

Whitney, My Love Novel Chapter 7 To 10

Chapter Seven

EXACTLY FOUR WEEKS AFTER THE ARMANDS' MASQUERADE, Matthew Bennett left his office and stepped into a splendid burgundy-lacquered coach with the Westmoreland ducal crest emblazoned in gold on the door panel. He placed his deerskin case containing the reports on Miss Whitney Allison Stone on the seat beside him, then stretched his long legs out in the duke's luxurious coach.

For nearly a century, Matthew's forebears had been entrusted with the private legal affairs of the Westmoreland family, but since Clayton Westmoreland's principal residences were in England, it was Matthew's father in the London office of the firm who was personally acquainted with the duke. Until now, Matthew's only contact with the current Duke of Claymore had been in writing, and Matthew was especially anxious to make a good impression today.

The coach had been climbing steadily, winding gently around green sloping hills splashed with wildflowers, when the French country house of the duke finally came into view. Matthew gazed at it in wonder. Situated atop the verdant hills, the sweeping two-story stone-and-glass structure was surrounded by terraces overlooking the panorama that stretched below in every direction.

At the front of the house, the coach drew to a stop, and Matthew picked up his case and walked slowly up the terraced stone steps. He presented his card to the liveried butler and was shown into a spacious library lined with books which were recessed into shallow alcoves in the walls.

Alone for the moment, Matthew looked with awe at the priceless artifacts reposing on gleaming rosewood tables. A magnificent Rembrandt hung above the marble fireplace, and part of one wall was covered with a glorious collection of Rembrandt's etchings. One long wall was entirely constructed of huge panes of glass with French doors opening out onto a broad stone terrace that afforded a breathtaking view of the surrounding countryside.

At the opposite end of the room, angled toward the windows, was a massive oak desk, intricately carved around the edges with leaves and vines. Mentally, Matthew placed the desk as late sixteenth century and, judging from the splendid craftsmanship, it had probably graced a royal palace. Walking across the thick Persian carpet, Matthew sat down in one of the high-backed leather chairs facing the desk, and placed the deerskin case on the floor beside him.

The library doors opened, and Matthew came swiftly to his feet, stealing a quick, appraising look at the dark-haired man upon whom his future depended. Clayton

Westmoreland was in his early thirties, uncommonly tall, and decidedly handsome. There was a vigorous purposefulness in his long, quick strides that bespoke an active, athletic life, rather than the indolence and overindulgence that Matthew normally ascribed to wealthy gentlemen of the peerage. An aura of carefully restrained power, of forcefulness, emanated from him.

A pair of penetrating gray eyes leveled on him, and Matthew swallowed a little nervously as the duke came around behind the desk and took his seat. The duke nodded at the chair across the desk, inviting Matthew to be seated, and said with calm authority, "Shall we begin, Mr. Bennett?"

"Certainly," Matthew said. He cleared his throat. "As you instructed, your grace, we have made inquiries into the young woman's family and background. Miss Stone is the daughter of Susan Stone-who died when Miss Stone was five years old-and Martin Albert Stone, who is still living. She was born on June thirtieth, eighteen hundred, at the family home near the village of Morsham, approximately seven hours from London.

"The Stone estate is small but productive, and Martin Stone has lived in the usual style of the landed gentry. However, about four years ago, his financial situation altered drastically. If you recall, that was when part of England was deluged with weeks of rainfall. Estates such as Stone's which did not have adequate drainage facilities suffered badly, and Stone apparently suffered more than most because there was no alternate means of supporting the estate, such as livestock.

"Our reports indicate that Stone then made some extremely large and unwise investments in a variety of risky ventures and, when those failed, he doubled and tripled his investments in more ventures of a similar nature-apparently in the hope of recouping his losses. These ventures were all disastrous, and two years ago, he mortgaged his estate to gain enough capital to make the last-and largest-of the ventures. He invested all the funds in a colonial shipping company. Unfortunately, that failed as well.

"At this time, he is heavily mortgaged and deeply in debt, not only to the cent-percenters in London, but to the local shopkeepers as well. The estate is quickly falling into disrepair, and there is only a skeleton staff of servants left on the place."

Reaching into the deerskin case, Matthew extracted a sheaf of papers. "This is an itemized list of his creditors, although there are bound to be more that we didn't discover in the brief period of time we had to make our investigation." He slid the papers across the surface of the ornate desk, then waited for some reaction from the duke.

Leaning back in his chair, Clayton Westmoreland scanned the lists, his face impassive. "How bad?" he asked when he finished reading the last page.

"Altogether, I'd say he's about \diamond 100,000 in debt."

The staggering sum made no apparent impression on the duke, who handed the papers back to Matthew and abruptly switched the subject. "What were you able to learn about the girl?"

Who, Matthew wondered as he extracted the file marked "W. Stone," should know more about the girl than the man whose mistress she was about to become? Although the duke had not actually said it, Matthew had already guessed that Claymore intended to take the young woman under discussion as his mistress, providing her with a comfortable establishment and an income of her own. He interpreted the duke's interest in the girl's family as curiosity over what kind of opposition, if any, he might expect from them.

To Matthew's legal mind, Stone's appalling financial situation already made the outcome of the matter a foregone conclusion: Martin Stone would have to accept this chance to turn over the responsibility for his daughter's support to Clayton Westmoreland. What choice had he? He could hardly continue to clothe her and keep her amid the Quality for much longer. If Stone's concern was for the girl's reputation, his own was in far more jeopardy than hers. Once his creditors discovered his dire circumstances, as they would at any time now, he would be facing not only disgrace, but an unpleasant stay in debtor's prison.

Matthew flushed as he realized that he'd been silently staring at the girl's open file, and he began at once. "While it was difficult to learn, much of a personal nature, without awakening unwanted suspicion, we did discover that Miss Stone was considered rather a difficult child, of an... er . . . unpredictable disposition. She is apparently well-read and uncommonly well-educated by a long string of tutors. She speaks fluent French, of course, as well as being proficient in Greek-enough so that she occasionally assists her uncle as translator during social functions where Greek diplomats are present. She reads Italian, Latin, and German; she may also speak them, but we aren't certain."

Matthew hesitated, feeling utterly absurd for telling Lord Westmoreland what he must already know. "Go on," the duke said with a faint smile at Matthew's obvious discomfort.

Nodding uncomfortably, Matthew continued. "Many of the individuals we contacted mentioned that there was considerable dissension between the young lady and her father.

A few of them put the blame at his door, but most sympathized with Martin Stone as an unfortunate man who had fathered a rebellious, unbiddable child. At the age of fourteen, Miss Stone evidently developed an ... er ... rather violent infatuation for a gentleman named Paul Sevarin. Sevarin was ten years her senior and apparently he

was no more pleased with Miss Stone's girlish attachment to him than her father was. Because of that, and because Stone apparently couldn't deal with her any other way, her father eventually sent her to France with her aunt and uncle when she was nearly sixteen. They then presented her to French Society at the customary age of seventeen. Since that time, our sources indicate that she had enjoyed an extraordinary popularity here. Of course, if her father's financial circumstances and her lack of a dowry were known, that situation would change drastically," Matthew conjectured aloud, then he glanced apologetically at the duke, and returned to the facts at hand-

"Miss Stone has been on the verge of receiving numerous offers of marriage, but has discouraged those suitors as soon as their intentions became apparent to her. Those gentlemen who persisted to the point of actually speaking to her uncle, Lord Edward Gilbert, were turned down by him, apparently on behalf of Martin Stone. Her manners are reported to be perfectly acceptable to society, although somewhat out of the ordinary. Is there some mistake in this?" Matthew inquired when the duke burst out laughing.

"No. No mistake," Clayton chuckled. "I'd say your information is entirely accurate." In his memory, he could still see her green eyes glowing with laughter as she scoffed at noble titles-his in particular. "Is there anything else?" he asked finally.

"Only a few remarks, your grace. Her uncle, Lord Edward Gilbert, as you already know, is attached to the British Consulate here and enjoys an unblemished reputation. Miss Stone is reportedly on excellent terms with him, and with his wife, Lady Anne Gilbert. At present, it is the consensus of opinion that Nicolas DuVille is on the verge of offering for her hand-an offer which Lord Gilbert will undoubtedly find most acceptable. The DuVilles, as I'm sure you know, are one of France's leading families, and Nicolas is their son and heir."

Matthew closed the file. "That's all we were able to team in the time you allotted us, your grace."

Leaving the solicitor to his own thoughts, Clayton got up and walked over to the wide sweep of windows overlooking the rolling green hills. Crossing his arms over his chest, he leaned a shoulder against the window frame and gazed at the magnificent view, while he considered for the last time the plan which, if put into words now, would become a reality.

Time after time, whenever he was in France and had seen Whitney, he had been drawn to her, laughing silently at some of the setdowns she gave her too persistent suitors. Twice they had been introduced; the first time she was too young for him to consider, and the second time she had been surrounded by a group of beaux all vying for her attention. She had nicked a distracted glance in his direction without really looking at him or listening to his name.

After that, he had avoided further contact with her, sensing that Whitney would require considerable time and courtship to lure into his arms. Of time, Clayton had little. When it came to courtship, he could not recall ever having had to actively court a woman in his adult life, at least not a reluctant woman. They were all too ready and eager to court him.

