a viewing couple's desire to get on with their own coupling stopped them from watching to the end. These two interruptions both disappointed her and increased her desire.

The scene in the next room played out with one very voluptuous woman and two men. The duke's immediate response was, "I don't share." But they stayed long enough for the woman to romp between the two men, rubbing herself against them before enthusiastically throwing one of them flat on his back on the cushions strewn across the floor and flinging herself on top of him. She flattened her generous breasts against his chest, impaled herself on his cock then thrust her fleshy arse

back and up. She cast a glance of pure lust, visible even through her elaborate mask, over her shoulder at the second man and wriggled her invitation.

Before the second man could mount the lascivious woman from behind for her shocking double penetration Beatrice found herself led, yet again, to the next room. Here it was a question of one man and two women.

"Hmm. I see several possibilities," the duke said without stating them. "But, again, no. Whichever way they position themselves, I still want my undivided attention on you ... and yours on me."

He was, however, curious enough to wait to see which way the threesome would join. After some gentle play the two women lay the man down on his back on the bed. One woman straddled him to ride his cock, the other to ride his face. The women faced one another and leaned forward to kiss, thus forming an erotic triangle of swaying flesh. Startled by the image, Beatrice hardly registered her reaction before the duke led them to the next room.

In response to the new scene before them, he flexed his fingers convulsively on her shoulders. "Perfection."

Of course he would like this scene, and she decided to match him for vulgar language. "You like the way his cock is thrust half-way down her throat?"

"No, I'm entranced by the look they're exchanging."

The woman on her knees was looking up at the standing man, and his focus was riveted on her eyes. With this observation all Beatrice's nerve endings were set on fire. "And what is that look, Your Grace?"

"Pure devotion."

Chapter Ten

The White Chrysanthemum. When she had told him of her connection to the most notorious house of pleasure in London he had been torn between scandalized disbelief and a sudden understanding of Miss Castle's irresistible combination of youthful innocence and assured worldliness. From his first encounter with her she had kept him off balance and would likely continue to do so in what promised to be highly volatile circumstances this evening – unless he could find a way to get a step ahead of her. Otherwise, weakened and enchanted with desire for her as he was, she could rip his heart out and turn him into her besotted slave for life. His survival instincts pricked him into action.

He had not fully realized he was on the battlefield of love until he stepped into the first viewing room and she became Wellington to his Napoleon. Wellington had studied his opponent, knew his strengths and weaknesses, just as Miss Castle had softened him into disclosing more about his interior life than was wise. And Wellington had chosen every battleground, thus making these viewing rooms Avery's Waterloo unless he could keep his wits about him.

It was not easy when presented with a feast of bouncing breasts, shaved cunts and quivering cocks, moans of pleasure filtering through glass, lights and shadows positioned for maximum effect – and, most tempting, a trembling virgin whose desire was gathering under his fingertips, a youthful beauty who had chosen *him*. He was intoxicated. She smelled like the freshest garden, sex and innocence, with her dewy skin, perfect curves and ripe lips he had yet to kiss and, yes, even her

intelligence and her unabashed candor.

Then, fortunately for him, and for all her curious freedom and worldliness she made a tactical error in admitting her inexperience in the first viewing room, and he took ample advantage of it in the second. *I have no idea since I'm so new to this* was all he needed to hear for him to take complete charge of the encounter.

He paused a little longer at the scene with the woman on her knees and her lover's cock down her throat (he saw the value of giving Miss Castle a fine idea). However, before the end he judged it time to leave and get on with their own encounter.

"Where to?" he asked, turning her toward the door at the back wall leading to the corridor.

"There are more rooms," she protested, gesturing to the side door.

"I've seen enough, and my guess is, so have you." He ran his hand from her shoulders to her breasts, pinched her nipples, which were already alert, and commented, "You see? You're nicely peaked." He bent his head down to nuzzle the spot behind one ear. The petal softness of her skin was divine and wafted with the delicate scent of roses mixed with a hint of musk. "I'll check between your legs when we get to our own room, which I'm guessing you've already chosen, no?"

With the hint of doubtful frown on her brow, she said, "I reserved the suite upstairs. But are you sure you want to -"

He cut her off with a low, "Very sure." He pressed his lips to her nape and was aware of the frisson that coursed down her spine. He placed his hands on her shoulders again and turned her toward the door to the corridor. Once outside he took her hand in his and led the way back down the hall, although he was not precisely sure where they were going. He knew only that he wanted, *needed* to take the lead. He found the staircase they originally ascended, went one more flight up and saw at the end of a hallway a door half-open to a room lit from within. He propelled them toward it. When she did not demur, he knew he was on the right path.

He got them on the other side of the door and closed it. He spared no glance around the room but rather focused completely on her, turning her away from him so he could make quick work of the buttons down the back of her dress.

Only then did she protest. "We're to have supper first," she said with some alarm, gesturing to the cart where awaited an array of covered dishes and a bucket bristling with bottles.

He would not let her set the pace with the pleasures of food accompanied by sweet cooing and artful anticipation. Surprise was his ally. He would win the day with a show of force and brute sexuality. His response to her comment about supper was therefore a disinterested grunt, and a moment later he finished with enough buttons to push the dress off her shoulders where it billowed to the floor. Her hair, a loose knot at her nape, was easily undone with a quick slide of his fingers down her scalp.

Next he bent down to slip off her mules then rose again and turned her toward him. Her chemise went the way of her dress. Evidently anticipating the activity of the night she had not bothered with white clothes and so was clad now only in her stockings. She was even more beautiful than he had anticipated, with

plump breasts and blush pink nipples, a trim waist, curvaceous thighs and an enticing nest. Beyond murmuring an appreciative “Gorgeous” he was not going to admire her beauty just now. Instead, he pressed his advantage, and in her emotional state of desire and bewilderment she was unable to coordinate any action beyond what he imposed upon her.

Thus it was easy to manoeuvre her backwards toward the bed, which was already thoughtfully turned down for the night, and to spread her out on her back, her hair flowing around her, burnished chestnut in the candle light. Before she could move, he removed his cravat then grasped her hands to raise them above her head whereupon he proceeded to use the length of white linen to bind her wrists to the slats in the headboard.

She made some noises of protest that became strangled when he slid the tie from a luxurious silk robe cascading over the footboard and turned it into a blindfold.

“Now I can’t see!” she managed at last, tugging at her restraints.

“Which gives you more ability to feel.”

“But I won’t be able to hold you,” she objected. Her pretty mouth pouted. “Are you denying me because in the first room I said how much I liked the way the woman held out her arms for her lover to come to her?”

He had to laugh because she was exactly right, but he wasn’t going to admit she had given him the idea to tie her up so he could take control. Instead he reassured her, “I won’t deny myself the pleasure of your embrace for long. But, right now, it’s about you and your pleasure.”

He swept his gaze over the bounteous, mouth-watering feast she presented, and the phrase *battlefield of love* drifted into his head again. Even with his senses swimming, the habit formed from years of soldiering demanded he have a strategy. But did he need one beyond his plan to slow things down now that he had her where he wanted her? To give her pleasure a number of times before taking his? Judging these twin and intertwined goals to be tactically ambitious enough, he cast aside the wisp of an afterthought that he was missing a piece of the picture.

He shrugged out of his coat, unbuttoned his shirt but did not take it off then sat on the edge of the bed in order to pull off his boots. He turned toward her. She was spread out temptingly with her ankles tightly crossed, her thighs pressed together, as if in an attempt at modesty. The white stockings and pretty pink garters framing the tops of her thighs and nest made a mockery of that effort. She was in the state of undress of a wanton tart. He placed a hand on the bed on either side of her waist, without touching her, arms straight. He wanted to look his fill.

She must have felt him hovering. “This is embarrassing,” she said in a quavering voice then added, “It’s also frightening.”

“As usual, I appreciate your forthrightness.” He considered. “I’d like to know whether you’re also aroused. I’ll find out for myself, as I’ve said, but it might be good for you to acknowledge it first.”

Her pretty lips were quivering. She paused a few moments before she said, “I don’t know. It might help if I knew where you were looking.”

“Would it help if I touched you where I’m looking?”

Her lips continued to quiver. “Yes, I think so.”

"All right, then." So saying he skimmed his hands up the side of her ribcage, slid them around her shoulders and continued up her arms to her wrists. Then he spread his fingers and threaded them through hers in order to uncurl the clutch of her hands.

When her fingers were open and her palms exposed, he said, "There. Much better. See how your whole body has relaxed? Perhaps what you've named as fear is really anticipation. To help you along, I'm going to warm you up first." He was going to put his lips to hers but changed his mind and instead sucked gently on each of her nipples. "We'll kiss on the lips later," he said, straightening up. "For now my interests are those of Room Two, where I want to go with you. What an excellent idea you had for us to view it." He reached up to tug playfully on her wrist restraints. "And I'm sure in one of the rooms down the line at least one person is tied up."

She drew a quick breath as if remembering such a scenario from a previous visitation.

"I'm glad I thought of it." He paused. "And you? Are you glad?"

She bit her lip. "I'm not sure yet."

He bent to her ear and reminded her quietly, "Uncramp your hands. Yes. There, now."

He proceeded to circle her waist with his hands, slid them down to frame her hips. Her luscious skin was satiny in the candlelight and pleasantly moist to the touch. He slid his hands back up to her breasts where his thumbs played with her nipples. He caressed her thoroughly, kissed her throat, the creases at her elbows, the soft skin just below her armpits, a mole near her belly button and another near her hipbone. Feeling emboldened he skimmed the back of his hand through the curls of her nest. She immediately bucked and shivered then squirmed against her bindings.

"No, don't," she said quickly. "I've changed my mind. I don't think this is a good -" She broke off on a slight choke.

