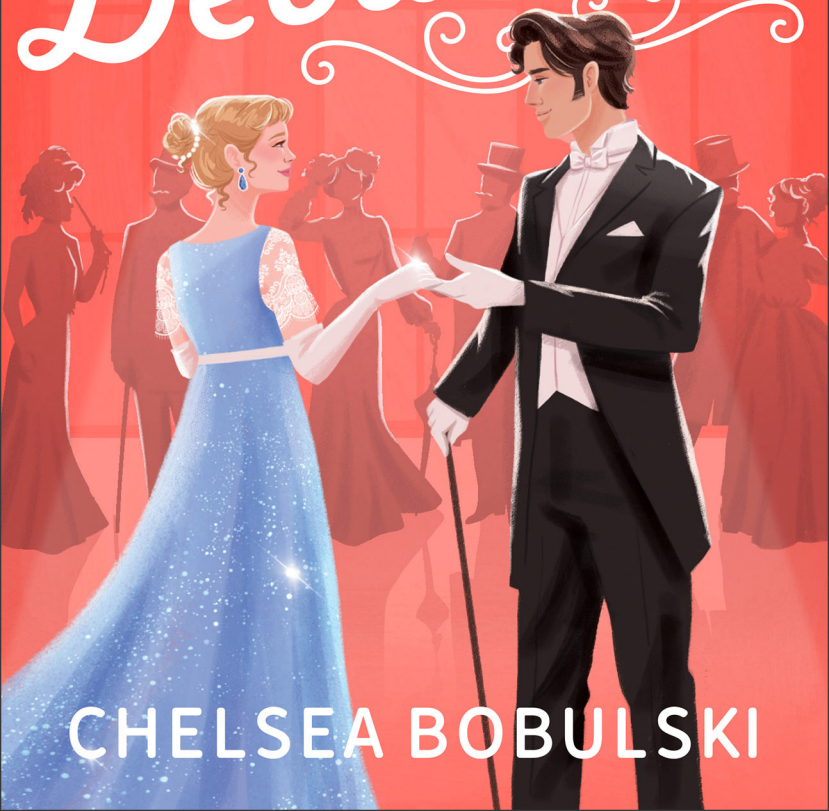


London's MOST Eligible

A DEAL WITH A *Debutante*



CHELSEA BOBULSKI

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Debutante

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1

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For all the romantics at heart,
this one's for you.



HIS LORDSHIP,

the Earl of Hayward,

AND HER LADYSHIP,

the Dowager Countess,

REQUEST THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY AT


❖ **WHITEFAWN MANOR** ❖

FOR THEIR ANNUAL

❖ **SUMMER BALL** ❖

ON SATURDAY, THE SIXTH OF JUNE,
WITH DINNER TO BE SERVED AT MIDNIGHT
AND DANCING TO FOLLOW

1



WHITEFAWN MANOR HAMPSHIRE, ENGLAND

Her mother had been thrilled to receive the invitation, although Miss Calliope Hart, currently eyeing the gentlemen of the ballroom through the leafy gaps of an overzealous fern, could not say the same.

She felt rather like a fattened pig at the county fair, with her mother attempting to sell her to the highest bidder; although the highest bidder in this case would not be the one with the most money, as the majority of marriageable bachelors in attendance were almost entirely broke (or, if not broke, still looking to add a considerable fortune to their depleted accounts).

No, Calliope's future husband would not be carefully chosen by her mother among those gentlemen with the most wealth, as was typical among scheming, high-society mothers, but among those with the most prestigious titles and the largest, even if dilapidated, estates.

As an American heiress newly arrived from New York, Calliope was the one holding the money.

If she were there for any other reason, she would have been able to appreciate the architecture of the ballroom, delighting

in the archways leading to the side galleries on the first- and second-floor mezzanines, which made her feel as though she were standing in the middle of a Roman plaza rather than in a country estate in the middle of Hampshire.