And then, four weeks ago, he had stood in the Armands' garden, drinking in her presence and fighting down the insane impulse to bend his head and slowly, endlessly, kiss the irreverent laughter from her soft, inviting lips, to carry her into the darkness and make love to her right there.

She was a natural temptress, alluring and provocative, with the smile of an angel, the slender, voluptuous body of a goddess, and an unspoiled charm that made him grin whenever he thought of her. And she had a sense of humor, an irreverent contempt for the absurd, that matched his own.

Clayton gave up trying to understand his reasons for the step he was about to take. He wanted her, that was reason enough. She was warm and witty and elusive as a damned butterfly. She would never bore him as other women had; he knew it with the wisdom born of years of experience with the fair sex.

His mind made up, he turned and strode briskly to the desk. "I will need some documents prepared, and there will have to be a transfer of a considerable amount of money when Stone accepts my offer."

"If Stone accepts it," Matthew corrected automatically.

The Westmoreland brow quirked in sardonic amusement. "He'll accept it."

Despite his nervousness today, Matthew was a respected legal advisor who had schooled himself never to show any emotion when dealing with delicate matters of a client. Nevertheless, when his grace began to dictate the terms under which a staggering sum of money was being offered to Martin Stone, Matthew raised his head and gaped in astonishment at the duke.

Clayton stood at the windows, absently watching the coach bearing Matthew Bennett back to Paris make its winding way down the hillside. Already he was impatient to have everything completed. He wanted Whitney, and he wanted her immediately, but he'd be damned if he'd court her in France, standing in line, playing the fop and bowing like an ass. That he would not do for any woman, even Miss Stone. Besides, he'd been away from England too long already. In order to manage his business affairs, he needed to be closer to London.

Since the Stone estate was only seven hours from the city, he could manage his business and his courtship very nicely from somewhere near her home. That being the

case, he decided to have Whitney's father summon her back to England as soon as his signature was on the documents and the money had changed hands.

Not for one moment did Clayton think Martin Stone would refuse his offer, nor did he have the slightest doubt of his own ability to lure Whitney into his arms.

What did concern him was the reported dissension between Whitney and her father—there was a small chance that if she learned of the arrangements to soon, she might rebel against it merely to defy Martin Stone. Clayton's instincts warned him that if Whitney were ever forced into the position of opposing him, she could become a very determined young adversary. And he didn't want to do battle with her, he wanted to make love to her.

Then too, there was the added complication of his identity and the personal notoriety that went with it. He rather fancied the idea of a charming country courtship, but how could he manage that with everyone bowing and scraping and cautiously keeping their distance. And the moment the newspapers discovered he was living in a remote country shire, the conjecture over what he was doing there would create a furor, and the villagers would watch every move he made with fanatical curiosity, particularly when he began to pay attention to Whitney.

Since Whitney had such a low opinion of the nobility—and dukes in particular—Clayton began to wonder if it might be wise to keep not only the arrangement with her father, but his identity as well, a secret from her until he had won her over.

Seven days later, Matthew returned to the duke's country house in France and was shown out onto a wide veranda where Westmoreland was seated at an ornamental iron table, working on some papers, his back to the panoramic view. "Will you join me in a brandy, Matthew?" he said without looking up.

"Yes, thank you, your grace," murmured Matthew, pleased and amazed by the duke's use of his given name and the friendly offer of a brandy. The Duke of Claymore glanced over his shoulder at the manservant hovering near the stone balustrade, and the drinks were produced without a word being spoken. A few minutes later, his grace shoved his papers aside and regarded Matthew, who had taken the chair across from him at the table.

Like the servant, Matthew found himself responding to an unspoken command, retrieving the documents from his case and handing them over. "As you requested, I included the provision that you will assume financial responsibility for Miss Stone's expenses. Did you wish to stipulate any maximum figure?"

"No, I'll assume complete responsibility for her," Clayton murmured absently, his gaze moving down the pages. After several minutes, he laid the documents aside and grinned at Matthew. "Well," he said, "what do you think?"

"What does Miss Stone think?" Matthew countered, grinning back at the duke.

"What Miss Stone thinks won't be known for a little time yet. She knows nothing of this. For that matter, she knows nothing of me."

Matthew concealed his shock by taking a fortifying swallow of the excellent brandy. "In that case, I wish you luck with the father and the young lady."

The duke waved the offer of luck aside as if he didn't need it, and leaned back in his chair. "I'll be leaving for England within the week to discuss this matter with Martin Stone. Assuming he agrees, I'll need a place to stay nearby. Notify your father in the London office to locate a comfortable one for me, will you? A modest place," he emphasized to Matthew's further astonishment. "If possible, no more than a half-hour's ride from the Stone estate. I don't want to spend any more time than necessary settling matters with Miss Stone, and I haven't any intention of wasting it traveling between her father's place and mine."

"A modest place, no more than a half-hour's ride from Stone's," repeated Matthew dazedly.

The man's obvious bewilderment brought a glint of amusement to Clayton's eyes. "Correct. And negotiate the lease in the name Westland, not Westmoreland. Once my staff and I are installed, we will keep to ourselves as much as possible, and I will pass myself off as a new neighbor, Clayton Westland."

"Surely not to Miss Stone?" Matthew said.

"Especially to Miss Stone," Clayton chuckled.

Chapter Eight

ONE MONTH LATER, WILSON, THE GILBERTS' DIGNIFIED BUTLER, padded down the hall to Lord Gilbert's study and handed him the mail. On the top of the stack was a letter from England. Five minutes later, the door to Lord Gilbert's study was flung open and he bellowed at the butler, "Have Lady Gilbert join me here at once! Don't dawdle, man. Hurry, I said," he called after the harassed servant who was already sprinting down the hall, his black coattails flapping behind him.

"What is it, Edward?" Anne said, flying into her husband's study in answer to his urgent summons.

"This!" said Edward, thrusting the letter from Martin Stone at her. Anne looked from her husband's white face to the signature on the single sheet of paper in her hand. "He's sent for Whitney?" she guessed in a tortured voice.

"He says he will reimburse me for all her expenses during the last four years, as soon as he receives an accounting from me," Edward said furiously. "And he's sent a

blasted fortune along with this letter, for her to spend 'on clothing and trinkets' before she returns. Who the devil does he think he is? He hasn't sent a penny to cover her expenses in all this time. That bastard! He'll get no accounting from me, and I will see that she returns in style. He can shove his money precisely-"

"Whitney is going home," Anne whispered brokenly, sinking into a chair. "I-I had deluded myself into thinking he'd forgotten about her." She brightened. "I have it! Write Martin at once and hint of a match with Nicolas DuVile. That would buy us time."

"Read the letter, Madame. He says as plainly and as rudely as can be that she's to leave here in one month to the day, without excuses or delay."

Anne did as he said, her eyes moving dully over the lines. "He says she is to spend the remaining time saying farewell to her friends and visiting her favorite modistes and milliners." She tried to look encouraged. "He must have changed in the last four years-he'd never have thought of Whitney requiring time to order her clothing here in Paris, where fashions are so far advanced. Edward," she said, "do you suppose that he could have received an offer for Whitney from that young man she adored so much when she was a girl?"

"He's received no marriage proposal," Edward snapped, "or he would have been gloating about it in this damned letter, thinking he had succeeded where he believes we've failed." He turned his back to his wife. "You may as well tell her now and have done with it. I'll be up in a bit."

Whitney stood numbly, trying to assimilate the news she thought she'd longed to hear. "I-I'm happy to be going home, Aunt Anne," she managed finally. "It's just that. . ." Her voice trailed off.

Happy to be going home? Terrified of going home! Terrified that now the chance was being given to her, she might fail. It was one thing to languish in Paris, surrounded by men who flattered and admired her, another to go home and try to make Paul see her with their eyes. There was her father to cope with, and Margaret Merryton, and everyone's mothers, who had always made her feel lower than an insect. But here, there was Aunt Anne and Uncle Edward who loved her and laughed with her, who made her life warm and happy.

Her aunt turned her face to the windows, but Whitney saw a tear trickle down her cheek. She bit her lip; if Aunt Anne had misgivings about her returning to England, then surely it was too soon to go. She wasn't ready to confront everyone yet. She turned to the mirror, hoping to find some reassurance in her appearance. In Paris, gentlemen said she was beautiful. Would Paul think so? The mirror promptly quashed that idea! It was happening already, she realized in panic. Before she even left, she could feel her facade falling away. She was plain, awkward, too tall-even her fingers

were fidgeting nervously as they used to do. And there--on the bridge of her nose-she could still see faint traces of the freckles she loathed. Oh the devil! Whitney thought, suddenly impatient with herself. Freckles do not reappear before one's eyes; fingers do not have to fidget, and she would not, would not, begin inventorying her faults and shortcomings as she had in the old days!

Her stomach ceased its frantic churning. Inside of her, something else began to blossom: hope. Her lips curved into a soft smile. I am going home, she thought. I am going home to Paul-home to show everyone how much I've really changed. I am actually going home!

But going home also meant leaving her beloved aunt and uncle.

She turned away from the mirror and saw her aunt's shoulders shaking with silent weeping. "I feel as if I'm being severed in half," Anne choked.