He immediately straightened and lifted his hands. The fully formed thought *Thus speaks the shy virgin!* collided with the half-formed *Lose the battle, win the -*

There it was, then: the missing piece of his strategy. He had not taken the more global view of the engagement, but it came to him now and just in time. He was at war, gentle though it was, which meant that he, disciplined Hussar, was willing to lose this particular battle - as magnificently disappointing as that would be - in order to win all.

Chapter Eleven

"I'm not looking at you now," he said gently, "if that helps."

"It does, thank you," she replied, automatically polite, as she struggled to regain her composure - if such was possible in these circumstances and if such was even what she wanted in these circumstances.

"It's a very pretty room," he remarked. "Luxurious. Hung in blue, I see. The fire is nice, mulling just right." His gaze must have fallen on the bedside table with the French letters because he said, "Ah, I see you planned ahead - even if we're not going to use -" He did not complete his thought on the potential lack of need for protection. Instead he asked, "What's in the bowl?"

"A pomander," she said, guessing he was referring to the dish next to the

condoms. "An orange spiked with cloves, you know. To make the room smell good."

"It does."

"I had Hattie prepare everything." Then added, "Hattie, my woman."

"She did a fine job."

He continued to make observations on other features of the room, and she felt his slight shifts on the bed as he looked around. She also found herself relaxing. He had been so quick to undress her and tie her up that surprise and fear had initially overwhelmed her with the force of an arching wave. And, yes, perhaps arousal had also seeped in through an undercurrent. But all his focused attention on her had been too much, and when he had touched her intimately, she had been startled and wanted to bolt. She drew a steadying breath. He had also been so quick to stop at her request that her surprise and fear just as quickly ebbed – leaving behind a vast and glittering shore of arousal. As new as she was to the feeling, it was nevertheless unmistakable, this sense of eager anticipation and yearning for more.

He remarked on a candle sputtering to extinction, but he did not offer to untie her or take off the blindfold. So. It was up to her. She would either ask him to end the encounter or to continue it, and if they were to continue it would be on his terms. After a minute or two he stopped commenting and sat still.

She didn't have to see him to know that he was poised exactly the way he had been the first moment she had met him, self-contained, contemplating which path to take, needing her directions. The blindfold increased her awareness of his even breathing. She heard a log shift on the hearth with a sizzle of embers. The sounds of the house drifted around her, the creak of wood, muffled movements from below stairs. She breathed in the citrus tang of the orange mixed with the spicy sweetness of the clove, an aphrodisiac, so Hattie had told her. As she relaxed further into the moment she suddenly understood that the bindings freed her of the need to act, while her nakedness was another form of liberation.

She could not prevent a dainty huff of amusement.

She felt the gentle rustle of his turn toward her. He asked evenly, politely, "Have you made a decision?"

She drew a deep breath. "In keeping with the honesty of all our previous discussions, I will admit that, in these matters, it seems you know best."

He paused before asking, "Would you like me to continue?" He admirably kept any trace of triumph out of his voice.

"Yes," she said in her forthright way. "I simply needed a moment to adjust."

"I understand."

"And to reassure myself that this is the good idea I thought it might be."

He hummed his agreement and apparently decided this was the moment to remove her stockings. He peeled one off then the other, caressed the soles of her feet then slid his hands up the outsides of her calves and thighs and brought his thumbs together at her crux to spread her nether lips. He breathed in delight,

"My darling, I can assure you, you think this is a most excellent idea."

The moment he put his fingers to her core she was transported to Room Two, just as he had wanted for her. He took his time. The pressure of his touch was divine. It was all the more arousing to see nothing but to know he was looking. She did not want any more of an audience, but she did like the way he arranged her so that her

feet were on the bed with her knees up and gently spread while he sprawled on his side across her stomach, keeping his hand where he wanted it. She imagined he had a nice view of her quivering. Men liked to watch. It was a further revelation of the evening to know that women – she, at least – liked to be watched.

She felt like a pot of cream. She felt like a juicy piece of fruit, a peach. She felt like a lily, unfurling her petals. These images she had previously considered vulgar but now found them delightful – along with his touch, his patience, his concentration, his presence.

He brought her to completion, trembly, tremulous. Then, before she had a chance to fully recover, he started in on her again. Not too many moments later she was overtaken by a more dramatic experience of coming to the point of points, which provoked her to a deep moan and gusty sigh of satisfaction. After a moment he withdrew his hand and laid it heavily on her stomach. She felt the pleasant rise and fall of it with her breathing. When he began to inch his fingers back down her belly through her curls, she wriggled her protest.

“No, I can’t.”

“No? All right, then. I was going to warm you up some more, but it seems you’re ready for the next step.”

She was about to say *What next step?* but knew the query to be utterly foolish, and his very suggestion of it made her eager for it. She felt him rise from the bed, heard him shedding his clothes then felt him lean across her to the beside table, evidently to sheathe himself in the protection she had provided. When he reached up to untie her wrists and withdraw her blindfold, she breathed a sigh of relief and felt a spurt of elation. She held out her arms, beckoning him to her as she had longed to do. He slipped his under hers and around her back to draw her to him, but not before their gazes met for a sweet, piercing moment, and she reveled in the glittering desire flickering in the depths of his midnight blue eyes.

She spared a fleeting thought to the possibility that the delicious effect of his skin against hers might have been heightened by her brief bondage, but then all thoughts were swamped by the feel of him in her arms, his chest against her breasts, their legs entwined. He had positioned himself on top of her with his face buried in her hair, his hands running up and down her sides until they gripped her thighs to wrap them around his back. She was excited, she was ready, she was –

Initially disgusted when she felt the tip of his cock at her entrance. Unable to prevent herself, she reared back.

He paused but did not relax.

Running her hands over the taut and flexed muscles of his back, she reassured him, “It’s all right.”

She felt the roll of his stomach muscles as he chuckled. “That’s supposed to be my line.”

“No, I mean, I know it’s like when I asked you to stop before and then didn’t want you to stop. Just the shock of the new. I’m – I’m – really, just go ahead.”

He did not wait for a further invitation, and his deep groan of pleasure nearly drowned out her groan of pain at his penetration. It was hard to imagine, at first, that any woman could welcome this alien invasion, which conjured an unpleasant image of an eel wriggling into a cave. But then she realized her lover’s attention was

on her. He kissed her eyebrows, her cheeks, and murmured for her to tell him if she could continue with him, what he could do for her. He adjusted his arms around her back to take his weight off her. These tender ministrations melted her already softened innards, so she tightened the grip of her legs around his back, grasped the sides of his face with her hands so he would look her straight in the eyes when she said,

“More.”

Gazes locked, bodies locked, he began to move, gently at first. She felt as if she were in a boat in the ocean, bobbing this way and that, the sails flapping and fluttering without much direction. But then when the speed increased, she closed her eyes, the sails caught the wind, and she felt an unexpected tug of canvas as it billowed to its tautest thread. Suddenly they were skimming together – *together!* – across a glass-smooth surface that quickly turned thick-ribbed, upon which they rocked deliriously until they capsized into churning water. The next moment the ocean spit them out with a force that hurled them toward an inviting shore where they coasted to rest in a refreshing spray.

Heart pounding, breath heaving, arms and legs still gripping him, she managed one word and that was, “Exhilarating.”

They made love a second time after which she rang to have a bath brought to them and a fresh, hot dinner since the one she originally ordered had gone cold. After attending to body functions, they returned to bed, pleased one another again and fell into a deep and languorous sleep.

Much later, long after the last candle had guttered in its socket, she awoke with a sense of extravagant satisfaction. She was cradling her lover in her arms like a baby. He was heavy against her, sleeping the sleep of the just. One of his hands had found its way to her mound, where it rested, palm relaxed, his fingers a fraction from her entrance. She marveled at his constant desire to have some part of him between her legs. For her part, she liked the sensations around her breasts and would have said, if asked, that holding him thus was as pleasurable as the physical joining. Different, of course, but equally keen in satisfaction. Contradictory, too, the whole experience, which was like sailing to a new island and at the same time returning home. Mostly she was filled with wonder at the effects of lovemaking, how it had turned her blood into sweet syrup, sliding in her veins, lulling her with ripe, round contentment.

She hung on to wakefulness to enjoy the moment, but it was difficult to resist the sly lure of sleep. Just as she was slipping over the edge into unconsciousness, she felt him rouse. He didn't move out of her arms, but she knew from his breathing that he was awake.

He made a few inarticulate noises before he formed a spare thought. “Want more?”

“No, no,” she said, smoothing his hair in long strokes, “I like it like this.”

His grunt of understanding might have doubled as agreement. He lay in her arms a good long while before he stirred away from her and reversed their positions. Now he held her in his arms. She put her cheek against his shoulder with her nose at his nape. She breathed in and was instantly aroused by his scent, but still she was too content to wish to anything more than lie there with him.

After a moment he said, "Tell me. Were you inspired to start Hartsfield as a way to balance out the activities of the White Chrysanthemum?"

"Balance out," she repeated. "Morally, do you mean? With professional women offering sexual favors on one side of the scale and innocent women who have been raped and redeemed on the other?"

He grunted then admitted, "I'm not quite sure. Perhaps I mean financially. I assume you're funding Hartsfield from these profits."

"Not so much any more," she said and laughed.

His tone was cautious when he asked, "You're not offended by my question?"

"Hardly," she said. "I grew up in this establishment and never thought of it as much more than a fact of life. I've already told you I first saw the rooms downstairs when I was seventeen. It didn't take me much longer to realize I didn't want to be in this business."

"So you do have a moral objection."

"I'm not sure," she said. "Not exactly." She was surprised by the turn in conversation only because she had never put into words her thoughts about her uncle's business and the direction of hers. "It's more that I didn't want to know about it anymore." That was it. She had wanted no more to do with spoiled peers of the realm, their needs, their arrogance. However, she saw no need to tell him this hard truth and potentially spoil the moment. So she said, "I simply wanted to be in a different business, to manage my properties in and around London and develop Hartsfield. So I found a buyer."