She would have breathed in the potted palms, snow-white roses, and gardenias perfuming the air with eager gratitude. She would, right at this moment, be luxuriating in the warm amber glow of the chandeliers and in the way their light sparkled off the jewels decorating every woman's neck, as well as the crystals embedded in their gowns, not to mention the artistic details of the Corinthian columns holding up an impressive dome ceiling delicately gilded to portray the night sky, with the North Star shining like a compass in its center.

It was an environment in which Calliope usually felt comfortable. From a young age, she had practiced her dancing, etiquette, and conversational skills under the tutelage of skilled governesses, all so that she would be prepared for moments like these, when she would be standing in an opulent ballroom, wrapped in a gown of ice-blue silk specifically chosen to match the color of her eyes, and tapping her heel in time to the music as she waited for the right man to sweep her off her feet.

Except it turned out she *hadn't* been properly groomed after all.

She would certainly pass muster in New York. She had been named "*the* debutante of the Season," in a society column last year. But the rules were different in England. It wasn't that she was a *complete* heathen, but there was a proper way of doing something for every occasion, for every different type of person. She would not address a duke in the same manner she would address an earl, and her curtsy, according to her new etiquette teacher, Madame Dupré, left much to be desired.

When Calliope informed her new teacher that she felt quite certain her curtsy was, at the very least, passable, Madame Dupré had replied, "Well, yes, dear, but you are an *American*."

In the end, that was the only thing that mattered. She was an American, and even though the majority of these men wanted—nay, *needed*—her for her money, they also looked down their long, aristocratic noses at her at every opportunity, and she simply could not imagine spending her life with anyone who saw her as a lesser person than himself.

Lord Wellesby, for instance—a viscount she'd had the displeasure of meeting at the Royal Opera House several weeks ago—was, at this very moment, circling the ballroom searching for her, his name the next on her dance card.

Calliope took a long, fortifying sip from her champagne flute as her mind flashed back to the night she'd met the viscount, a tall, rather thin gentleman only a year or two older than herself with gaunt cheeks and perpetually narrowed eyes, who appeared to garner his social currency from making others feel inferior to himself.

“Oh, wonderful,” he'd murmured to his sycophantic friends after introductions had been made, loud enough for Calliope to hear as she turned to follow her mother back to their opera box. “Another Robber Baron's daughter has crossed the pond.”

The crowd surrounding him guffawed at the remark, as well as at the one that followed next, when Wellesby had compared her ilk to California's gold-rush miners, wielding overly stuffed pocketbooks over pickaxes and seeking titles over treasures.

“Their manners are just as uncouth as their grimy-faced, shanty-residing countrymen,” he continued with a disdainful sneer, looking right at her as he said it (her mother had thankfully been engrossed in a separate conversation and had not heard him). “I haven't met one yet who knows how to properly address a peer of the realm, and none can hold an interesting conversation to save their lives.”

Calliope had to bite her tongue to restrain herself from showing the viscount just how uncouth her manners could be, and

now here he was again, hair shining beneath the chandelier light like an oil slick and jaw tight with annoyance, searching for her.

Well, Calliope had no intention of dancing with the viscount this night—or any other night for that matter—and so she was going to stay right here in her hiding spot behind the monstrously large fern.

Unfortunately for Calliope, her mother, Mrs. Mercy Bissette Hart, of the Maryland Bissettes, chose that precise moment to cluck her way around the corner with the other mother hens spending the evening cultivating their daughters' prospects, and even if Calliope had possessed the ability to make herself invisible, she could not have done so quickly enough to escape her mother's notice.

"Calliope?" Mrs. Hart, dressed in an emerald gown dripping with teardrop crystals that clinked together as she walked, stopped at the sight of her daughter. "What are you doing back here?"

Palms sweating, Calliope glanced past the fern and columns to the viscount edging ever closer.

"Um, I was"—she scrambled for something to say—"admiring this fern. An impressive specimen, is it not? Do you think the dowager countess found some unknown giant species in the Amazon rainforest and plucked it from the soil herself?"