"I love you, Aunt Anne," Whitney whispered, hot tears rushing to her eyes and streaming down her cheeks. "I love you so much." Aunt Anne opened her arms, and Whitney fled into them, trying to comfort and be comforted.

Pausing outside Whitney's bedroom, Edward squared his shoulders and carefully schooled his desolate features into a fixed, bright smile. Claspng his hands behind his back, he strolled into the room. "Having a good time, ladies?" he ventured with forced joviality, glancing from one weeping woman to the other.

Two teary, anguished faces gaped at him in utter disbelief. "Having a good. . . ?" Anne echoed incredulously. She looked at Whitney and Whitney looked at her. Suddenly they began to giggle, then the giggles burst into great, gusty laughs. "Yes ... er ... well, good. Glad to see it," Edward murmured, bewildered by his ladies' excessively unstable behavior. Then he cleared his throat. "We'll miss you, child. You've been a blessing and a joy to us both."

Whitney's gaiety fled, and fresh tears stung her eyes. "Oh Uncle Edward," she whispered brokenly, "I shall never, never love any man as much as I love you."

To his acute dismay, Edward felt his eyes misting. He opened his arms wide, and his niece came into them. When at last the storm of emotions had passed, the three of them stood looking sheepishly at one another, each clutching a handkerchief. Edward was the first to speak. "Well now, England isn't the end of the world, is it?"

"It-it isn't exactly next door, either," Whitney said, dabbing at her eyes.

"You have friends there," Edward reminded her. "And of course, that young man you admired so much is there too-the blond fellow who didn't have brains enough to recognize a jewel when she was right under his nose. What was his name?"

"Paul," Whitney provided with a teary smile.

"The man's a fool-he should have snatched you up before." Edward paused, then watching her very closely, he said, "I expect he will now."

"I hope so," Whitney said fervently.

"I rather thought you did, child," he said with an I-told-you-so look at Anne. "In fact, I've often wondered if the reason you've never found any of your suitors here acceptable is because you've always wanted to go back to England and bring Mm up to scratch. That's what you're going to do, isn't it?"

"I intend to try," Whitney admitted, puzzled because her uncle suddenly looked like a small mischievous boy.

"In that case," he continued, "I expect you'll get yourself betrothed before the snow falls."

"If I can," Whitney said, smiling eagerly.

Jamming his hands into his pants pockets, he seemed to consider an idea. "I rather think at a time like that, a lass should have a woman to advise her. It might take a lot of planning to snare such a laggard as . . . er . . . ?"

"Paul," Whitney provided breathlessly.

"Right, Paul. You know my dear," he said thoughtfully, "you might like to have your aunt come with you." He peered over his spectacles at Whitney. "Would that please you?"

"Yes!" she shrieked, laughing. "Yes, yes, yes!"

Edward hugged her and looked over her shoulder at his beaming wife. The smile of gratitude that she gave him was compensation enough for his sacrifice. "I've been postponing a journey to Spain," he said. "When the two of you leave, I'll be about the

kingdom's business there. After a stop or two along the way, I'll come to England to congratulate that laggard you'll be betrothed to, and I'll bring your aunt back home with me when I leave."

Now that he had the satisfaction of outmaneuvering Martin Stone by sending Anne along to be certain Whitney got off to the right start, Edward relented on his original decision about the extravagant sum Martin had sent for Whitney to spend. Accordingly, his ladies set out on a round of shopping excursions which began in the morning and ended with just enough time to dress for the evening's festivities or collapse in bed.

Nicolas DuVille's parents held a lavish party in Whitney's honor the night before Lady Anne and Whitney were to leave. All evening, Whitney dreaded saying goodbye to Nicki, but when the time came, he made it relatively easy.

They had stolen a few moments alone together in one of the anterooms of his parents' spacious house. Nicki was standing by the fireplace, one shoulder propped against the mantle, idly contemplating the drink in his hand. "I'll miss you, Nicki," Whitney said softly, unable to endure the silence.

He looked up, his expression amused. "Will you, cherie?" Before she could answer, he added, "I shall not miss you for very long."

Whitney's lips trembled with surprised laughter. "What a perfectly unchivalrous thing to say!"

"Chivalry is for callow youths and old men," Nicki told her with a teasing inflection in his voice. "However, I shan't miss you for long, because I intend to come to England in a few months."

Whitney shook her head, and in sheer desperation said, "Nicki, there is someone else. At home, I mean. At least, I think there is. His name is Paul and . . ." She trailed off, bewildered by Nicki's slow grin.

"Has he ever come to France to see you?" he asked carefully.

"No, he wouldn't even think of such a thing. You see, I was different then-you know, childish, and he only remembers me as a reckless, unruly, inelegant young girl who . . . Why are you grinning like that?"

"Because I am delighted," Nicki said, laughing softly. "Delighted to learn, after so many weeks of wondering who my rival is, that he is some English idiot whom you haven't seen in four years, and who hadn't sense enough to anticipate the woman you would become. Go home, cherie," he chuckled, putting his glass down and drawing her tightly against him. "You will soon discover that in matters of the heart, memories are much kinder than reality. Then, in a few months, I will come, and you will listen to what I wish to say." 

Whitney knew he intended to declare himself, just as she knew it would be futile to argue the point now. Her memories would not prove better than reality, because none of her memories were good ones. But she didn't want to explain to Nicki how shockingly she had behaved, and why Paul couldn't possibly have imagined she would turn out to be a presentable young woman.

Besides, Nicki wouldn't have listened; he was already bending his head to claim her lips in a long, violently sweet\

Chapter Nine

ENGLAND 1880

IN THE DEEPENING DUSK OF A SPLENDID SEPTEMBER DAY, Whitney gazed out the coach window at the achingly familiar scene. She was only a few miles from home.

Uncle Edward had insisted that they travel in style, which meant that, in addition to their coach, there were two more, heavily loaded with trunks and valises, and a fourth carrying Aunt Anne's maid and Clarissa, Whitney's own maid. Besides the four coachmen and four postillions, there were six outriders, three in front and three bringing up the rear. Altogether they combined to make a rather spectacular caravan, and Whitney wished that Paul could see her returning in such grand style.

The coach swayed as they turned north onto the private drive leading up to her home. Whitney's hands shook as she drew on her lilac gloves so that she would look absolutely perfect when she saw her father.

"Nervous?" Anne smiled, watching her.

"Yes. How do I look?"



Lady Anne gave her a thorough appraisal from the top of her head where a fragile filigree clip held her heavy mahogany tresses off her forehead, past her glowing face, to the fashionable lilac traveling costume she was wearing. "Perfect," she said.

Lady Anne pulled on her own gloves, feeling almost as nervous as Whitney looked. In order to eliminate the possibility that Martin Stone might somehow object to her accompanying Whitney home, Edward had decided the best course was for her to arrive unexpectedly with Whitney, leaving Martin with no choice but to make her welcome. At the time, Anne had recognized the wisdom in her husband's thinking, but as her confrontation with Martin approached, she was miserably uncomfortable at being an uninvited houseguest.

Their coaches drew up before the wide steps at the front of the house. The footman opened the door and let down the steps, and both women watched Martin making his decorous way toward the coach. Whitney gathered her skirts so that she could step down and threw a smiling look at Anne.

From within the coach, Anne watched eagerly as Martin came face to face with the gorgeous, elegant young woman who was smiling dazzlingly at him. In a stiff, self-conscious voice, he spoke to the daughter he hadn't seen in four years. "Child," said he, "you've grown even taller."

"Either that, Papa," Whitney returned gravely, "or you have shrunk."

Lady Anne's muffled laugh announced her presence in the coach, and she reluctantly climbed down to confront her host. She had not expected effusive cordiality-Martin was never effusive, and rarely cordial-but neither had she expected him to gape at her, while his expression went from thunderstruck to alarmed to irritated. "Good of you to see Whitney home," he managed finally. "When d'you plan to leave?"

"Aunt Anne is going to remain with me for two or three months, until I'm settled again," Whitney interjected hastily "Isn't that kind of her?"

"Yes, kind," he agreed, looking definitely irked. "Why don't you both relax before supper . . . have a rest, or supervise the unpacking, or something. I have a note to write. I will see you later," he added, already starting for the house.

Whitney was torn between mortification over the way her father was treating her aunt, and a nostalgic joy at being home again. As they mounted the staircase, she let her gaze wander over the familiar old house with its mellow, oak-panelled walls lined with English landscapes and trained portraits of her ancestors. Her favorite painting, a lively hunt scene in the cool morning mist, was in its place of honor on the balcony, hanging between a pair of Chippendale sconces. Everything was the same, yet different. There seemed to be three times as many servants as they'd ever had before, and the house shone from the painstaking labor of many extra hands. Every inch of parquet floor, every bit of panelled wall was glowing with newly applied polish. The candleholders lining the hall were gleaming, and the carpet beneath her feet was new.

In the doorway to her old bedroom, Whitney stopped and caught her breath. Her room had been completely redone in her absence. She smiled with pleasure as she looked at her bed, its canopy and coverlet of ivory satin with threads of gold and pale orange. Matching draperies hung at the windows. "Clarissa, doesn't it look wonderful?" she exclaimed, turning to her maid. But the plump, gray-haired woman was busily directing the footmen who were carrying in the trunks from the coaches. Whitney was too excited to rest, so she helped Clarissa and a new maid with the unpacking.