He held her away from him a bit so he could see her, even in the dark. "You've sold it?"

"Almost," she said. "First, I had strict conditions that the new owner would treat his employees as well as my uncle, and second, the sale price is enormous."

"I can only imagine."

"Indeed. It took me two years to find the right buyer, and it's taken him over three years to buy the business in increments. We're near the end of the transfer. Only another month or two, and then I'll be quit. Henceforth my businesses will all be respectable properties."

"And then you'll have no more access to reserving the viewing rooms downstairs or this room upstairs."

"I suppose not," she said, laying her head down again on his shoulder. "I didn't make any contractual provision for it. It wasn't until I had my idea about you that the rooms downstairs and this one here had any interest for me. After tonight, I don't know what further interest they would have." She paused then nudged him playfully. "Well, maybe this one."

Chapter Twelve

He surfaced from sleep feeling so far from the battlefield that an infant-like innocence washed through him, as if he had never experienced evil. He nestled further into the comfort, wanting to float in the feeling as long as possible, aware on some level that his cheek lay against the curve of a soft breast and that he was breathing in flowers and a woman's skin. With time the sensations were strong enough for the infant in him to develop quickly into a man. He wasn't sorry, because

he awoke to find his body wrapped luxuriously around hers. She was stroking his hair. He grunted in bliss, and his eyes rolled back.

He cast lazy thoughts over the pleasures of the past few hours then paused to reflect on what he determined to be the defining moment: when she had told him to stop and then had to decide whether or not to continue tied-up and blindfolded. He had been prepared for her to end the encounter, which would have put him in an unpleasant physical and emotional state. He was delighted beyond measure she had chosen to continue *and* that she had inadvertently given him that moment to formulate for himself what he wanted. It was what he had wanted from his first visit with her in the oasis of her courtyard at Hartsfield perhaps even from the first moment he met her. What he did in that one defining moment was to name it.

He could not predict how she would respond to his newly named desire when he would tell her of it, because he was all too aware she had a mind of her own. She certainly had a business sense. The brief discussion of her sale of the White Chrysanthemum reinforced his admiration of those skills. But then she had said, "Well, maybe this one" in reference to her interest in their present love nest, and he was no longer thinking about her responses to anything but his physical advances.

They dozed. His army habits served him well, and he awoke well before daybreak. He possessed her one last time, fiercely, with no protection and no apology. When they finished, he savored spare seconds still inside her then withdrew and rose from the bed. He groped for his clothing.

"What?" she said, rather sleepily, rising on an elbow. "You're leaving?"

He pulled on his drawers and trousers. As he crossed to the windows on the east wall, he shrugged into his shirt. He pulled back the curtain to reveal a sky of black whose heavy hem was lightly ruffled by a faint red glow. "It's the respectful time for a man to leave a lady's bed."

"It's not like that for us," she protested. "Stay and have breakfast with me."

"I can't," he said. He crossed back and sat rather heavily on the bed to don stockings and boots. He glanced over his shoulder at her and saw her bite her lip as if to prevent her from saying *Why not?*

Instead she said, "Then come back tonight."

He pulled on one boot then the other. He turned back around to look at her and said, "No, the condition I require won't be in place before this evening."

She sat up at that, holding the sheet to her chin. "Condition?"

This was his moment. "Yes, the next time we are in bed together we will be married."

"Married," she repeated, as if forming her lips around the name of a strange foreign custom. She looked blank for another moment before her features dawned with incredulous understanding. "Do you mean, married *to each other?*"

"That is exactly what I mean." He stood up and plucked his coat and cravat from the footboard of the bed.

Her evident shock held her immobile. She finally had the presence of mind to close her mouth then open it again to say, "You're not serious."

"I am."

"No, you're not. It's a joke. But I fail to see the humor."

He saw no reason to respond.

After a moment she commented, with a disbelieving shake of her head, "You refuse to acknowledge the situation the way it is."

He waved this away. "Give me one good reason not to marry me."

"I can and I will," she said with conviction. "I like you too much to marry you."

"Hmm," he said, sliding into his coat and slinging his wrinkled cravat around his neck. "That sounds like a rather good reason to marry me."

"I mean," she said, with emphasis, "that I will not let you make yourself a figure of fun by marrying a woman who owns a brothel." She huffed. "Or make myself an object of scorn, for that matter."

He reached across the bed and snatched the sheet from her hands. "That's better," he said, running his appreciative gaze over her body, "especially since your initial resistance to my obviously good idea might mean that it will be some time before I see you naked again."

In some anger she grabbed at the sheet but he held it away from her. So she heaved her legs over the side of the bed and sat turned away from him. "This is a ridiculous conversation, and I won't entertain it."

He tossed the sheet on the bed and walked around to her side to stand in front of her. Before she could turn away again he placed his hands on her shoulders. Her hands flew to her lap to cover herself. He did not object, since he had a good enough view of delicious skin, beautiful breasts and cascading hair.

"Let's sort the problem. What was your uncle's name?"

She looked up at him with a frown. "What difference does it make?"

He persisted, "What was his name?"

"It doesn't matter," she snapped. Then, "Oh, all right, Bertram Thorne."

"Your mother's brother, then. No immediate association with the name Castle. And what was your father's station in life?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Try again."

"It *really* does not matter." She reached up to grasp his forearms and shook him slightly. "You *refuse* to acknowledge the situation, *Your Grace*."

"Answer the question."

She dropped her hands to her lap again, this time to compose herself. "He was a vicar in Surrey. Elstead, in fact, not so very far from Hartsfield."

"Capital! My father was a vicar, too, whom I quote when I say, 'The Good Lord knows there's enough Avery money to provide for the position'. To prove the point, that same fortune provides my mother a handsome pension."

She was gaping up at him now. "Your mother is *alive*?"

He nodded. "My sister, as well. They both live around Tontham. That's Wiltshire."

She blinked once then made an effort to rise. He held her down. "I am *not* having this conversation while I'm naked and you're dressed."

He relented. "All right."

She rose and groped for the robe draped over the footboard whose tie had served as her blindfold. She snatched it around her body and cinched the belt.

"You're upset," he observed.

"I'm -" she broke off then said, "I don't know what I am. Befuddled, mostly."

You have a family.”

“Is that so wonderful?”

“No, it’s completely normal, but where are they?” She held up a hand in a staying gesture. “In Wiltshire, I know. I mean –” here she waved her hands in bewilderment – “where *are* they?”

“Since my mother would be worse than useless to me as I settle into a job I never thought to have, I asked her to give me time to get my feet on the ground before I attempt to ease her into my new life at Bradford Manor. As for my sister, who is younger than I am, she suffered a tragedy when her intended suddenly died two years ago, which left her despondent for a long time. She is now wild with excitement to come to London for the Season, provided I have all my wits about me by that time. As for my mother, it’s doubtful she’ll have anything to do with debauched worldly pleasures in town.”

“There you have it,” she said, holding up a finger as if scoring a point. “Your mother would not be much pleased with a daughter-in-law with such a debauched background as mine – never mind what the rest of the Ton would say!”

He affected polite interest. “How would she learn of the White Chrysanthemum or your involvement in it?”

“I don’t know. Someone would tell her. These things *always* come out.” She added, with heavy stress, “Sooner or later.”

He sat them down on the edge of the bed and took both her hands into his. Then, as if seriously considering the problem, he asked, “Do you think Mr. Lyons would be so indiscreet to mention it to anyone?”

She laughed and shook her head. “The man’s a bottomless well. A secret is tossed in and is never heard of again.”

“Hugo, then?”

“Oh, for heavens sakes,” she said. “I’m not saying my association with the White Chrysanthemum –”

“Nearly former association.”

“– nearly *former* association with this place would come out the first moment I was made known to anyone in the upper crust” – she looked at him with meaning – “of which you are now the crisp, but *eventually*, and then you would be socially ruined. And your sister! How could she think to make a good match if my soiled background became known?”

He waved her objections away. “Do you think any of the noblemen and women who expose themselves in the viewing rooms downstairs would be so foolhardy as to say anything about you?”

She admitted, reluctantly, “No client is likely to know of my existence.”

“Well, then.”

“Once again, you do not understand the situation. Please believe me when I say that I seem to understand the rules of your newly acquired social circle better than you do.”

“Then all the more reason for me to marry you so that I will know how to go on.”

She cast him a baleful look. “Very amusing.” Then she sighed, as if frustrated. “If I were to become the ... the Duchess of Bradford –” Here she broke off and

exclaimed, "Good heavens, I can hardly say such a thing out loud!" She waved her hand, as if to dismiss the problem of an exalted title. "In any case, as your wife, my past would be the subject of intense interest. Do you not think great inquiries would be made into the vicarage in Elstead and every detail of my life afterwards? And whatever else may be the case, the possibilities of sexual blackmail, such as you have suggested them, are not tit for tat."

"I'm not so sure."

"But I am," she said. "Any peer revealed to engage in scandalous sexual behavior remains a peer of the realm – and if it were a man, he would no doubt be lionized for it! – whereas *my* association would be held in contempt, and I have no title to cover any blemishes." She shrugged. "As a woman, even a title would not prevent me from ruin." She looked up at him, her eyes beseeching, "I can't do that to you. I won't."

He had already assessed the risk to his public life with her and weighed it against what he considered the greater risk to his private life without her. He stood up. "I am convinced you have only my welfare at heart, and given that none of your arguments against marriage are founded on any disgust of me, I'm rather encouraged."

She rose, too, saying with restrained impatience, "I'm trying to talk you out of it."

"I know." He took her hand and brought it to his lips. "I find your efforts endearing."