The other ladies chuckled behind their fans, but Calliope's mother's lips drew tight.

She was *not* amused.

Closing the distance between them, Mrs. Hart pinched Calliope's wrist between her thumb and forefinger, holding the dance card hanging from Calliope's wrist to the light.

"It looks as though this dance belongs to Lord Wellesby." Her mother's gaze darted up to scan the ballroom. "And how fortuitous. There he is now."

Calliope's stomach dropped. "Mother, please, don't, I beg of you—"

“Lord Wellesby!” Mrs. Hart trilled as she pulled Calliope away from the fern and directly into the viscount’s path. “I believe my daughter owes you this dance.”

Lord Wellesby’s returning smile reminded Calliope of a lion she’d observed once in the Central Park Menagerie, who had toyed with a mouse in his cage before swallowing it whole.

“Yes,” the viscount sneered, extending his hand. “She does.”



Perhaps it was the closeness of the viscount’s waistcoat against her chest that had Calliope feeling so flustered, preventing any hint of the summer breeze that had been trickling through the open windows and veranda doors from reaching them. Or perhaps it was the fact that Lord Wellesby seemed incapable of going three seconds without saying something to offend her. Either way, Calliope’s blood was boiling.

It had started innocuously enough. The dance was already half over by the time the viscount had led her to the center of the room, and Calliope consoled herself with the knowledge that she would not have to remain in the viscount’s arms for long. Her hastily drawn battle plan had been to soldier her way through the remainder of the song by counting the steps in her head and dutifully nodding along to whatever topic of conversation her partner decided upon.

Her strategy went to shambles, however, when Lord Wellesby began by asking her if she even knew *how* to waltz. Upon informing him, through gritted teeth, that she had been taught by a world-renowned dancing instructor at the age of eight, he murmured, “Really? I did not realize such European sophistication had traveled to the colonies. Tell me, do you dance it to the tune of Yankee Doodle?”

His lips quirked into a frustratingly pompous smirk. It was clear he was trying to get a rise out of her. His gaze flicked to a group of men at the side of the ballroom, watching with eager

fascination and anticipatory grins. He'd probably promised his friends a show.

"Only when we are not dancing to 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee, Your Lordship,'" Calliope replied, unable to help herself.

An arrogant laugh escaped him. "Of course."

Calliope opened her mouth, another retort on her lips, but then her gaze landed on her mother, watching them dance with such hope in her eyes that Calliope felt the least she could do was restrain her tongue for a few minutes more, for her mother's sake.

But that was easier said than done. Yes, Calliope had been groomed for this life, and despite her contemptuous feelings toward their reason for being in England, she'd kept up with her studies at L'Académie Culturelle—Madame Dupré's school for American girls trying to catch English husbands—if only so that she would not embarrass herself too often during their stay. But Calliope had a wild streak inside of her that had been just as properly cultivated by her father and, later on, her best friends back home, which had the most annoying habit, at least in her mother's opinion, of getting in the way of Calliope embodying the perfect high-society darling she had been groomed to be.

Granted, it was a *small* streak, just a slight need that popped up from time to time to go out and live her life and not care about silly things like decorum and perfect posture and whether or not she should snort or roll her eyes. That was when she would go out with her childhood friends, Tommy, Charlie, and Lenore, for a few hours. They would skip rocks in the park, or dance in the rain, or catch snowflakes on their tongues, completely free from the expectations society had placed upon them.

And then, once she'd satisfied her need for adventure, once she'd allowed herself those few blissful moments of freedom, Calliope would resume her role as the proper high-society daughter for a few more weeks—months, even—without feeling as though she were completely wasting her life in stuffy drawing rooms and rib-cracking corsets.

She could feel that familiar willfulness rising up in her now and knew from experience that if she did not get away from Lord Wellesby soon, she was likely to do something she would very much regret. Not because she cared what a single person in this room thought of her, but because she would have to hear her mother lecture her about it for months afterward. And because, if she were being entirely honest with herself, for all of the ways she resented the life that was being thrust upon her, Calliope couldn't stand to see the disappointment in her mother's eyes whenever she failed to live up to her expectations.