By mealtime, she had bathed and changed clothes, and the maids were nearly finished unpacking. Whitney went down the hallway to her aunt's room. The large guest suite had not been redone and looked shabby in comparison to other parts of the house. Whitney wanted to apologize to her aunt for it, and for her father's rude reception, but Aunt Anne stopped her with an understanding smile. "It doesn't matter, darling," she said. Linking her arm through Whitney's, they went downstairs.

Her father was waiting for them in the dining room, and Whitney vaguely noted that the chairs at the table had been reupholstered in rose velvet to match the new draperies that were pulled back with heavy tassels. Two footmen in immaculate uniforms were hovering near the sideboard, and another was pushing in a silver cart laden with covered dishes from the kitchen. "There seems to be a score of new servants in the house."

Whitney remarked to her father as he politely seated Anne at the table.

"We always needed them," he said brusquely. "The place had begun to look run down."

It had been four years since anyone had spoken to her in that tone, and Whitney stared at him in bewilderment. It was then, with the bright light from the chandelier above the table illuminating him, that she realized his hair had turned from black to gray in her absence, and that deep crevices now marked his forehead and grooved the sides of his mouth and eyes. He looked as if he had aged a decade in four years, she thought with a sharp pang. "Why are you staring at me?" he said shortly. He had always been this sharp with her in the old days, Whitney remembered sadly, but then he had had reason to be. Now that she was home, however, she didn't want them to fall into their old pattern of hostility. Softly she said, "I was noticing that your hair has turned gray."

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"Is that so surprising?" he retorted, but with less edge to his voice.

Very carefully, very deliberately, Whitney smiled at him, and as she did so, it occurred to her that she couldn't remember ever smiling at him before. "Yes," she said, her eyes twinkling. "If I didn't give you gray hair white I was growing up, I'm amazed mere years could do it."

Her father looked startled by her smiling reply, but he unbent a bit. "Suppose you know your friend Emily got herself a husband?" Whitney nodded, and he added, "She'd been out three seasons, and her father told me he'd all but despaired of ever seeing her suitably married. Now the match is the talk of the whole damn countryside!" His gaze levelled accusingly on Lady Anne, rebuking her for having failed to see Whitney suitably married.

Lady Anne stiffened and Whitney hastily tried to interject a teasing note into her voice. "Surely you haven't despaired of seeing me suitably married?" "Yes," he said bluntly. "I had." Pride demanded that Whitney tell him of the dozen splendid offers Uncle Edward had received for her hand; reason warned that her father would react violently to the discovery that, without consulting him, Uncle Edward had rejected those offers. Why was her father so cold and unapproachable? Whitney wondered unhappily. Could she ever hope to bridge the gulf between them? Putting her cup down, she gave him a warm, conspiratorial smile and said lightly, "If it would lessen your mortification at having an unwed daughter already out four seasons, Aunt Anne and I could have it whispered about that I declined offers from two baronets, an earl, a duke, and a prince!"

"Is this true, Madam?" he snapped at Aunt Anne. "Why wasn't I informed of these offers?"

"Of course, it isn't true," Whitney interceded, trying to keep the smile pasted on her face. "I've met only one real duke and one imposter-and I detested them both equally. I did meet a Russian prince, but he was already spoken for by the princess, and I doubt she'd give him up so that I could outdo Emily."

For a moment he stared at her, then said abruptly, "I'm having a little party for you tomorrow night."

Whitney felt a glow of warmth tingle through her that remained even when he irritably corrected: "Actually, it's not a little party, it's a damned circus with every Tom, Dick and Harry for miles around coming-an orchestra, and dancing, and all that rubbish!"

"It sounds . . . wonderful," Whitney managed to say, keeping her laughing eyes downcast.

"Emily is coming from London with her new husband. Everybody is coming."

His shifts of mood were so unpredictable that Whitney stopped trying to converse with him, and the rest of the meal progressed in wary silence. Not until dessert was nearly finished did he break the silence, and then his voice was so unnaturally loud that Whitney started. "We have a new neighbor," he almost boomed, then checked himself, cleared his throat, and spoke more naturally. "He'll be coming to your party too, I want you to meet him. Good-looking chap--a bachelor. Excellent man with a horse. Saw him out riding the other day."

Understanding dawned, and Whitney burst out laughing. "Oh Papa," she said, shaking her long, shining hair, "you don't have to start matchmaking-I'm not quite at my last prayers yet." Judging from his expression, her father didn't share her humor in the

matter, so Whitney tried to look dutifully solemn as she asked the name of their new neighbor.

"Clayton Westmor . . . Clayton Westland."

Lady Anne's spoon clattered to her plate and onto the table. She gazed with narrowed eyes at Martin Stone, who glared at her in return while his face turned a suspicious red.

After considering her father's stormy countenance, Whitney decided to rescue her aunt from his trying moods. Putting down her own spoon, she stood up. "I think Aunt Anne and I would both like to retire early after our journey, Father."

To her surprise, Lady Anne shook her head. "I would like to spend a few minutes with your father, dear. You go ahead."

"Yes," Martin echoed instantly. "Run along to bed, and your aunt and I will have a friendly chat."

When Whitney left, Martin curtly dismissed the footmen, then regarded Anne with a mixture of caution and annoyance. "You reacted very queerly to the mention of our neighbor's name, Madam."

Lady Anne inclined her head, watching him intently. "Whether or not my reaction was 'queer' depends upon whether or not his name is Clayton Westland-or Clayton Westmoreland. I warn you that if the man is Clayton Westmoreland, I shall recognize him the moment I see him, even though we've never been introduced."

"It is Westmoreland, if you must know," Martin snapped. "And there's a very simple explanation for his being here: He happens to be recovering from exhaustion-the result of an old ailment that sometimes troubles him."

That explanation was so ludicrous, Anne stared at him open-mouthed. "You're joking!"

"Dammit, do I look like I'm joking?" he hissed furiously.

"Do you actually believe that Banbury tale?" Anne exclaimed, not sure whether he might. "There are countless places where the Duke of Claymore would go, were he in need of a rest. The very last I can think of is here, with winter coming on."

"Be that as it may, I can only tell you what he told me. His grace feels the need to escape from the pressures of his life, and he has chosen to do it here. Since only I-and now you-know who he is, I trust that neither of us will deprive him of his privacy by giving his identity away."

Upstairs in the solitude of her rooms, Lady Anne sought to come to grips with the furor in her mind, feverishly, she thought back to the night of the Armands'

masquerade when Whitney had asked the name of the tall, gray-eyed man with Marie St. Allermain. Anne was absolutely positive the man had been the duke; it was common knowledge that the gorgeous St. Allermain was Claymore's mistress, and that she never honored any other man with her company. The duke, of course, was not so singular in his attentions, and frequently escorted other beautiful women when St. Allermain was on tour in Europe.

Very well, Anne thought, dismissing St. Allermain from her mind, Claymore had been at the masquerade, and Whitney had asked about him. But they couldn't have spent any time together, or Whitney would have known who he was without having to ask. And Claymore could not have followed Whitney here--he was here before she arrived. Therefore, it must be mere coincidence that Whitney had inquired about him at the Armands', and he was now in quiet seclusion here.

Lady Anne felt much better, but only for an instant. Tomorrow night Clayton Westmoreland and Whitney would be introduced to each other. Whitney would attract him, of that Anne had no doubt. What if he chose to pursue her? Anne shuddered, then stood up, and her feminine jaw was hardened with resolve. She had no desire to make an enemy of the powerful Duke of Claymore by giving his identity away, but if she suspected that Whitney might be falling victim to his legendary charm and good looks, she would reveal not only his identity to Whitney, but a full accounting of his past female conquests and behavior!

Not for one moment would Anne allow herself to hope that Claymore might meet Whitney and tumble into love with her, ignore the fact that she was neither wealthy (by his standards) nor of aristocratic lineage, and offer her marriage. No indeed! There were hundreds of embarrassed mamas with heartbroken daughters who'd been foolish enough to hope that!

Lady Anne undressed and went to bed, but Clayton Westmoreland's presence in the district kept her lying awake for hours. Nor could Whitney sleep. She was dreamily contemplating tomorrow night's party, when Paul would see her for the first time, elegantly gowned and grown to womanhood.

Three miles away, the objects of both their* thoughts were together at Clayton's temporary home, relaxing over a brandy after a game of cards. Stretching his legs toward the fire, Paul savored the taste of the amber liquid in his glass. "Are you planning to attend the Stone affair tomorrow night?" he asked.

Clayton's expression was guarded. "Yes."

"Wouldn't miss it, myself," Paul chuckled. "Unless Whitney's done a complete turnabout, it should be an entertaining evening."

"Unusual name-Whitney," Clayton remarked with just the right degree of mild curiosity to encourage his guest to continue.

"It's a family name. Her father was bent on having a boy, as I understand it, and he hung the name on her anyway. He nearly got his wish, too. She could swim like a fish, climb like a monkey, and handle a horse better than any female alive. She showed up in men's pants one day-another, she set off on a raft saying that she was sailing for America on an adventure."