She switched tactics. "Would it help if I told you I don't like you?"

He felt rather smug. "Too late. Not after last night."

She drew away from him then put her hands in prayer position at her chin. "Please, listen to me. You have just come into the title. You are a young man. You need to wait for the Season, which is only a few months off, and then go to all the parties and meet someone suitable. You're a catch. *The* catch, no doubt."

"I am not likely to be attracted to an eighteen-year-old featherbrain."

"Not all of them are featherbrains, surely not, and you don't have to confine yourself to the debutantes. Why not look for an attractive, well-bred and intelligent woman who doesn't have much of a fortune and therefore may have had several Seasons and who might be twenty or twenty-one or even twenty-five! I'm sure she would easily fall madly in love with you."

He smiled congenially. "And you see nothing wrong with this plan?"

"No, why? I am sure the right woman for you exists."

He saw no need to respond.

"But not me," she added. "You think I'm a good – a good – oh, a good *what* I don't know! But you've just come back from the Continent, we happened to cross paths, I fancied you then brought you here." She put her arms around his neck and snuggled into him. "Give up your daft notion and come back tonight. I'm sure there's at least one woman of the Ton who has what you want and need in a wife. "

He enjoyed the feel of her next to him but steeled his resolve and did not return her embrace. "Ah, but you are reckoning without the one thing I know to be true about you. No other woman I will henceforth meet can match it."

She looked up at him, puzzled. "Which is –?"

He took her chin in his hand and gave it a squeeze. He said, mock sorrowful, "And here I was thinking that, of the two of us, you, Miss Castle, were the clever one."

Chapter Thirteen

Avery left the White Chrysanthemum in jolly good spirits. He reconsidered his parting shot and wondered if he should have added something like, "Contact me when you've made up your mind to marry me. You know where I live." But then, on further consideration, he was satisfied that he had left with a good exit line, one which had put Miss Castle mentally and emotionally off balance.

The thought came: Should he think of her as Beatrice? The thought left. Miss Castle would do for now.

Despite the ungodly early hour, Avery was unworried about cutpurses or other manner of riff-raff. He was, however, destined to encounter the occasional group of very drunk young men, clearly well born and clearly the worse for the wear of the evening's entertainment. He was even obliged to step into a disturbance and draw aside one foppish cub who was belligerently airing his opinion of some honest workman's ability to drive his cart. Avery's final comment, "A few years in the army would do you good, lad!" drew a smile from the workman, after which Avery continued on his way, enjoying the fresh air and the light exercise. As the sun peeked over the horizon to announce the new day, he arrived in Portman Square. With Nelson's help, he cleaned up then ate a hearty breakfast and got to work.

Unconsciously following Miss Castle's example, he set out to establish a network of information about her movements. He wisely recognized his campaign for her hand would take time. He was in no hurry, and there was ground to prepare. In the meantime, he would attend to his estates. But first he decided another visit to Horse Guards later that very afternoon was in order. He hoped to further his acquaintance with Selfridge.

He was in luck.

Selfridge was hanging about the main hall and hailed him the moment he walked in. After quite a bit of inconsequential chitchat with various guards, relaxed with their coats unbuttoned, Selfridge suggested they look in at White's.

"I can introduce you to my set, as a start," he said. "You'll certainly form your own set of intimates over time. Until then every peer in the realm is your best friend."

"Day before yesterday was a bit of a trial," he admitted, "in my first pass through the clubs, which is why I ended up at Horse Guards. I don't long to be back in the army. But I would like to have a clear sense of my place in the world." This was as close as he would come to complaining.

The major was socially adroit and managed to introduce Avery to his acquaintance in a way that muted the obsequious attention Avery had earlier endured. Perhaps Selfridge's mere presence was the buffer. Or perhaps Avery was already becoming accustomed to his new role. Whatever the reason, he enjoyed this foray through White's much better than the last time around.

At one point they found themselves watching a table where the play was deep. After observing several hands, they moved away.

“Not for me, I’m afraid,” Avery commented. “Not a gambling man – that is, if I don’t count the gamble I took every time I rode onto the battlefield.”

“It doesn’t attract me, either,” Selfridge agreed, “although soldiers are not famous for refraining from gambling.”

“I have no problem with small change every now and then. What is bet here on one turn of the cards amounts to an army man’s annual pay. It’s absurd. Senseless bravado.”

Selfridge looked at him. “Although you might never take up gambling, you’re going to have to adjust to different spending habits.”

Avery sighed. “Yes, adjust.”

“And to everything else, I would think. All the privileges and all the duties.” Selfridge’s expression lit with mischief. “The most glaring one facing you being, of course –” he broke off artfully.

Avery raised his brows.

“Setting up your nursery,” he concluded. “The succession. Oh, the succession! And think of the women who will be throwing themselves at your feet.”

Avery paused then said, off-hand, “I was thinking of looking up my childhood sweetheart.”

“From Wiltshire?”

He didn’t answer the question but looked away, as if contemplating a distant memory, then said, “Her father was a vicar like mine.”

“When did you last see her?”

“Years ago. I’ve since lost track of her whereabouts.”

“Perhaps she has married in the meantime.”

“Perhaps,” Avery agreed mildly. “But it will hurt nothing to find out.”

Selfridge’s brows rose, as if his memory had just then been jogged. “You’ve a younger sister, as I recall, don’t you?”

“Yes, Martha.”

“Married?”

“No, not married, and, yes, she plans to come to London for the Season.”

Selfridge winked. “Then don’t make a mull of your choice of a Duchess. If you do and lose some of your luster, your sister may be forced to end up with a rotter like me!”

Avery smiled obligingly, but the comment gave him pause. Miss Castle had suggested as much, but mention of his sister’s fate had a different effect on him coming from a peer. For now he’d said all he was going to say on the subject and had the perfect opening to ask, “Well now, as a rotter, how stand things with you and the ladies?”

Selfridge lifted his arm in the sling. “It’s amazing how they flock to kiss it and make it better. I have no desire to narrow the field.” He smiled broadly and shook his head. “Not any time soon.”

Avery threw himself into his work, if not with pleasure then at least with growing confidence. He left town to tour his estates, bound first for Yorkshire to get ahead of the winter. Then it was on to Devon and Hampshire, with a stop in Wiltshire for a thankfully quiet Christmas celebration, then on to Bradford Manor to

begin the New Year. He thought long and hard before making a trip to nearby Elstead but was glad he did so when he discovered that Vicar Castle was long forgotten and a large donation to a parish church could buy silence from its rector.

In all places he entertained the local gentry and was, in turn, entertained by them. He found he still enjoyed riding but no longer had a taste for hunting. He was happy to meet the eligible young women thrown in his path. Having one woman firmly in mind made meeting all the others tolerable, because he had a point of comparison, and the more women he met, the more he became fixed on Miss Castle. He had determined a business sense to be essential in his wife.

Not having been born to the title or raised in Society, he brought an outsider's perspective to his new life. It included the experience of his mother tending to the household accounts so that his father could, as she phrased it, "spend more time with God." Avery, very much his mother's son, knew what she meant: his father had been hopeless with a column of numbers. Avery himself was improving in his ability to handle budgetary matters, but he wanted help, and he would not marry a woman who thought fashion – or watercolors or playing the piano or any other genteel activity – was more important than the business of running of his estates. When his foray into the countryside yielded no prospects to rival Miss Castle, he began to harbor dark thoughts about the state of education of the women of the upper classes.

He returned to town at the beginning of February. His first visit in October had been when London was thin of company, and he had kept a low profile. Now with the Season underway he was besieged with invitations, and it was all he could do for the first weeks to keep up with his social calendar – and with the rumors circulating about him. Although he had expected to be the object of wagging tongues, he was still taken aback by the spectacular amount of the gossip billowing about him like a cloud of heavy perfume.

One afternoon at White's a new crony drew his attention to the betting book lying open on a table in pride of place by the bow window. When he saw the many entries concerning his very own marriage he was puzzled, appalled and satisfied all at once. He was puzzled to wonder why anyone would think he would propose marriage to a Miss Elizabeth Ashley since he couldn't place her, but then remembered she was the Accredited Beauty of the Season. He was appalled by the sizes of some of the bets, which meant he still had not adjusted to different spending habits. He was satisfied to see several bets placed on him marrying his Childhood Sweetheart, Unknown and Unnamed – wagers he took as signs of possible acceptance of said sweetheart.

As for those last entries, Selfridge was apologetic when next he ran into Avery at the club. "I never said a thing about you telling me of childhood sweetheart, Bradford, not a thing. We must have been overheard."

Avery replied amiably, "Even so, I never swore you to secrecy."

Selfridge's brows rose waggishly. "So, did you find her? And if you did, is she still unmarried?"

Avery smiled enigmatically and gestured toward the famous book. "If I told you, then you'd have an unfair advantage, wouldn't you?"

Chapter Fourteen

Madness. It was absolute madness.

First he had proposed marriage while she was naked. Well, no, he hadn't proposed. He had stated a condition. Then he dropped off the face of the earth, and the next thing she knew, it was February, and she began to catch glimpses of him here and there about town. She began to read about him, too, since she regularly poured through several newspapers to keep abreast of business. Before she had always skipped the snippets devoted to the lives of the royalty and the titled, but now they drew her like a starving woman to a tempting steak.

The past few months had turned into a strange limbo for her, not knowing which way was forward. The morning after, she told Hattie that she had enjoyed herself then added, "But I'm not interested in pursuing the relationship with him. No," she said dismissively, "not for me."

Hattie nodded wisely, making her own interpretation. "No harm done, then. Curiosity satisfied. Keep looking, mistress. I'm sure there's a man for you who can get the job done." Then she fell into reminiscence of her best-endowed client, offered a few salacious anecdotes, and related all with a fond smile.