Please, just finish the dance without another word, Calliope silently begged the viscount as they twirled about the room. *For both our sakes.*

But the viscount's sickly sweet smile grew, and she knew whatever he planned to say next would be impossible to ignore.

"Have you found him yet?"

Calliope closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Found whom, Your Lordship?"

"Come now, Miss Hart," he said. "You do not have to play coy with me. I know why you are here. Why any American heiress of a marriageable age comes *here*."

She gritted her teeth. "And why is that?"

"You are here to find a husband," he pronounced in a rather bored voice, as if he'd witnessed this phenomenon so many times now, it had become monotonous. "Someone to give you a title, to make you feel more important than you actually are, because no matter how much money you and your cowboy cousins accrue, the one thing you cannot buy outside of marriage is a respectable lineage."

She narrowed her eyes. "I do not know what you mean, sir."

"Yes, you do. I only hope you know you are barking up the wrong tree with me. Pleasing as your visage is to behold, you will never be good enough to join our ranks. You do see that, don't you?"

One bar of music more. Don't give in. Don't retaliate. Just let him say his spiteful words and hold your tongue.

"I don't know why you all don't just go back to where you came from," he continued, his overly spiced cologne mixing with the brandy and cigars on his breath in such a noxious way as to make her stomach turn. "Surely your marriage prospects would be better there, amongst your own kind."

Decorum. Maintain decorum.

A spark lighting in his gaze, the viscount leaned close enough for her to feel his hot breath against her ear. "It is funny, though."

She sighed. It was clear he would not let her leave the circle of his arms without responding, and even though she knew it would not lead anywhere good, etiquette prompted her to ask, "What is?"

He smirked. "How the oldest profession can disguise itself in jewels and furs, but it really is no different from those who ply their trade on the streets, is it?"

Calliope's jaw dropped.

"Do I shock you?" he asked, the arrogance in his tone thick enough to grease a wheel. "I thought Americans were above such shock, living on the frontier as you do."

Calliope's lips twitched into a smile that boded very ill indeed.

"No, sir," she replied, her tone turning honey sweet. "You do not shock me. Although your logic is flawed."

He arched a brow. "How so?"

"It seems to me that if anyone is wrapped up in jewels and furs in order to practice the world's oldest profession, it would be your countrymen, Your Lordship. My fellow heiresses and I have enough capital to care for the next ten generations of our descendants, whereas most of you will die with no legacy to speak of if you do not—how did you put it? Ply your trade?"

The viscount gaped at her.

Their steps slowed as the music ended. Calliope applauded the quartet along with the rest of the couples whilst Lord Wellesby

sputtered his indignation, his mouth opening and closing like a fish as he tried to think of what to say.

“And for your information,” she said, turning back to the viscount and offering her hand in farewell, “Manhattan is far more advanced than London, and its people much kinder. If anyone needs a lesson on refinement, Lord Wellesby, it is most definitely not me and my friends, but you and yours.”

He glared at her, but with the entire room staring, he could do nothing but press his lips to her gloved knuckles and bow respectfully. “Miss Hart.”

She smiled back at him as if nothing were amiss. “Lord Wellesby.”

And with that, she turned on her heel, grabbed her third champagne flute of the night from a passing footman, and strode away, her heart pounding in her ears, though no one would be able to tell from her practiced smile and easy gait.

It was not until she'd returned to the ridiculously large fern that she allowed herself to crumple, pressing her hand to her chest and forcing herself to inhale deeply.

She wished she could say she'd never met anyone so narcissistic and insufferable in all her life, but the viscount was no different from any other titled gentlemen she'd met since her mother had forced her onto an ocean liner three months ago in order to take her husband-hunting across the Atlantic. Certainly, some were more tactful than the smarmy Lord Wellesby, only insinuating their disdain for Calliope and the other American heiresses who had washed upon their shores, but still. The message was clear: Even the ones who needed American money to save their estates hated the idea of marrying the daughters of industry titans to get it.