"What happened?"

"She came to me end of the pond," Paul said, grinning. "To give her credit, the chit has-had-a pair of eyes that were something to behold, the greenest green you'll ever see." Paul gazed into the fire, smiling with an old memory. "When she left for France four years ago, she asked me to wait for her. First proposal I ever got."

Dark brows lifted over inscrutable gray eyes. "Did you accept?"

"Hardly!" Paul laughed, taking a long swallow of brandy. "She was barely out of the school room and determined to compete with Elizabeth Ashton. If Elizabeth came down with a case of mumps, Whitney wanted a worse case. God! She was a tangle-haired ruffian. Never conformed to a single rule of propriety in her life." Paul fell silent, remembering the day she had left for France, when he had brought her the little pendant. But / don't want to be just your friend, she had pleaded desperately. The smile faded from his face. "For her father's sake," he said with feeling, "I hope she's changed." Clayton eyed Sevarin with amusement, but said absolutely nothing.

After his guest had left, Clayton relaxed back in his chair and thoughtfully swirled the brandy in his glass. At best, this masquerade of his was risky, and the more people he came into contact with, the greater his chances of being discovered.

Yesterday, he had received a jolt when he learned that the Emily Archibald he'd been hearing so much about was married to a remote acquaintance of his. That problem had been handled with a five-minute private meeting with Michael Archibald. Not for a moment had the baron believed his explanation about "needing a rest," Clayton knew,

but Michael was too much of a gentleman to pry, and honorable enough to keep Clayton's identity secret.

Lady Anne Gilbert's arrival with Whitney today was another unforeseen complication, but according to Martin Stone's note, Lady Anne had accepted the explanation that he was here for a rest. Clayton stood up and dismissed those incidents. If his identity was revealed, he would be deprived of the pleasure of pursuing Whitney as an ordinary country gentleman, but the legal agreement was already signed, and the money accepted by Stone who, from the looks of things, was busily spending as much of it as he could. Therefore, Clayton's ultimate objective was absolutely secure.

Chapter Ten

WHITNEY THREW OPEN THE WINDOWS AND INHALED THE wonderful fresh country air. While Clarissa helped her into a chic turquoise riding habit, Whitney's traitorous mind suggested again and again that she pay a morning call on Paul. Each time, she firmly thrust the notion aside. She would ride over and see Emily.

The stables where the horses were kept was situated down a path and off to the left, screened from view of the main house by a tall boxwood hedge. Twenty stalls ran the length of the building on both sides. A wide, overhanging roofline provided shade and protection to the building's equine occupants. Halfway there, Whitney stopped to let her gaze rove appreciatively over the lovely, familiar landscape.

In the distance a newly whitewashed fence stretched in a broad oval, marking the boundary of the timing track where her grandfather used to test the speed of his horses before deciding which to take to the races. Behind the track, hills rolled gently at first, dotted with oak and sycamore trees, then became steeper, ending in a densely wooded rise along the northeast boundary of the property.

As Whitney approached the stable, she was amazed to see that every stall along this side was occupied. A brass name-plate was bolted to each door, and Whitney stopped at the last stall on the corner, glancing at the name on the plate.

"YOU must be Passing Fancy," she said to the beautiful bay mare as she stroked her satiny neck. "What a pretty name you have."

"Still talking to horses, I see," chuckled a voice behind her.

Whitney swung around, beaming at the ramrod-straight figure of Thomas, her father's head groom. Thomas had been her girlhood confidant and a sympathetic witness to some of her most infamous outbursts of temper and unhappiness. "I can't believe how full the stable is," she said after they had "What on earth do we do with all these horses?"

"Exercise them mostly. But don't stand out here. I've something to show you." Wonderful smells of oil and leather welcomed Whitney as she stepped into the cool stable, bunking to adjust to the dim light. At the end of the corridor, two men were attempting to soothe a magnificent Mack stallion who was crosstied, while a third tried to trim his hooves. The stallion was a flurry of movement, shaking and tossing his head, rearing the few inches off the ground that the slack in the ropes allowed. "Dangerous Crossing," announced Thomas proudly. "And a right fitting name for him, too."

Already Whitney could feel those splendid muscles flexing beneath her. "Is he broken to ride?"

"Sometimes," Thomas chuckled. "But most of the time he tries to break the rider. Moodiest animal in the world. One day you think he's ready to give in and start responding, the next he'll try to rub you off on the fences. Gets himself all worked up over something, and he'll charge like he's half bull." Thomas raised his crop to point to another stall and the frenzied horse tripled his efforts to break free.

"Whoa! Easy now. Easy," gasped one of the struggling stableboys. "Master Thomas, could you put that crop behind you?"

Quickly tucking the crop behind him with an apologetic look at the sweating stableboy, Thomas explained to Whitney, "This animal hates the sight of the crop. George there tried to back him off a fence with it last week and nearly

ended up making the acquaintance of his Creator. Never mind the stallion, I've got something else to show you." Thomas steered Whitney toward the opposite entrance to the stable where another stable boy was leading-or being led by-a magnificent chestnut gelding with four snowy white feet.

"Khan?" Whitney whispered. Before Thomas could answer, the chestnut nuzzled her at the hip, looking for the pocket where she used to hide his treats when he was a colt. "Why you beggar!" she laughed. She smiled over her shoulder at Thomas. "How does he go? He was much too little to saddle when I left."

"Why don't you try him out and see for yourself?"

Whitney needed no more encouragement. With her crop clenched between her teeth, she reached up to tighten the turquoise ribbon that held her hair at the nape. Dangerous Crossing lunged backward, kicking out at the men, creating a furor. "Hide the crop!" Thomas warned sharply, and Whitney quickly complied.

Khan pranced sideways with anticipation as he was led outdoors. Thomas gave Whitney a leg up, and she landed gracefully in the sidesaddle. Turning Khan toward the open gate, she said, "I'm a little out of practice. If he comes back without me, I'll be between here and Lady Archibald's father's house."

As Khan trotted up the drive to Emily's house, a curtain shifted at a wide bow window. A moment later the front door opened, and Emily came flying outside. "Whitney!" she cried joyously, flinging her arms around her and returning Whitney's

hug. "Oh Whitney, let me see you." Laughing, Emily backed up, still clasping both Whitney's hands in hers. "You're absolutely beautiful!"

"You're the one who looks wonderful," Whitney said, admiring Emily's tight brown hair cut fashionably short and threaded with a ribbon.

"That's because I'm happy, not because I'm beautiful," Emily argued.

Arm in arm the girls strolled into the drawing room. A slender, sandy-haired man in his late twenties stood up, his hazel eyes smiling as Emily breathlessly began the introduction. "Whitney, may I present my husband-"

"Michael Archibald," he finished before his wife put the barrier of his title in Whitney's way. It was a simple, unaffected gesture of open friendliness, and Whitney appreciated the subtle thoughtfulness, as did his beaming wife.

Shortly thereafter, he excused himself and left the girls to talk, an activity in which they engaged eagerly for two hours. "Paul was here this morning," Emily said as Whitney reluctantly rose to leave. "He came over to speak to my father about something." A guilty smile flitted over Emily's pretty features. "I... well. . . I didn't think it would hurt if I-very casually, you understand-repeated some of the things Monsieur DuVille had mentioned about how popular you are in France. Although," Emily added as her smile vanished, "I'm not sure Monsieur DuVille did you a favor talking about you like that in front of Margaret Merryton. He flayed her alive with tales of your conquests, and now she hates you even more than she ever did."

"Why?" Whitney asked as they walked down the front hall.

"Why has she always hated you? I suppose because you were the wealthiest of all of us. Although, now that she's preoccupied with your new neighbor, maybe she'll be nice for a change, instead of so hateful." At Whitney's puzzled look, Emily explained. "Mr. Westland, your new neighbor. From what Elizabeth was telling me yesterday, Margaret considers him her exclusive property."

"How is Elizabeth?" Whitney asked, forgetting about Margaret entirely at the mention of her rival for Paul's love.

"As pretty and sweet as ever. And you may as well know that Paul escorts her practically everywhere."

Whitney thought about that as she galloped diagonally across an implanted field belonging to Emily's father. Elizabeth Ashton had always been everything Whitney wanted to be-ladylike, demure, blond, petite, and sweet.

The wind tore at her hair, tugging it loose from the velvet ribbon, tossing it wildly about. Beneath her, Whitney could feel Khan gathering and flexing gracefully as he

flew over the ground with amazing speed. Regretfully, she eased him back into a canter, slowing him to a walk as they entered the woods to follow a path that existed now only in Whitney's memory. Rabbits scampered in the underbrush, and squirrels darted up the trees as they wound their way through the dense growth. A few minutes later, they crested the hill, and Whitney guided Khan carefully down the steep slope where a small meadow was bordered by a wide brook that ran through the northern section of her father's property.

Dismounting, Whitney looped Khan's reins around a sturdy oak, waited a minute to be certain that he would stand quietly, then patted his sleek neck and struck out across the meadow toward the stream. As she walked, she stopped now and then to gaze around her with older, more appreciative eyes, and to savor the scent of late summer wildflowers and fresh clover. She did not, however, look up and over her shoulder, and so she didn't notice the solitary horseman who was motionless atop a great sorrel stallion, watching every step she took.