Now *that* was the kind of relationship Beatrice had been looking for. But her duke had turned the tables. If they were to continue their sexual activity, it would be on his terms, just as he had initiated it.

She proceeded to put her successful-yet-failed adventure out of her mind but soon discovered that forgetting her duke and their night together was not so easily done. She knew enough about her uncle's business to know that the women who worked at the White Chrysanthemum very rarely became emotionally attached to their clients. Instead they were close with each other, fighting and making up with all the passion of lovers and all the drama of Drury Lane. The women were physically close as well, touching often, frequently lying around in what her uncle had called "a puppy puddle."

When at work Beatrice was able to keep her distraction to a minimum, but when she was alone, her thoughts often drifted to her duke, and she began to wonder where she had gone wrong. She had never felt the lack of female friends but felt it now, if only to have the benefit of having someone to talk to. No relief was to be found during her visits to Hartsfield either, because all she had to do was cross the street from the Hotel to her house and look up to see Bradford Manor. She knew it was supposed to be a symbol of power and protection, but sitting as Hartsfield did on the south slope of it, the grand house reminded her as much of the spoiled men of wealth whose babies she sheltered as it did of her duke.

During one of her visits to the countryside it occurred to her that perhaps she had shrunk from her duke's offer not because she thought the peerage would consider her unworthy. Rather she abhorred the idea of becoming one of them. The world suddenly seemed upside down.

Over and over she relived in detail the night they had spent together. He was everything she would want in a lover. She had called him perfect, and she had chosen perfectly. Why couldn't he have agreed to an *affaire*? They could have gone along nicely for as long as such things lasted. She had wanted an adventure, not a whole new life. He had wanted something different and was willing to establish a

bold condition to get it.

But marriage? To a duke? It seemed ...

... the only word she could think of was 'indecent.' Once again, everything was topsy-turvy.

As she went about her business in town she kept glimpsing him. Not every day, no. Not even necessarily once a week but often enough to keep him in her thoughts until he had become an obsession. She considered the possibility he was monitoring her movements the way she had once monitored his and had contrived to get her name in the ledger at Lyons and Sons where she knew he would be sure to see it. But if he were keeping tabs on her, wouldn't he engineer an encounter?

One came to pass on a blustery afternoon toward the end of March. She had given up trying to do anything useful that day and informed her staff that she was going to The Temple of Muses library on Finsbury Square and announced her intention of walking there. She donned stout walking shoes, bundled up and set out to rid herself of the restless energy that seemed to be growing in her.

She arrived invigorated from the walk and determined to find the most wonderful story to take her out of her life and into another. Before she had had time to narrow down her selection, she heard behind her,

"Miss Castle? Why, yes, I do believe it's Miss Castle."

The sound of his voice caused sparks to fly up and down her spine. She had one second to pull herself together before she turned –

– to meet his gaze and saw the gleam in his eye. It was similar to the one she had caught just before he had entered her the last time with a fierce possession that spoke louder than the words *You're mine*. A bolt of pure lust passed through her, and she had to swallow a gasp from the sheer force of it.

"Your Grace," she managed and was glad her voice did not waver.

"How nice to see you again," he said with a slight bow, "and what a fortunate opportunity for me to introduce you to my sister, Miss Martha Avery."

"Miss Avery," she said, acknowledging the woman who was a feminine copy of her brother, same dark hair, blue eyes and masterful nose but with a feminine chin and rosebud lips. She was wearing a very stylish pelisse of power blue. She looked to be of an age with Beatrice.

"You must be the Miss Castle my brother has told me about, the one who has the home for young mothers in Hartsfield."

She replied in the affirmative, and she and Miss Avery proceeded to converse on the topic of her charity while her duke stood benignly by. Now that her surprise had worn off, she was able to register the fact that he, unlike she, had been unsurprised by their meeting. She could also figure that anyone keeping tabs on her movements in her neighborhood would have had plenty of time to send word to Bradford House. Her duke and his sister would have had no trouble catching up in a carriage while she was traversing town on foot.

When the topic of Hartsfield came to an end, Miss Avery said, "But I shouldn't like to keep you, Miss Castle. I'm sure you'd like to get on with your shopping."

"Miss Castle likes novels," her duke informed his sister.

"Novels! What kind are you looking for?"

"Almost anything with an Italian setting," she replied. "And you?"

"I'm here for a book on gardening. Well! Do please find an exciting novel so you can tell me all about the story when next we meet."

Beatrice glanced at her duke. He met her gaze and smiled pleasantly.

"I'd love for you to come to Bradford House for a visit," Miss Avery said.

Beatrice opened her mouth then closed it.

With a winning smile – she, too, had dimples! – Miss Avery said, "I have few friends in town, since I'm so newly arrived. It's quite an adjustment, this life, you know. My brother tells me you know London ways. Do come for a visit. I would be so appreciative."

Thus entreated Beatrice agreed to afternoon tea several days hence, and her duke and his sister retreated to the gardening section of the bookstore. Beatrice was left to guess that this immediate invitation for tea, which eliminated a series of brief morning visits as a way to establish friendship, meant that her duke had told his sister something of his interests.

Beatrice became convinced of her guess during the course of that tea. But first she had to endure the days preceding it. Seeing him again had given new life to her fantasies. She longed for his presence, their talks, his touch, their conversation of skin. She craved the moments of exquisite satisfaction when she had cradled him in her arms, the contented thrall she had experienced when he had held her in his arms. She dwelled on the way he had possessed her the last time, like he already owned her and wanted to plant his seed. Not much later he had set his condition. She wanted him intensely, but she didn't want forever.

Or did she?

She became so confused that she finally broke down and poured the story out to Hattie.

When she came to the end, Hattie was as dumbfounded as Beatrice had initially been. "Marriage?" Hattie pondered the problem then brightened with a thought. "Is he one of them nobs who's pockets to let and needs your money? Meaning no disrespect to you, of course."

Beatrice shook her head. "He's wealthy."

Hattie grunted. "Marriage, is it? It's not what we do on this side of town."

"I know. I hate the idea of giving up my life as it is. I thought I'd worked it out perfectly, chosen the perfect lover. And then he turns out to be –"

"Wait. Isn't it supposed to be the other way around? The man wants the woman's favors with no obligation, while the woman waits for marriage?"

"Yes, and that's only part of what's confusing me."

"You mean, you're considering it?"

"I do like him, really like him."

"Maybe you're like Darla."

"Darla?"

Hattie got a faraway look in her eyes. "Years ago it was, when you were just a little girl. Darla up and ran off with one of them carpenters doing repairs on the house." She held up her hands. "The silly cow left the best job she'd ever have, just like that!"

"How did it go for her? Do you know?"

Hattie frowned. "I might have heard she settled in Luton and had a baby." Her

brow cleared. "Something like that. Happily ever after." Her grunt was skeptical. "Well, dearie, I don't know what your uncle would think of you going off and marrying."

He would think her a fool. She heard him say, "A relationship is a transaction. It's business, Beatrice. Always business. Remember that!"

Marrying her duke would mean giving him legal control over everything she owned. She knew a spectacularly bad business deal when she encountered one. Then again, her reaction to him in the bookstore could not be dismissed. She steadied herself with the thought that when she saw him at tea, she would be prepared, on her guard, and thus would be able to better understand her feelings for him.

Yes, seeing him again would help her decide the matter.

Chapter Fifteen

Beatrice arrived at the imposing mansion on Portman Square at the appointed time. Miss Avery apparently did not stand on ceremony because she was already in the foyer as if the butler didn't exist.

"Thank you, Roberts," she said to the man who likely didn't want his job usurped, "and to you, too, Miss Castle, for coming." Miss Avery's welcome was warm, and the hostess took her guest's arm to lead her across a space cavernous enough for their footsteps and voices to echo.

As she and Beatrice moved down a hallway opening on to stately rooms hushed with dustless elegance, gilt ceilings and occasional pairs of footmen, Miss Avery pulled Beatrice closer and whispered into her ear, "In Tontham I was capable of opening my own front door, but here -? Oh, no!" She then proceeded, in a normal tone of voice, to chat amiably about gardening, about her life in London, about the goings-on in Tontham. With a half impish, half defiant but utterly charming smile, she finished off her remarks with the comment, "And, yes, I know I am not supposed to mention in polite company such a trifling backwater as Tontham!"

They had arrived at a pretty little room in the back overlooking a garden about to shake off its winter slumber, and Beatrice was feeling relaxed enough in her hostess's company to say, "You can speak of Tontham with impunity from me, Miss Avery."

Miss Avery nodded her thanks and opined, "This sunroom is the only one that's *cozy*." Then she lowered her voice to another whisper, "I had the table set and the tea steeping before you came so I could send the servants away. I cannot *stand* them hovering. I know that's their job, but I find it" - here she gave a delicate shudder - "unsettling."

When they took their seats at the table, Beatrice said, "I am sure it is, at first."

Miss Avery sighed then busied herself with the tea. "I know Jonathan has told you a bit about his new life. It's quite ... quite ... something. Very difficult to put into words."

"And he is -?" Beatrice asked, looking around.

"At one of his clubs."

Beatrice's heart fell. She didn't know whether her reaction was from the disappointment of being deprived of his presence or of not having a chance to

explore further the state of her feelings for him. Both? Neither? More confusion, especially since she should have known that an invitation to tea would not include men. She had just assumed her duke would want to see her. Instead he was forcing her hand. If she wanted to see him again, she would have to initiate the encounter, at which time, she supposed, she would have to give him her definitive answer.

"I wanted you all to myself, you see," Miss Avery explained. "He told me what a good listener you are. You cannot imagine how many etiquette books I read before daring to set foot in town!"