She could only hope the viscount would be too ashamed of his actions—and of how precisely her words had cut him down to size—to spread her retort throughout the ballroom. For Calliope had any recurring sins, speaking her mind when she

shouldn't most definitely topped the list, and her mother would never let her hear the end of it if her outburst did anything to spoil her campaign for a titled son-in-law to join their ranks before the Season was through.

2



Edward Chase, the Earl of Hayward, was also hiding, although he had chosen the shadows in the western corner of the ballroom, situated behind a Corinthian column bedecked in cornucopias of sculpted fruit and frolicking cherubim playing musical instruments of every variety. Unfortunately, he would not be able to hide much longer. This was technically *his* ball, not that he'd had any say in the matter.

His mother had been hosting her Annual Summer Ball for nearly twenty-five years now, ever since she'd left London to marry Edward's father and lead a "quiet" life in the country. She also held an Annual Harvest Ball, an Annual Christmas Ball, and an Annual Benefit for the Hampshire Orphanage Ball, although thanks to his years at Eton as well as his recent studies at Cambridge, it had been a rather long time since Edward had been forced to endure them.

Of course, there was no escaping these sorts of events now that Edward *was* the Earl of Hayward.

His entire body stiffened as he thought of his father. Had it really been two years since the earl's death? Some days it felt longer. Other days—like today—he could have sworn he had just seen his father that very morning, drinking coffee in the

breakfast room, his nose in the paper, just as Edward had seen him do every morning as far back as he could remember.

It always startled him, how grief could simultaneously feel so far away and much too near.

Edward backed farther into the shadows as his mother glided past, looking regal in a dark purple gown. He was happy to see her out of her black mourning garb, but he also felt rather frightened. His mother was now a woman on a mission, and that mission was to see her only son married by the end of the year. This was nothing new, of course, but lately she had taken on the task with a fervor that bordered on obsession.

Not that Edward didn't understand her reasoning. The estate had been hemorrhaging money at an alarming rate for the past decade, partly due to some bad business dealings on his father's part, who never did have a good head for figures, and partly due to agricultural methods that were now proving outdated in the face of modern advancements. In short, the newest Earl of Hayward was broke, and Whitefawn Manor was in serious jeopardy of going under.

Unless, of course, Edward found a bride. But it wasn't just any bride he needed; he needed the sort of bride whose family hailed from big business; the sort of bride who had more money than anyone could spend in fifty lifetimes, let alone one.

He needed an American bride.

It was inescapable, really. Edward would not see Whitefawn, nor the employees whose livelihoods depended on its welfare, crumble. That would *not* be his legacy. Still, he couldn't seem to find the strength to step out from behind the gargantuan columns and meet his fate.

"Ah, there you are," a familiar voice called out, pulling Edward from his thoughts. "Same old hiding spot, I see."

August Shaw, the Marquess of Holbrook, stood next to him, one hand behind his back, the other holding a champagne flute. Holbrook, in his usual demeanor, somehow managed to look

both disinterested and wolfish all at once as he scanned the ladies in attendance.

“Found one who hasn’t heard of your many romantic exploits yet?” Edward asked.

Holbrook lifted a brow. “Found one who doesn’t have you running for the hills like a scared little boy yet?”

“I’m not scared.” Edward tugged on the fit of his waistcoat. “I’m evaluating. With discretion.”

“Yes, well, I’ll be sure to tell your mother that the next time she asks where you’ve gone.” Holbrook brought the flute to his lips with a grin. “You know, it’s not too late to make a run for the continent.”

“Holbrook—”

“Or America,” he said. “Just tell your mother you do not approve of the selection here and you’ve decided to go straight to the source to find your bride.”

Edward sighed. “I’m afraid it’s too late for that. The manor won’t survive the year if I don’t choose someone now.”

“Pity,” Holbrook replied. “Well then, forgive me if I do not understand why you’re hiding back here instead of welcoming your guests?”