Clayton grinned when Whitney stripped off her turquoise jacket and slung it jauntily over her right shoulder. Free of all the restrictions of Parisian society, her walk was an easy, swinging gait that was both lively and seductive, sending her luxuriant mane of hair swaying to and fro as she strolled toward the stream. She sauntered up a gentle knoll that sloped toward the water's edge. Seating herself beneath an ancient, gnarled sycamore standing sentinel atop the knoll, she pulled off her riding boots, peeled her stockings down, and tossed them over by the boots.

His horse moved restlessly beneath him while Clayton debated whether or not to approach his quarry. When she hitched her skirts up and waded into the stream, he chuckled and made his decision. Angling his horse back into the trees, he descended through the woods toward the meadow below. Wading in this stream, Whitney quickly decided, was not quite as enjoyable as she remembered it. For one thing, the water was freezing cold, and beneath her feet the rocks were sharp and slippery. Gingerly, she waded back to the bank, then stretched out on the grass. Her hair tumbled to the sides, floating on the water's rippling surface as she lay propped up on her elbows, her chin cupped in her hands, lazily raising and lowering her wet calves, letting the breeze dry them. She was watching the minnows darting in the shallows and trying to imagine the moment when Paul would see her for the first time tonight, when a slight movement near the sycamore tree to her left drew her attention.

From the corner of her eye, Whitney glimpsed a pair of expensive brown riding boots polished to a mirror shine. She froze, then rolled over and quickly raised herself to a sitting position, drawing her knees up against her chest, hastily tugging her sodden skirts down around her bare ankles.

The man was standing with one shoulder negligently propped against the sycamore tree, his arms crossed loosely over his chest. "Fishing?" he inquired, as his gaze

roamed over every warm curve of her body, lingered momentarily on her bare toes peeping out from beneath the wet hem of her riding skirts, then moved upward in a leisurely inspection of her feminine assets that left Whitney feeling as if she'd just been stripped of all her clothing. "Spying?" she countered coldly.

He didn't deign to reply, but looked at her in ill-concealed amusement. Whitney lifted her chin and haughtily returned his gaze. He was very tall, easily 6 feet 2 inches, lean and superbly fit. His jaw was firm and well carved, his nose straight. The breeze lightly ruffled his hair which was a thick, coffee-brown. Beneath dark brows, his gray eyes observed her with frank interest. His clean-shaven face was very handsome- Whitney allowed him that-but there was an aggressive virility in his bold gaze, and an uncompromising authority, an arrogance, in the set of his jaw, that was not at all to Whitney's liking.

His mouth quirked in a half smile. "Were you going for a swim?"

"No, I was trying to be alone, Mr. ... ?" "Westland," he provided, his gaze dipping to touch the rounded fullness of her breasts where they pressed against her sheer white shirt. Whitney crossed her arms protectively over her bosom, and his smile widened knowingly. "Mr. Westland!" she snapped angrily, "your sense of direction must be nearly as poor as your manners!"

Her tart reprimand only seemed to push him nearer the brink of outright laughter. "Really, why is that, Ma'am?"

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"Because you are trespassing," Whitney said. When he still showed no inclination to leave or apologize, Whitney knew she would have to be the one to go. Gritting her teeth, she glanced disgustedly toward her stockings and boots.

He straightened from his lounging position and stepped over to her, extending his hand. "May I help you?" he offered.

"You certainly may help me," Whitney replied, her smile deliberately cold and ungracious. "Get on your horse and go away."

Something flickered in his gray eyes, but his smile remained, and his hand was still outstretched. "Here is my hand, take it." Whitney ignored it and rose to her feet unassisted. It was impossible to put on her stockings without exposing her legs to the

man who was leaning against the tree watching her, so she pulled on her boots and stuffed the stockings in her jacket pocket.

Walking quickly over to Khan, she picked up her crop and, stepping onto a fallen stump, hoisted herself into the saddle. His horse, a beautifully muscled sorrel, was tied beside her. She turned Khan in a tight circle, urging him into a lunging gallop around the woods.

"A pleasure meeting you again, Miss Stone," Clayton chuckled aloud. "You little hellcat," he added appreciatively.

Once out of sight, Whitney slowed Khan to a loping canter. She could hardly believe Mr. Westland was the neighbor her father held in such high esteem. She grimaced, recalling that he was invited to her party tonight. Why, the man was insufferably rude, outrageously bold, and infuriatingly arrogant! How could her father like him?

She was still wondering about that when she wandered into the sewing room and sat down beside her aunt. "You will never guess who I have just met," she was telling her aunt when Sewell, the old family butler, circumspectly cleared his throat and announced, "Lady Amelia Eubank asks to see you."

Whitney blanched. "Me? Dear God, why?"

"Show Lady Eubank into the rose salon, Sewell," Lady Anne said, curiously studying Whitney, who was looking wildly around the room for a place to hide. "What on earth has you looking so alarmed, darling?"

"You just don't know her, Aunt Anne. When I was little she used to shout at me not to chomp my nails."

"Well, at least she cared enough about you to want to correct you, which is more than I can say of anyone else here."

"But we were in church," Whitney cried desperately.

Anne's smile was sympathetic but firm. "I'll admit she's a trifle deaf and very outspoken. But four years ago, when all your neighbors came to see me, Lady Eubank was the only person who had a kind word to say about you. She said you had spunk. And she has a great deal of influence with everyone else hereabouts."

"That's because they're all frightened to death of her." Whitney sighed.

When Lady Anne and Whitney walked into the salon, the dowager Lady Eubank was examining the workmanship of a porcelain pheasant. Grimacing to show her distaste, she replaced the object atop the mantle and said to Whitney, "That atrocity must be to your father's liking. Your mother wouldn't have had it in her house."

Whitney opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't think of a reply. Lady Eubank groped for the monocle dangling from a black ribbon over her ample bosom, raised it to her eye and scrutinized Whitney from the top of her head to the tip of her toes. "Well, miss, what have you to say for yourself?" she demanded.

Fighting down the childish urge to wring her hands, Whitney said formally, "I am delighted to see you again after so many years, my lady."

"Rubbish!" said the dowager. "Do you still chomp your nails?"

Whitney almost, but not quite, rolled her eyes. "No, actually, I don't."

"Good. You have a fine figure, nice face. Now, to get down to the reason for my visit. Do you still mean to get Sevarin?"

"Do I-I what?"

"Young woman, I am the one who's supposed to be deaf. Now do you, or do you not, mean to get Sevarin?"

Whitney frantically considered and cast aside half a dozen responses. She glanced beseechingly at her aunt, who gave her a helpless, laughing look. Finally, she clasped her hands behind her back and regarded her tormentor directly. "Yes. If

I can."

"Ha! Thought so!" said the dowager happily, then her eyes narrowed. "You aren't given to blushing and simpering, are you? Because if you are, you may as well go back to France. Miss Elizabeth has tried that for years, and she's yet to snare Sevarin. You take my advice, and give that young man some competition! Competition is what he needs-he's too sure of himself with the ladies and always has been." She turned to Lady Anne. "For fifteen years, I have listened to my tiresome neighbors foretelling a dire future for your niece, Madam, but I always believed there was hope for her. Now," she said with a complacent smirk, "I intend to sit back and laugh myself into fits watching her snap Sevarin up right in front of their eyes." Raising her monocle to her eye, she gave Whitney a final inspection, then nodded abruptly. "Do Not Fail Me, Miss."

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In amazed disbelief Whitney stared at the empty doorway through which the dowager had just passed. "I think she's a little mad."

"I think she's as wily as a fox," Lady Anne replied with a faint smile. "And I think you'd be wise to take her advice to heart."

Trancelike, Whitney sat before her dressing table mirror, watching Clarissa deftly twist her heavy hair into elaborate curls entwined with a rope of diamonds--her last, and most extravagant purchase made with the money her father sent her to spend in Paris. As Clarissa teased soft tendrils over her ears, the night breeze wafted the curtains, raising bumps on Whitney's arms. Tonight was going to be unseasonably cool, which suited Whitney perfectly, for the gown she wanted to wear was of velvet.

As the gown was being fastened up the back, Whitney heard the sound of carriages making their way along the drive, the echo of muted laughter, distant but distinct, drifting through the open windows. Were they laughing as they recounted her old antics? Was that Margaret Merryton or one of the other girls, sniggering about the shameful way she used to behave?

Whitney didn't notice when Clarissa finished and quietly left the room. She felt cold all over, frightened, and more painfully unsure of herself than ever before in her life. Tonight was the night she had been practicing for and dreaming of all these years in France.

She wandered over to the windows, wondering distractedly what Elizabeth would wear tonight. Something pastel, no doubt. And demurely fetching. Parting the ivory and gold curtains, she stared down, watching the carriage lamps twinkling as they approached along the sweeping drive. One after another, in amazing numbers, they rolled to a stop at the steps. Her father must have invited half the countryside, she thought nervously. And of course, they had all accepted his invitation. They would all be eager to look her over, to search for some flaw, some sign of the unruly girl she'd been before.