Beatrice gazed over the table with its Wedgewood china, sparkling silverware, and crisp, white linen napkins edged with needle lace. In the center, striking an elegant pose, stood a three tier platter with a colorful composition of miniature savory pies, dainty sandwiches, biscuits and tartlets, and at whose feet crouched fat little pots of sweet cream, marmalade and honey.

"Are you the one to have set such a pretty table, then?" Beatrice ventured.

"Goodness, no," she admitted without a qualm. "This is the work of Mrs. Simmons, the housekeeper, who knows absolutely everything about how a grand family should receive a guest." She embroidered artlessly on the topic, "And if figuring out the ghastly rules of behavior for a mere female is exhausting, you can imagine what it's been like for Jonathan these past few months. Sometimes I think the poor man is going to run himself into the -"

Miss Avery was prevented from finishing her sentence when Roberts bowed himself into the room and presented her with a silver salver upon which lay two calling cards. She took them, seemed to make an effort to hide her surprised dismay then said with her winning smile, "How delightful! Please escort the Marchioness and Miss Hallowell in. Oh, and do inform Mrs. Simmons of our extra guests."

When the butler bowed himself out, Mrs. Jordan whispered, "Unexpected guests, but then again not completely unexpected. You'll see what I mean."

She returned to talking about her plans for the spring garden, which was the topic under discussion when Mrs. Simmons came to lay two more places and then stayed to hover. The topic was still in play when a rather handsome *grande dame* swathed in magnificent purple swept into the room followed by a young woman, likely a first or second year debutante, becomingly dressed in a blue saracenet gown with a darker blue spotted spencer and a gold pendant.

Beatrice was introduced to the Marchioness of Cambray and her daughter, Miss Eugenia Hallowell. At a glance Beatrice took the Marchioness in acute dislike. Of the daughter Beatrice withheld judgment. She was demure and very pretty. At the moment her impassive expression suggested that, with a mother like hers, she had had ample practice in the art of not looking embarrassed.

When they had seated themselves and dispensed with a comment or two on the weather, the Marchioness declared, "Your table is a credit to you, Miss Avery, truly a credit. So beautifully laid out, and such a proper selection of cakes." Turning to Beatrice she explained, "Miss Avery wisely gave me permission to instruct her in the ways of the Ton. So when I saw a carriage I did not recognize pull up outside Bradford House, I came to do what I can only think of as my duty to my newest and very dearest neighbor!"

Beatrice forbore to laugh at this frail excuse for a case of rampant curiosity.

Miss Avery's warm and seemingly genuine acceptance of the brash intrusion drew Beatrice's admiration. "Thank you so much, Lady Cambray," she said immediately. "What a pleasure to know I've prepared the table correctly, and the pleasure is now doubled to share it with you and your daughter."

"And your guest, Miss Castle," the Marchioness added with a majestic nod to Beatrice, as clear a request for information as Beatrice could imagine.

Miss Avery stretched out a hand and gently gave Beatrice's arm a pat. "A guest, yes, but I hardly think of her as such, since I've known her my entire life."

Ah, so that was the game. Beatrice met Miss Avery's steady gaze then turned to the Marchioness and smiled.

"From Wiltshire, then?"

"Our fathers knew one another," Miss Avery answered, as if the question had been directed at her. "Both vicars."

The look of pure calculation that flashed across Lady Cambray's face did not encourage Beatrice to think she would ever willingly join a group which included such a woman, much less aspire to be her next-door neighbor. Her ladyship's look quickly became one of sharp-eyed assessment of every aspect of Beatrice's person. After a moment, her ladyship remarked, "What a charming ensemble you are wearing, Miss Castle. Do you have such talented modistes in Wiltshire?"

Beatrice was wearing a gown of palest peach silk with three-quarter sleeves and a lightly embroidered bodice. It was unfussy and attractive and suited her perfectly. She said truthfully, "This dress was made by Mrs. Brown on Chancery Lane."

Lady Cambray blinked in some surprise. "A country vicar's daughter with such a fashionable London modiste?"

"Of course a vicar's living wouldn't cover such expenses," Beatrice said matter-of-factly. "I am fortunate to have other family resources." She was also fortunate that Mrs. Brown's bills were paid through the offices of Mr. Lyons Senior, so no one could easily learn the source of those family resources. She threw her ladyship a bone. "I lost my parents at a young age and so was raised by relatives."

"I see," said Lady Cambray. "And what do they do?"

Beatrice leveled her gaze at the nosy woman and repeated, quizzically, "Do?"

Beatrice let the word hang in the air and calmly watched her ladyship's growing discomfiture, the older woman unsure of herself for being ignorant of a possibly illustrious branch of the Castle family. A slight tightening around her mouth suggested she was now experiencing the horror of that sinking feeling for having given offense to a woman who may well become a duchess.

Having slain her opponent with one simple word, Beatrice let another highly uncomfortable moment pass before turning to her ladyship's daughter and asking pleasantly, "And you, Miss Hollowell, who is your modiste?"

Thus was discussion steered away from Beatrice. However, she figured that such a brazen busybody as Lady Cambray would quickly recover her composure and, indeed, she did. Although she did not dare question Beatrice at point blank range again, Beatrice nevertheless felt her ladyship's quivering desire to know everything about her, which likely included the closeness of her relationship to the Avery family, the extent of her family money and, most importantly, the amount of interest,

if any, the new duke had in her.

Of Miss Hallowell Beatrice formed a good opinion, helped in large measure by the fact that Miss Hallowell declared her favorite leisure activity to be novel reading, particularly stories set in France.

Beatrice acknowledged readily, "I love the ones set in Italy."

Miss Avery happily chimed in, "Miss Castle was going to tell me about the latest one she read. I'd be so happy to hear about it!"

Thereafter talk between Beatrice and Miss Hallowell flourished. They recommended exciting books to one another, critiqued the stories of the ones they had read in common, and encouraged Miss Avery to join them in this splendid pastime. Miss Hallowell also didn't pander to Beatrice by always agreeing with her opinions on the stories they had both read, which pleased Beatrice enormously. She liked that Miss Hallowell had a mind of her own, spoke good sense and treated Beatrice as a potential friend rather than a rival.

After a correct period of time she and her mother left. By then Beatrice had determined Miss Hallowell to be a positive counterweight to her mother, and the scales in Beatrice's opinion of the upper class evened out.

With the exit of the unexpected guests, a small silence fell in the sunroom. It was not awkward, but rather meditative, with Beatrice and likely Miss Avery sifting through the significance of the visit.

After a moment Miss Avery roused herself and said over her shoulder, "Thank you, Mrs. Simmons, for so easily accommodating our extra guests. I would be grateful if you would clear the table now." When they were finally alone again, Miss Avery smiled, somewhat ruefully, and said, "This was not exactly the visit I was expecting to have with you. I'm sure you can imagine!"

"I can imagine," was her reply. She was not going to inquire into the extent of what her duke had divulged to his sister about their relationship, but it was clear that Miss Avery was willing to help create a new persona for Miss Castle, should she choose to need one. "But the visit was nevertheless useful, wouldn't you say?"

"Useful," Miss Avery repeated with a quirk of her brows. "I'm sure the old Nosy Parker is already making inquiries into the Castles of Wiltshire."

Beatrice laughed to imagine the woman's futile search. "And no doubt planning a personal visit to Chancery Lane." She felt a clutch of fear to wonder how far the woman would go then said, "She'll get no personal information about me out of my dressmaker, in case you're worried."

"I'm not."

Another small silence fell, this one hesitant. Beatrice drew in a deep breath then felt moved to say, "I'm not from your world."

"I know, but neither of us are from *this* world, so I don't see much difference between us in the present situation. What I can say is I feel as if I've moved to a foreign country and am learning a new language and new customs. It's early days yet. I don't know to what extent either Jonathan or I will ever become natives. We're accepted, of course. We have to be. He is so obscenely rich!" She stopped. "I can say that to you, can't I?"

Beatrice laughed. "Yes, you can say that, and I can tell you that as a Londoner with – how should I put it? – *ties* to certain elements of Society, I have a sense of how

to proceed in this situation.”

“Very good. And how would that be?”

“I’ll leave here in my carriage, but since I expect your dreadful neighbor to have me followed, I do not intend to go straight home. Instead I’ll slip out of the carriage at a very crowded intersection then disappear. My driver will go on to his favorite pub in Cheapside where the carriage will stay for the night, while I check myself into a hotel for the foreseeable future.” She considered her options. “Mivart’s. It’s in my neighborhood. Mayfair.”

Miss Avery looked impressed. “*Very* good, Miss Castle! Jonathan said you were a clever one. Oh, I hope –” she broke off and gave her head a shake. She paused to collect herself then looked Beatrice directly in the eye and said simply, “We live in a fish bowl. You need to know that.”

Beatrice had lived her entire life in the shadow of Society. Was she afraid now to step out into the glare? Would she let fear affect her decision?

“I understand. Thank you.”

Chapter Sixteen

When his sister recounted the details of the tea to him, Avery was encouraged, particularly by Miss Castle’s scheme to stay in a hotel. It suggested she was seriously considering his offer and could make herself known to the Ton as if she had appeared out of the blue – or, at least, out of an untraceable past.

The evening of the tea he went to White’s in order to check the betting book. He took cynical satisfaction to see new bets with the name Miss Beatrice Castle next to his and the initials BC added in superscript to the bets already made in the name of Childhood Sweetheart. Over the next few days Selfridge became his self-appointed purveyor of gossip and told him Miss Castle was widely known to be pretty, fashionable and rich. As to where she came from, the most commonly held assumption was Wiltshire, but Devon and Hampshire were in the running, along with a few stories of a well-to-do Castle family living on the Continent, presumably Italy.

This last, absurd bit of speculation plainly invented out of whole cloth – and evidently muddled with Miss Castle’s preference for novels set in Italy – must have affected Avery enough for his shock to appear on his face.