“I told you, I’m just—”

“Lady Hayward!” Holbrook called out, grabbing hold of Edward’s jacket and tugging him away from the column as the dowager countess passed. “I’ve found him.”

“Traitor,” Edward muttered under his breath.

“Ah, thank you, August, dear,” Edward’s mother, Margaret Chase, replied, her smile all too bright and her eyes all too sharp. “It’s nice to know *someone* understands the importance of my son’s duty tonight.”

Holbrook bowed. “I live to serve.”

Edward feigned nonchalance. “Oh, hello, Mother. I was just looking for you—”

“Save it,” she ground out from between her teeth. “It has been

an hour since dinner, and you have yet to place your name on a single dance card. Have you forgotten the purpose of this ball?"

"To give you an excuse to buy a new gown?"

His mother's glare seared Edward to his very core. "Sarcasm does not suit you, dear. Now, go out there and find a bride."

"Mother, I don't—"

"Must I remind you how many people will be out of work if Whitefawn goes under? If you won't do this for me, perhaps you'll do it for McAllister, or Mrs. Cooper? Or for the gardeners, or the housemaids, or the footmen, or the farmers? Or perhaps you'll do it for the people in the village who rely on the livestock our estate raises and who drink the milk from our cows? Or perhaps you'll do it for your future children, so they can grow up on their ancestral lands, surrounded by the history we've worked so hard to protect?"

"No, Mother. You don't have to remind me." It was truly all he thought about. "But are you certain this is the only way?"

"You looked at the books yourself. Do you have another suggestion?"

Edward *had* looked at them. Over and over again, he had looked at them, and no matter how hard he tried, he could not find any way to balance them other than adding a considerable fortune to their accounts, and the only way to do that—short of robbery or an act of God—was to marry into it.

Edward shook his head.

Margaret sighed and took his hand. "Your father was a proud man. He did not mean to leave us in such a state. I am certain he hoped to rectify the matter before his passing, but here we are. I am sorry this weight has fallen on your shoulders, Edward, but it is the responsibility to which you were born. You must do everything in your power to protect Whitefawn."

She was right. Of course she was right.

Still, he couldn't help wishing his marriage could be more than just a business transaction. His parents had married for love,

and he had seen how happy they'd made each other. He had also seen the disastrous outcome of marriages of convenience, in which neither party could stand the sight of the other. If given the choice, he would choose someone who looked at him every morning the way his mother had looked at his father—as if every moment together was a gift that shouldn't be squandered. But perhaps that kind of life was not meant for him. Perhaps Edward's great love would be Whitefawn.

Perhaps it had to be.

He squared his shoulders and scanned the couples gliding across the floor, as well as the ladies sipping champagne as they waited for the next gentlemen on their cards.

"Fine, then," he said, tugging on the cuffs of his shirtsleeves. "Which woman shall I choose?"

His mother's eyes widened at his sudden change of heart. "I specifically selected every lady present for—"

"That's not what I mean." He turned toward her, a firm and practical determination rooting itself in his mind. "I'll make this very simple, Mother. Whitefawn needs as much financial help as it can get, so tell me which lady in attendance possesses the most capital, and she alone will be the focus of my efforts."

For a moment, he thought the dowager would tell him to stop being so crass. Although there had been plenty of evidence to the contrary as of late, his mother was still English and therefore avoided the discussion of finances like the plague. That was how Edward had known, even before he'd looked at the books and spoken with the accountant and the barrister, that Whitefawn was in dire straits indeed, because his mother had been the one to tell him.

She cleared her throat. "That would be Miss Calliope Hart, the one beside that fern over there next to the fireplace, in the light blue silk. She's the daughter of Mr. Jonathan Hart, a man who made his fortune buying and selling New York real estate,

and Mrs. Mercy Bissette Hart, of the Bissette Coal empire. I am told their fortune is second only to the Astors.”

Edward nodded. “Miss Calliope Hart it is, then.”

He started toward her, but his mother’s hand on his arm stopped him.