Two steps into Whitney's room, Anne came to an abrupt halt, a slow, beaming smile working its way across her face. In profile, Whitney's finely sculpted features looked too lovely to be real. Anne took in everything, from the shadows of thick lashes on glowing magnolia skin, to the diamonds glittering amidst her shiny mahogany curls and peeping from beneath the soft tendrils at her ears. Her curvaceous form was draped in an emerald-green velvet gown with a high waist. The bodice was molded firmly to her breasts, exposing a daring amount of flesh above the square neckline. As if to atone for the gown's immodest display of bosom, the sleeves were fitted tubes of emerald velvet which did not allow so much as a glimpse of skin from shoulder to

wrist, where they ended in deep points at the tops of her hands. Like the front, the back of the gown was elegant in its simplicity, falling in velvet folds.

A carriage drew up below, and Whitney watched a tall, blond man bound down and offer his hand to a beautiful blond girl. Paul had arrived. And he had come with Elizabeth. Jerking away from the window, Whitney saw her aunt and visibly jumped.

"You took positively breathtaking!" Lady Anne whispered. "Do you really like it—the dress, I mean?" Whitney's voice was raspy and tight with mounting tension.

"Like it?" Anne laughed. "Darling, it's you! Daring and elegant and special." She extended her hand from which dangled a magnificent emerald pendant. "Your father asked me this morning what color your gown was, and he just brought me this to give to you. It was your mother's," Anne added when Whitney stared at the glittering jewel.

The emerald was easily an inch square, flanked by a row of glittering diamonds on all four sides. It was not her mother's; Whitney had spent hours, long ago, lovingly touching all the little treasures and trinkets in her mother's jewel case. But she was too nervous to argue the point. She stood rigidly still while her aunt fastened the pendant.

"Perfect!" Anne exclaimed with pleasure, studying the effect of the glowing jewel nestling in the hollow between Whitney's breasts. Linking her arm through Whitney's, Anne took a step forward. "Come, darling—it's time for your second official debut." Whitney wished with all her heart that Nicolas DuVille were here to help her through this debut, too.

Her father was pacing impatiently at the foot of the stairs, waiting to escort her into the ballroom. When he saw her coming down the steps toward him, he halted in mid-stride, and the stunned admiration on his face bolstered Whitney's faltering confidence.

Under the wide arched entrance to the ballroom, he stopped and nodded at the musicians in the far alcove, and the music ground to an abrupt halt. Whitney could feel the eyes swerving toward her, hear the roar of the crowd dying swiftly as the babble of voices trailed off in ominous silence. She drew a long, quivering breath, focused her eyes slightly above everyone's heads, and stepped down the three shallow steps, allowing her father to lead her toward the center of the room.

Staring, watchful silence followed her and, at that moment, had she been able to find the strength, Whitney would have picked up her skirts and fled. She clung to the memory of Nicolas DuVile, of his proud, laughing elegance, and the way he had escorted her everywhere. He would have leaned over and whispered in her ear, "They are nothing but provincials, cherie! Just keep your head high."

The crowd parted as a young, red-haired man shoved his way through—Peter Redfern, who had teased her unmercifully as a child, but had also been one of her few friends. At five and twenty, Peter's hairline had receded slightly, but the boyishness that was so much a part of him was still there. "Good God!" he exclaimed with unconcealed admiration when he was standing directly in front of her. "It is you, you little ruffian! What have you done with your freckles?!"

Whitney gulped back her horrified laughter at this undignified greeting and put her hand in his outstretched palm. "What," she countered, beaming at him, "have you done with your hair, Peter?"

Peter burst out laughing, and the silent spell was broken. Everyone started talking at once, closing in on her and exchanging greetings.

Anticipation and tension were building apace, but Whitney restrained the urge to turn and look for Paul as the minutes ticked past and she continued making the same mechanical responses, over and over again. Yes, she had enjoyed Paris. Yes, her

Uncle Edward Gilbert was well. Yes, she would be pleased to attend this card party or that dinner party.

Peter was still beside her a quarter of an hour later while Whitney was speaking with the apothecary's wife. From her left, where all the local girls and their husbands were standing, Whitney heard Margaret Merryton's familiar, malicious laugh. "I heard she made a spectacle of herself in Paris and is all but shunned from polite society there," Margaret was telling them.

Peter heard her too, and he grinned at Whitney. "It's time to face Miss Merryton. You can't avoid her forever. And anyway, she's with someone you haven't met yet."

At Peter's urging, Whitney reluctantly turned to face her childhood foe.

Margaret Merryton was standing with her hand resting possessively on Clayton Westland's claret-colored sleeve. This afternoon, Whitney would have sworn that nothing, nothing could make her dislike Clayton Westland more than she did, but seeing him with Margaret, knowing he was listening to her vituperative comments, turned Whitney's initial dislike into genuine loathing.

"We were all so disappointed that you weren't able to find a husband in France, Whitney," Margaret said with silken malice.

Whitney looked at her with cool disdain. "Margaret, every time you open your mouth, I always expect to hear a rattle." Then she picked up her skirts, intending to turn and speak to Emily, but Peter caught her elbow. "Whitney," he said, "allow me to introduce Mr. Westland to you. He has leased the Hodges place and is just back from France."

Still stinging from Margaret's cruel remarks, Whitney jumped to the conclusion that if Clayton Westland had just returned from France, he must be the one who had

provided Margaret with the lie that Whitney was an outcast there. "How do you like living in the country, Mr. Westland?" she inquired in a voice of bored indifference.

"Most of the people have been very friendly," he said meaningfully.

"I'm certain they have." Whitney could almost feel his eyes disrobing her as they had at the stream. "Perhaps one of them will even be 'friendly' enough to show you the boundary of your property, so that you don't embarrass yourself by trespassing on ours, as you did earlier today."

A stunned silence fell over the group; the amusement vanished from Clayton Westland's expression. "Miss Stone," he said in a voice of strained patience, "we seem to have gotten off on a rather bad foot." Inclining his head toward the dance floor, he said, "Perhaps if you will do me the honor of dancing..."

If he said anything more, Whitney didn't hear it, because directly behind her and very close to her ear an aching familiar, deep voice said, "I beg your pardon, I was told Whitney Stone was to be here tonight, but I don't recognize her." His hand touched her elbow, and Whitney's pulse went wild as she let Paul slowly turn her around to face him.

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She lifted her eyes and gazed up into the bluest ones this side of heaven. Unconsciously, she extended both her hands, feeling them clasped firmly in Paul's strong, warm ones. In the last four years, she had rehearsed dozens of clever things to say when this moment finally arrived; but looking up at his beloved, handsome face, all she could say was, "Hello, Paul." A slow, appreciative smile worked its way across his face as he tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. "Dance with me," he said simply.

Trembling inside, Whitney stepped into Paul's arms and felt his hand glide around her waist, gathering her closer. Beneath her fingertips, his beautiful dark blue jacket seemed to be a living thing that her fingers ached to slide over and caress. She knew that now was the time to be the poised, light-hearted female she'd been in Paris, but her thoughts were jumbled and erratic, as if part of her was fifteen years old again. All she wanted to say was, "I love you. I have always loved you. Now do you want me? Have I changed enough for you to want me?" "Did you miss me?" Paul asked.

Warning bells went off in Whitney's head as she heard the thread of confidence in his tone. Instinctively, she gave him a provocative sideways smile. "I missed you

desperately!" she declared with enough extra emphasis to make it seem a gross exaggeration.

"How 'desperately'?" Paul persisted, his grin widening.

"I was utterly desolate," Whitney teased, knowing full well that Emily had regaled him with stories of her popularity in Paris. "In fact, I nearly wasted away in loneliness for you."

"Liar." He chuckled, his hand on her waist tightening possessively. "That's not what I heard this morning. Did you, or did you not, tell some French nobleman that if you were as impressed with his title as you were with his conceit, you'd be tempted to accept his offer?"

Whitney nodded slowly, her tips twitching with laughter. "I did."

"May I ask what his offer was?" Paul said.

"No, you may not."

"Should I call him out?"

Whitney felt as if she was dancing on air. Should he call him out? Paul was flirting with her, actually fluting with her!

"How is Elizabeth?" Before the words were past her lips, she cursed herself in French and English. And when she saw the satisfied smile sweeping across Paul's face, she felt like stamping her foot in self-disgust.

"I'll find her and bring her over, so you can see for yourself," Paul offered, the knowing smile lingering in his eyes as the musk wound to a close.

Whitney was still trying to recover from the humiliation of her hideous blunder when she realized that Paul was guiding her directly toward Clayton Westland's group. Until that moment, she'd entirely forgotten that she'd turned her back on him when he was asking her to dance, and had strolled off with Paul.

"I believe I stole Miss Stone away when you were about to request a dance, Clayton," Paul said.

Considering her earlier rudeness, Whitney couldn't see any way to avoid dancing with her loathsome neighbor now. She waited for Clayton to repeat the invitation, but he did nothing of the sort. With everyone witnessing her chagrin, Clayton let her stand there until she flushed with angry embarrassment. Then he offered his arm and said in a bored, unenthusiastic voice, "Miss Stone?"

"No, thank you," Whitney said coldly. "I don't care to dance, Mr. Westland." Turning on her heel she walked off toward the opposite end of the room, putting as much

space as possible between herself and that boorish clod, and joined a group of people that included Aunt Anne. She had been standing there for perhaps five minutes when her father appeared at her elbow and drew her away. "There is someone I want you to meet," he said with gruff determination.