“Ah, so she *has* been living on the Continent,” Selfridge said wisely.

Avery recognized Selfridge’s misinterpretation for the gossip windfall it was and took instant advantage. “Please keep it to yourself, my friend. Both of our families have long lived quiet, private lives, and we’re not used to being in the center of attention. Miss Castle and I have only recently reconnected. It’s early days yet. We might not suit.”

Selfridge assured him of his discretion, and Avery left the conversation entirely satisfied, since he guessed Selfridge to be the origin of the Childhood Sweetheart rumors. Sure enough, one morning hardly two days after the latest exchange with Selfridge, a most exclusive invitation arrived at Bradford House.

He was seated with his sister in the sunroom overlooking the garden. His plate bore mute witness to the remains of a breakfast sirloin and two coddled eggs on toast. At hand was a cup of coffee, which from force of old habit was black and

bitter. He was idling through the *Times*, with thoughts of Miss Castle dancing at the edges of his awareness. His sister was engaged with her correspondence.

Roberts entered the sunroom with a dignified step, bearing the invitation. It was centered on the tray he carried, its heavy golden vellum radiating an importance no less impressive than that exerted by the Emperor of China seated on his throne, facing south. Extending the tray toward the lady of the house the butler bowed and intoned, "Godfrey himself delivered the missive."

Martha took the thick envelope and thanked the butler kindly. When Roberts withdrew, Avery raised his brows in inquiry and mouthed, "Godfrey?"

Martha shrugged her ignorance and broke the seal, saying, "I knew this was coming. Lady Cambray was so thoughtful to come round yesterday afternoon while you were out for the evening to tell me about it."

"Ah, yes! Our dear neighbor."

"It's an invitation from the Earl and Countess of Avondale who live here on Portman Square and who are veritable leaders of the Ton, so I've been told! Godfrey must be the highest-ranking servant in their employ. No mere linkboy would do for this exalted job of delivering the invitation."

Avery brought to mind what he had learned of his immediate neighbors. "They live directly across from us, no?"

"That's right. Lady Cambray told me they planned a musicale to welcome us to the neighborhood, an intimate gathering, which means not more than forty guests. Fifty at most."

"Hmm," was all Avery said, adjusting with difficulty his notion of what counted as an intimate gathering, similar to his effort to recalibrate what constituted proper spending habits. He had met Avondale once at one of his clubs, recalled the earl saying where he lived, but he could not quite match a face to the name.

His sister abstracted two smaller envelopes and held them up so he could see. One was addressed to the Duke of Bradford and Miss Martha Avery, the other to Miss Beatrice Castle of Florence, Italy.

Brother and sister exchanged a glance of astonished amusement.

"Oh, but, Jonathan, there's more," Martha said, her eyes twinkling. "We are under no circumstances to arrive on foot. Never think it! No, we must arrive in our grandest carriage."

He hardly knew whether to be further amused or thoroughly appalled. "You have that on Lady Cambray's authority, I gather?"

"Absolutely. At first I thought she was joking that we would take a carriage to go halfway around this square, but then I realized from her solemn expression that she was imparting deeply serious advice."

"Good God!"

Martha bit off a laugh and queried, "Will we ever adapt?"

Avery's prediction was gloomy. "Perhaps not any time soon."

"Of course the whole thing is to ferret out Miss Castle, don't you think?"

"The timing would suggest so," he said, shaking his head in disbelief at the absurd turns his life continued to take, "now that it's widely known she has family money and is from the Continent."

"Do you think she'll come?"

It was a reasonable question, and he thought it over. She had attended the impromptu autumn festival in Brad's Ford, which meant she had been willing to meet him in public. Then again that rustic festival would be public with respect to the musicale on an order of magnitude between, say, the flicker of a match and a blast of cannon fire. Still, the more he thought about it, the more he was happy – if also somewhat apprehensive – about the invitation. If Miss Castle's introduction to Society went smoothly, then all was well and good. If it went badly or if she balked, then, although he would be averse to giving her up or letting her go, at least he would know. He glanced at his sister. Her fate hung in the balance, too.

And just then she was looking at him hopefully, expectantly. He reached out for Miss Castle's invitation, and she handed it over. He opened the envelope, borrowed her pen and wrote: *Miss Castle, Please come, B.* just as he had months ago. He waved the paper for the ink to dry then slipped the invitation back in its sleeve, saying, "It's a test, and she'll know it. My guess is she'll rise to the occasion and come."

"I agree," Martha said. "She has many qualities, among them pluck. Now give it here, and I'll write her a note encouraging her to join us then have it sent around immediately to Mivart's."

Avery handed his sister the envelope but put a staying hand on her wrist. "Wait until this evening," he advised, bethinking himself of Miss Castle's cautious lead of subterfuge. "I'm sure Lady Cambrey and likely the Countess of Avondale are looking out their windows this very moment to see if we're sending someone on an urgent errand. They're bound to imagine we're thrilled to let Miss Castle know at once about the signal honor of this invitation, and they'll have their bloodhounds ready to set loose in pursuit. Let's foil them."

Chapter Seventeen

The moment Beatrice crossed the threshold of the Avondale's music room in company of His Grace Duke of Bedford and Miss Avery she felt a shock akin to that of nighttime pupils exposed to sudden daylight.

She had spent the last few days strengthening her resolve to face this evening's trial by fire. Her duke and his sister had done their parts earlier in the evening to bolster her confidence. Her appointment several days earlier with Mrs. Brown to fit her for an evening gown had been enlightening since the modiste had unwittingly disclosed how she had contributed to the fantastical stories now circulating in Town about "Miss Castle, my most favorite client. All this time I never knew how well traveled you are! Surely I suspected, but you are so modest, my dear child, and don't put on airs. Such becoming manners!"

Nevertheless, nothing could have prepared Beatrice for the physical experience of setting foot into Society and being the object of a scrutiny as intense as it was covert. Introduced to one person after the next, she was the recipient of a considered respect so exquisitely poised she felt it balanced as if on the tip of knife and knew the breathtaking balance to be held in place by the presence of her duke. Her taut nerves were in tune with the animal spirits lurking deep, pawing and straining against tightly held leashes, sniffing at the scent of her duke's interest in her. Whiffs of feminine jealousy and desire mingled with expensive perfumes.

Ancient masculine hunting instincts joined forces with competitive ones and seeped through pores. For the first few minutes she wondered if curiosity could take physical shape and eat her alive. And all these ferocious feelings were enveloped by beautiful skins of silk and satin and soothed by cultured voices murmuring polite nothings.

She quickly discovered that the most effective response to the question “Do you speak Italian, Miss Castle?” was to affect eager anticipation and to ask, in turn, “Do you, Lady X or Lord Y?” Then, when the invariable response “No” was returned, she had only to attempt to cover mild disappointment and to allow her interlocutor to hastily change the subject.

Eventually Lord and Lady Avondale shepherded their guests to the rows of seats arranged in a semi-circle at the far end of the room, and the musicale began. Beatrice hardly heard a single note the supposedly talented soprano and tenor sang, and soon enough – too soon, as far as she was concerned – the first intermission came. She did not suppose she could remain sheltered in the safe harbor of her duke’s presence the whole evening and, indeed, found herself swept up into a circle of young women.

A pretty, rather buxom woman addressed her. “So, you thought to steal the march on all of us, did you, Miss Castle?” she said, trying for a teasing note and falling a bit short and landing instead on snide.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Beatrice replied, struggling to recall the woman’s name, for they had been introduced.

“That’s not very nice, Letty,” another one, tall and slim, chided.

That’s right, Letitia, Beatrice thought, *Letitia Somebody or Other.*

“But true,” Letty rejoined, giving Beatrice a thorough once-over. “You must have contacted him once you heard about the change in his fortunes.”

Beatrice found this kind of spiteful honesty easier to deal with than polite chitchat covering ardent speculation. She answered truthfully, “If you’re referring to his grace, I will tell you that he contacted me first.”

“There, you see, Letty,” the tall and slim one said. She turned to Beatrice and gave her a little nod. “My name is Sarah Cantwell. I’m a friend of Miss Hollowell.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Beatrice said and thought *Any friend of Miss Hollowell is a friend of mine.* She looked around and asked, “Is Miss Hollowell here? I haven’t yet seen her.”

Miss Cantwell said she had glimpsed her friend but had not yet had a chance to say hello. “Why don’t we go in search of her then, Miss Castle,” Miss Cantwell suggested, and Beatrice gratefully agreed.

As they made their way through the crowd, she was greeted by many people and even stopped by one man who insisted on the preposterous idea that he had met Miss Castle’s charming aunt at a soiree in Florence some years before. As he went on to recount one or two of his adventures in this most illustrious Italian city, Beatrice thought back on the conversation she had had with her duke and his sister in the carriage on their way to the musicale.

“But these stories!” Beatrice had exclaimed upon being told she had acquired a wealthy and eccentric aunt.

“It’s precisely because no one knows anything about you,” Miss Avery had

replied.

And Society, abhorring a vacuum, had gleefully filled the void. Mrs. Brown had done her part, as it turned out, by inventively answering the leading questions Lady Cambray had posed the day after her ladyship had met Beatrice. In the intervening days since her ladyship's visit to Chancery Lane a consensus among the Ton had coalesced around a preferred version of Beatrice's story.

"The stories will die down, no doubt," her duke had noted, looking at her hopefully, "as people get to know you."

"Fish bowl," she had said. Recalling an old lesson from one of her tutors, she had added, "My life has been refracted by the optical illusion of the fish bowl. I'm the proverbial spoon thrust into a glass of water, with the submerged part suddenly larger and disconnected from the part in the air."