“Thank you,” she said, meeting his gaze, and in those two words he heard all of the agony they had suffered since the morning the Earl of Hayward would not awaken, no matter how Edward’s mother had screamed, nor how much Edward had denied the news once it had reached him at Cambridge.

Nothing had been right since.

His mother gave his arm one more squeeze and smiled for his benefit, although he did not miss the tears in her eyes, nor the way she tried to blink them away.

“All will be well,” he told her. “Do not worry.”

Now if only he could get the gaping pit in his stomach to agree with him.

“A young lady in want of a husband must never overindulge in food or drink. She is, at all times, in control of herself and her appetites and therefore does not embarrass herself, nor her family, by stuffing her face with pastries or drinking amounts of alcohol that could impair her judgment. To do so would be to cause a scandal of the highest regard, lessening her marriage prospects considerably. This author suggests one glass of wine at dinner and nonalcoholic punch, coffee, or tea to follow.”

—*Mrs. Marcell's Book of Proper Etiquette*, Second Edition

3



There was no doubt about it: Calliope Hart had somehow found herself much too deep in her cups. Her head was swimming, while the rest of her body no longer felt like much of anything at all. Or perhaps it felt like the gelatin dessert Cook liked to make back home, the one that wiggled with just the slightest prod.

Yes, that was exactly how she felt.

Gelatinous.

Calliope laughed, although she wasn't quite sure what was so funny. She reached her hand out to grasp the column in front of her, but her fingers only met air. She toppled slightly into the fern, only just managing to regain her balance before her hands splayed into its cool, dark soil.

Thankfully, no one was watching her.

She chose to lean against the wall instead, which was most certainly *not* proper, but far less embarrassing than taking down a fern the size of Manhattan. She breathed deeply, but the scent of roses and gardenias was suddenly overpowering, the moisture in the air from the crush of bodies heavy and cloying.

She was very much in danger of making a fool of herself. She needed to find her mother so they could make their excuses. She

pushed away from the wall, brushing aside an overly friendly branch, and—

Smacked right into an ivory waistcoat.

“I’m sorry, sir.” Her eyes trailed up the waistcoat to the gentleman’s cravat, his neck, his square chin—goodness, he was tall. “I mean, my lord. I did not see you. I—”

But suddenly she could not think of what she was going to say, for her gaze had roamed over his cheekbones, high and prominent, and up his slightly crooked nose, before finally meeting his eyes. Oh, and what beautiful eyes they were. The deep blue center of a sapphire. His slashing brows only made the blue richer, to the point that Calliope had to physically stop herself from reaching out, petting his cheek, and whispering, “*How pretty.*”

“No harm done,” the gentleman said, one side of his mouth curving into a half smirk. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Edward Chase, the Earl of Hayward.”

The host of this ball and the owner of this property. She had seen him at dinner, but he had been seated at the other end of a very long, very full table, and all she’d been able to make out was the broad chest of an athletic build and dark hair slicked back with pomade, although not nearly as garishly as Lord Wellesby’s had been.

She felt the earl take her hand and knew she should say something, *anything*, but all she could do was stare as his lips pressed against her silk gloves. He looked up at her from beneath his lashes.

“And you are?” he asked.

She cleared her throat. “Miss Calliope Hart.”

“Well, Miss Hart, would you do me the honor of this dance?”

“Oh, um—” She fumbled for her dance card before realizing it must have slipped off her wrist when she’d fallen and now resided at the base of the fern. Without it, she could not say if another gentleman had claimed this dance, nor could she see any way to politely bow out from the earl’s invitation, even though doing

so was, undoubtedly, the wisest course of action. “Of course, Your Grace.”

His brow arched. “While I cannot say I mind being called ‘Your Grace,’ proper etiquette forces me to concede that only a *duke* is to be addressed in such manner.”

She winced. “I knew that. I don’t know why I said that.”