Despite his tone, Whitney could tell that he was very proud of her tonight, and she accompanied him gladly as he skirted around the perimeter of the ballroom . . . until she realized where he was taking her. Directly ahead, Clayton Westland was engaged in laughing conversation with Emily and her husband. Margaret Merryton still clung to his arm.

"Father, please!" Whitney whispered urgently, drawing back. "I don't like him."

"Don't be absurd!" he snapped irritably, forcibly pulling her the rest of the way. "Here she is," he told Clayton Westland in a booming, jovial voice. He turned to Whitney and said, as if she were nine years old, "Make your curtsy and say 'how do' to our friend and neighbor, Mr. Clayton Westland."

"We've already met," Clayton said drily.

"We've met," Whitney echoed weakly. Her cheeks burned as she endured Clayton's mocking gaze. If he said or did anything to embarrass her in front of her father, Whitney thought she would murder him. For the first time in her life, her father was seeing her as an accepted, and acceptable, human being, and he was proud of her.

"Well good. Good," her father said, looking expectantly from Whitney to Clayton. "Then why don't you two dance? That's what this music is for-"

The reason they weren't going to dance, Whitney instantly realized, was because it was obvious from Clayton's aloof expression that he wouldn't ask her to dance again if someone held a gun to his head. Feeling lower than an insect, Whitney made herself look imploringly at him, and then at the dance floor, in an unmistakable invitation to him.

His brows arched in ironic amusement. For one hideous moment, Whitney thought he intended to ignore her invitation, but he shrugged instead and, without so much as offering her his arm, he strolled toward the dance floor, leaving her to follow or remain standing there.

Whitney followed him, but she loathed him every single step of the way for making her do it. Trailing along in his wake, she stared daggers at the back of his wine-colored jacket, but until he turned toward her, she didn't realize that he was laughing-actually laughing at her mortification!

Whitney stepped toward him, then right past him, fully intending to leave him standing there in the middle of the dancers.

His hand shot out and captured her elbow. "Don't you dare!" he growled, laughing as he drew her around to face him for the waltz.

"It was excessively kind of you to ask me to dance," Whitney remarked sarcastically as she stepped reluctantly into his arms.

"Wasn't that what you wanted me to do?" he asked with mock innocence, and before she could answer, he added, "If I had only realized that you prefer to do the asking, I'd not have wasted my other two attempts."

"Of all the conceited, rude-" Whitney caught her father's anxious stare and smiled brilliantly at him, to show what a marvellous time she was having. The moment he looked away, she glared murderously at her dancing partner and continued, "-unspeakable, insufferable-" Clayton Westland's shoulders began to rock with laughter, and Whitney choked on her ire.

"Go on," he urged with a broad grin. "I haven't had such a trimming since I was a small boy. Now, where were you? I am 'unspeakable, insufferable'-"

"Outrageously bold," Whitney provided furiously, and then for want of anything better, "-and ungentlemanly!"

"Now that puts me in a very difficult position," he mocked lightly. "Because you've left me no alternative except to defend myself by pointing out that your behavior to me tonight has been anything but ladylike."

"Smile, please. My father is watching us," Whitney warned, forcing her mouth into a smile.

Clayton complied immediately. His teeth flashed white in a lazy grin, but his gaze dipped lingeringly to her soft tips.

The focal point of his gaze did not escape Whitney, who stiffened in his arms. "Mr. Westland, I think this brief, unpleasant encounter has gone on long enough!"

She jerked back, but his arm tightened sharply, preventing her from puffing free. "I haven't any intention of either of us becoming a spectacle, little one," he warned. Since Whitney had no choice except to move where he led her, she ignored his improper endearment, shrugged, and looked away. "Lovely evening, isn't it?" he drawled, and then in a stage whisper, he added. "Your father is watching us again."

"It was a lovely evening," Whitney retorted. She waited for Clayton's rejoinder and when, after several seconds, there was none, she glanced uncertainly at him. He was watching her intently, but without a trace of rancor over her jibe. Suddenly Whitney felt foolish and bad-tempered. True, he had behaved outrageously this afternoon at the stream but, considering the things she had done and said to him tonight, she had not

behaved any better. A rueful smile lit her eyes to glowing jade as she looked at him. "I think it is your turn to be rude to me now," she offered fairly. "Or have I lost count?"

His eyes smiled his approval at her sudden change of attitude. "I think we're about even," he said quietly.

Something about his deep voice and gray eyes, about the effortless ease with which he danced the waltz, stirred the ashes of some vague memory. Forgetting that his eyes were locked to hers, Whitney gazed at him, trying to grasp what was niggling at the back of her mind. "Mr. Westland, have we ever met before?"

"If we had, I hate to think that you could forget it."

"I'm certain that if we had, I would remember," Whitney said politely, and dismissed the idea.

True to his promise, Paul brought Elizabeth over when Clayton and Whitney strolled off the dance floor. Elizabeth Ashton, Whitney thought despairingly, looked like a beautiful, fragile china doll. She was wrapped in a gown of ice-blue satin that complemented the pink of her cheeks and the shining gold of her curls, and her voice was soft with amazed admiration as she said, "I can't believe it's you, Whitney."

There was the implication, of course, that Whitney had been so unpresentable before that Elizabeth couldn't believe the change, but watching her stroll away on Clayton's arm, Whitney didn't think Elizabeth had meant to be insulting.

Since Elizabeth was dancing with Clayton Westland, Whitney waited, hoping that Paul would ask her to dance again. Instead he frowned and said abruptly, "Is it the custom in Paris for a man and woman who have just been introduced to gaze into one another's eyes while they dance?"

Whitney looked at him in startled surprise. "I-I wasn't gazing into Mr. Westland's eyes. It was just that he seemed familiar to me, and yet, I don't know him at all. Hasn't that ever happened to you?"

"It happened to me tonight," Paul said curtly. "I thought you were someone I knew. Now I'm not certain I know you at all." He turned on his heel and walked away, leaving Whitney staring after him. In the old days, Whitney would have run after him to reassure him that it was him she wanted, only now, and not Clayton Westland. But these weren't the old days and she was much wiser, so she smiled to herself and turned in the opposite direction.

Even though Paul never approached her again, she was perfectly happy to dance the night away with the local swains. Given a choice between an overconfident Paul and an aloof, jealous one, Whitney definitely preferred the latter. Lady Eubank was right, Whitney decided. Competition was what Paul needed.

It was nearly noon when Whitney awoke the following day. She threw back the covers and jumped out of bed, positively certain that Paul would come to call.

Paul didn't come, but several of her other neighbors did, and she spent the afternoon trying to be charming and gay while her spirits sank along with the setting sun.

When she went to bed that night she told herself that Paul would surely come tomorrow. But tomorrow came and went without a sign of him.

It was not until the day after, that Whitney saw nun, and then it was purely by chance. She and Emily were riding back from the village, their horses kicking up little puffs of dust as they walked along the road. "Did you know that Mr. West-tend was called away to London the day after your party?" Emily asked.

"My father said something about it," Whitney said, her mind on Paul "I think he is expected back tomorrow. Why?"

"Because Margaret's mama told mine that Margaret has been counting the hours until he returns. Apparently, Margaret's affections are absolutely fixed on him and-" Emily stopped talking and squinted down the road. "Unless I mistake my eyes," she said with a teasing glance at Whitney, "we are about to encounter your prey."

Leaning forward, Whitney made out an elegant phaeton tearing along at a spanking pace in their direction. There was scarcely time for her to smooth the skirt of her riding habit before Paul was upon them. He pulled up, greeted Whitney politely, and then devoted his complete attention to Emily, flattering her with teasing gallantries until she laughingly ordered him to desist because she was now a married woman.

Khan had taken an instant aversion to Paul's showy black horse, and Whitney listened to their conversation while trying to keep Khan under control. "Are you going to Lady Eubank's affair tomorrow?" she heard him ask. When there was a lengthening moment of silence, she looked up to find Paul's attention on her.

"Are you going to Lady Eubank's affair tomorrow?" he repeated.

Whitney nodded, her heart doubling its tempo.

"Fine. I'll see you there." Without another word, he flicked the reins, and the phaeton bowled off down the road. Emily turned, watching the vehicle until it vanished from view. "If that wasn't the most extraordinary encounter I have ever had in my Me, I can't imagine what was!" she said. A slow smile dawned across her features as she looked at Whitney. "Paul Sevarin just went to great pains to completely ignore you. Whitney!" she said excitedly, "doesn't that strike you as rather odd?"

"Not at all," Whitney said with a disheartened sigh. "If you remember, Paul always used to ignore me."

"Yes, I know." Emily said, laughing softly. "But back then, he wasn't watching you the entire time he did it. The whole time he was talking to me just now, he was watching you. And at your party the other night, he watched you constantly when you weren't looking."

Whitney jerked Khan to a halt. "Did he truly? Are you certain?"

"Of course I'm certain, silly, I was watching him, watching you."

"Oh, Emily," Whitney laughed shakily. "I wish you didn't have to go back to London next week. When you're gone, who will tell me the things I want to hear?"