The second half of the musicale began before Beatrice and Miss Cantwell found Miss Hallowell, and they took seats in the back. The placement was fortunate because, just after the last note was sung, Beatrice had an exchange that dispelled all her misgivings about the occasion.

A young woman, also seated in the back row, lost no time in taking Beatrice aside and saying, "You're pretty enough, but only passably so."

"And you're the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," Beatrice replied immediately and honestly. She beheld golden hair, big blue eyes, a perfect nose and jawline, exquisite lips, not to mention a flawless figure. "You evidently know my name. Am I to know yours?"

"I'm Miss Elizabeth Ashley," she said. "I'm the Accredited Beauty of the Season."

"I can see why," Beatrice said again honestly, thinking *She is Rose all over again* – Rose being the most beautiful of her uncle's mistresses and determined that everyone should know it. Beatrice had been at first blinded by the light in the room but now everything came into focus: she was among people, just people. Rich, certainly, but like everyone else she'd ever dealt with. So she asked Miss Ashley the obvious question, "As the Accredited Beauty, do you think, perhaps, you are entitled to an offer from the Duke of Bradford?"

"My mother thinks so," she said, serene in the comfort of her mother's assurance. "I have also danced with him." Thinking to clinch the argument, she added, "Twice."

Miss Ashley glanced away just then. Beatrice followed the line of Miss Ashley's gaze straight to her duke. He was standing in a small group, looking very fit and handsome in his evening finery. She saw him now as she had first seen him on the country road, with his air of self-containment. In this new setting of an elegant music room he exuded an undeniable air of mystery and attraction, like the force field around a treasure vault. With his wealth and his looks and his strong sense of presence, he was a prize – and surely irresistible to any woman in the room, married or unmarried.

The room came into sharper focus, and she had the answer to the one thing he knew to be true about her that no other woman would ever match. He knew for an absolute certainty that she had chosen him for himself alone and not for his wealth and title.

She still had a decision to make. If Miss Ashley was Rose, was she Darla?

Chapter Eighteen

If someone had asked Avery, even as recently as the year before, what he would do when he left the army, he would have said he would sow wild oats for as long as he could. If someone had asked him what he would do if he were also handed a great fortune, he would have said he would sow those wild oats in magnificent style. But now he was a changed man. The gut-wrenching effects of Waterloo had hollowed him out and left him open to transformation. The weight of his new responsibilities had compressed every muscle, especially his heart, and given him new kind of sober strength. Before he had taken no interest in politics. Now he was considering taking his seat in the House of Lords, which terrifying step would require him to examine his soul to discover whether he was a Tory or a Whig and to test whether a peer could choose for himself. Before he had never imagined wanting a wife. Now he wanted one, and it was a deep want for his other half, his better half, his rib. He wanted Beatrice Castle, who was frank both in her liking of him and her desire for him.

He knew from his sister, who had it on the word of Miss Hallowell, that Miss Castle was the Talk of the Town, having amply passed the test at the musicale. It was damnable to think that if he did not marry her, no one would guess she had turned him down. It would only be assumed he did not ask her, and she, after having had her brief turn in the spotlight on Society's stage, would return to Italy to nurse her broken heart under the Tuscan sun.

When they left the musicale she had seemed in a very compliant mood, and his spirits had soared. When he didn't hear from her the next day, he fell into soul-chilling despair. All he could do was wait.

The wait came to an end two mornings later upon receiving a note from Miss Castle asking him to meet her at Mivart's. He dressed with care then walked out into Portman Square and left his neighborhood on foot. He declined the use of one of his carriages. With the family crest emblazoned on the panels, he was sure to be recognized bowling through town and then perhaps to be followed. Traveling in one of his open carriages posed a similar danger. So he made his way in a direction opposite to his destination and hired a hackney carriage on George Street whereupon he gave the driver the address on Brook Street.

The sky was robin's egg blue and the air wafted with the sweetness of early honeysuckle tumbling over garden fences. These good omens lifted his spirits. However, upon entering the hotel and crossing the black-and-white tiled floor of the foyer, fingers of trepidation suddenly pinched along his spine. A young man at Reception pointed him toward a side parlor. The moment he entered the room and Miss Castle stood up and came toward him, the pinching fingers relaxed. He saw his answer in her eyes, and his heart swelled. Love for her started at his feet and rose upward as pure and irresistible as a sudden welling of joyful laughter.

"Thank you for coming," she said, holding out both hands to him. He grasped them, and she led them to a silk settee where they arranged themselves side by side.

Still holding hands, she said, "I don't want to marry you."

He laughed in delight. "But you're going to do it anyway."

She colored up. How charming to see Miss Castle put to the blush! "I am," she said, a bit miffed he stole her thunder. "You see, I want you more than I don't want marriage."

"What tipped the balance?" he asked with polite interest.

"For one thing, people are just people, but that's hardly the point," she said and thereby dismissed the problem of Society, its rules and its hypocrisies as of minor importance. "To answer your question then, first, on my recent visits to Hartsfield I have thought more and more about babies, about having one." She looked at him in her forthright way. "It's better they come into the world with a father on hand."

He loved the way she spoke so freely about her desires. The feeling enveloped him, the one he had so consistently in her presence, the patient excitement that came full circle and melded with serenity. It was the primitive and arousing peace of being with his mate.

He replied, "That's a good start."

"Then I tried to imagine a physical relationship with a man other than you." She paused then said with wry twist of her mouth, "I failed miserably."

"I am very glad to hear it."

She retorted quickly, "And if I marry you, I will expect reciprocal fidelity."

"You have my solemn promise."

"I also like your sister."

"She returns your regard."

She smiled. "I suppose the three of us can help one other, then, in a situation none of us would freely choose."

He squeezed her hands. "To think you're the one woman of my acquaintance for whom my present position is a liability."

"Well, as to that, first I had to admit to myself I had a prejudice against the upper class then I had to overcome it." She shrugged. "The musicale was helpful in its way. But, to be honest, some of the people are perfectly awful. Miss Ashley, for instance. Well, her mother, at any rate."

"Miss Ashley?" he repeated. The name sounded familiar. "Who is she?"

"The Accredited Beauty."

"Oh, yes, now I remember."

"You've danced with her twice."

"Twice? I recall being maneuvered into dancing with her once." He shook his head to clear it. "What's wrong with her mother?"

"She seems to think her daughter's beauty is deserving of an offer of marriage from you."

He blinked. "I may not be entirely blameless in this world, nevertheless I do not think I deserve such a penance."

She chuckled. "Maybe Miss Ashley is not so bad. And maybe the mother only wants what she thinks is best for her daughter. All of this might make more sense to us if we had grown up in Society with all its expectations. And perhaps some of the awful people will become less awful over time."

He said wisely, "They're another one of the many things to adjust to."

She gave him a searching look. "Do you think it will be all right? You and me,

with my background and the original sin of our lie to the world?"

"Spoken like a vicar's daughter," he commented, "and it's only one lie. All the other stories being told around town about you are other people's inventions."

She sighed. "True. And very strange."

"Even stranger is that, given my rank, no one dares to ask me a question of a personal nature, so I am never confronted. And now here is an advantage of my position I had not realized I would prize so highly! I've already said that I imagine speculation about you will die down over time. Details of your past will become irrelevant, and a new mystery or scandal will appear to occupy inquiring minds."

"There's always the problem of Hartsfield."

He considered it. "The work you do there can only be held in esteem."

"I mean, I started it well before you inherited, making the location something of an extraordinary coincidence, once people find out about it."

"If people find out about it," he added then thought the matter through. Of course her work would eventually become known, and perhaps also the length of its operation. He recalled a detail from their conversation at her house on Curzon Street. "You mentioned that you had dealings with domestic agencies who staff grand houses. Would anyone in one of those agencies be likely to mention a Miss Castle to someone in a grand house?"

She laughed softly. "No, Hugo does my bidding on that score, and he does it in his name, not mine. I've always stayed, well, out of sight."

"For what reason?"

She held his gaze, with the smallest frown between her brows. "I don't know, really. It seemed wise somehow."

"Because you thought a titled gentleman would eventually ask you to marry him, and you needed to have the cleanest slate possible?"

"I will point out that no titled gentleman has asked for my hand. Set a condition, yes. Asked, no."

He laughed again. "I got your attention and your consent, so I'm satisfied. And now that I think of it, it seems you've done a good job of guarding your identity because you've been at this hotel quite some time and have not been found out."

"Yes, almost two weeks and not one glance amiss."

It had only been two weeks? It had felt like two months. "So, did it take meeting my sister for you to decide that our family is quite all right to join? And then realizing you could make the best of a musicale?"

"Well, in all honesty - "

"What I love best about you."

"- I was already making up my mind in January. Inching in the direction."

His brows rose in inquiry.

"During the final transfer payment." She looked at him with desire in her eyes. "You should know my house on Curzon Street shares a back wall with the White Chrysanthemum on Market Mews."

He imagined the layout of those streets. "I see."

"Yes, and there is a door on the third floor in that wall. Before the final payment, I made an offer to the buyer to have the door locked only from my side on condition I could use it when I wanted in exchange for lowering the final price."

“And the buyer accepted?”

She nodded.

He felt a thrill. “And you had me in mind?”

“No one else.” She was almost shy when she added, “You know, just in case down the line, we want to visit.”

He had no desire to think that far ahead. “Let’s repair to Tontham at once and tie the knot. We can have a more public celebration in town afterwards. In the meantime, my love,” he said, leaning into her, “we should have our first kiss.”

He pulled her into his arms and put his lips to hers. The kiss became a kind of trance, a small and perfect holiday, where he put down his burdens and embraced the joy of being alive. Between kisses he asked, “What room are you thinking of?”

“Room? Oh! Two, I think. Yes, Room Two.”

“Me, I’m partial to Five.”

“You would be, of course. I know what you want.”

“That’s right. Pure devotion.”

The End