“It is an easy mistake to make,” he assured her, but she felt ridiculous anyway, knowing firsthand from Madame Dupré and the odious Lord Wellesby how important these things were to the gentry. “Shall we?”

He led her to the center of the room, her heels sliding a bit on the marble.

She shouldn’t be doing this. She did not feel like herself. She was bound to say or do something stupid.

But then the music started, and the earl’s hand was pressing against her waist and, before she could utter another word, they were gliding across the ballroom, the couples around them blurring until they were nothing but a swirl of colors, like something in a dream.

“You are very light on your feet, Miss Hart,” Lord Hayward complimented her.

“Thank you, my lord.”

She was suddenly very grateful for the earl’s impressively strong frame keeping her upright, as well as for the copious dance lessons her mother had forced upon her in her youth. The steps had become habitual after spending so many hours repeating them, enabling her body to move without thought. Which was a very good thing at the moment, for all she could focus on was the fact that her stomach was suddenly sloshing in a most peculiar manner.

And his eyes.

She couldn’t stop staring at his eyes.

He seemed to notice that, too. He swallowed and stared at a point over her shoulder. “Where are you from?”

“New York,” she answered. “Manhattan.”

“I have always wanted to visit New York. I hear it is like no other city in the world.”

“I had always wanted to visit London, although I never thought I’d be coming here for a—” She stopped herself from saying “husband”, but his shoulder tensed beneath her palm, and she was certain he knew what she was going to say regardless.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Lord Wellesby glaring at her from the crowd and, with a slight hiccup she prayed the Earl of Hayward could not hear, she quickly turned her gaze away.

“And how do you like it?” he asked. “London?”

She hadn’t been able to see much of it. She’d spent the last three months studying with Madame Dupré whilst her mother made the rounds through all the fashionable houses in Mayfair, leaving her calling card and prying her way into every drawing room in the city, letting it be not-so-subtly known that there was a new American heiress in town.

Little did her mother realize that not everyone was willing to stoop so low as to marry outside their kind, no matter their financial straits. Calliope may have been richer than the lot of them combined, but she was *nouveau riche*, still a commoner in most aristocratic eyes.

Rich or poor, Calliope was simply not good enough to marry into their families.

Although this was not the first gathering to which Calliope and her mother had been invited since they’d set up their Mayfair residence, Calliope could count the number on one hand. Mrs. Hart had been so giddy to receive the invitation, she hadn’t even cared that it was out in the country, or that it meant several hours of travel by train.

“The estates that need the most help won’t be found in London,” her mother had told her. “We must go to them.” And then, with a sudden, concerned air, she’d added, “Please don’t do anything to embarrass me.”

Calliope had sighed. “Mother, please. Have you ever seen me do anything unladylike whilst in the company of polite society?”

“As a matter of fact, I have,” her mother began, counting off Calliope’s indiscretions on her fingers. “Laughing so boisterously in front of Charles Drummond that you both fell over and were seen lying in the grass together at the Founder’s Day picnic; running through Mrs. Cartwright’s gardens with one leg tied to Thomas Daily; *not to mention* betting on a horse race—a horse race, of all things!—with the both of them and that troublemaker, Lenore Hastings.”

Calliope rolled her eyes. “Charlie, Tommy, and Lenore are my oldest friends—they hardly count. And since I won’t have a single friend in England, I don’t believe you will have anything to worry about on that score.”

Her mother arched a brow. “Rolling your eyes is also forbidden.”

For a moment, Calliope wondered if she should go into that much detail to answer the earl’s question, knowing such a prolonged and somewhat circuitous answer would serve to hasten his departure, but after her interaction with Lord Wellesby, she feared she would not be able to speak of her friends back home without crying. So instead, she replied, in a rather flat tone, “London is lovely.”

“Where will you go next?” he asked. “Or will you be staying there for the duration of your visit?”

“We’ll stay wherever my mother deems fit, I suppose.”

His smile turned knowing as he dipped down to whisper, “Don’t you mean wherever your prospects of finding a husband are greatest?”

Calliope blinked. “What did you say?”

The earl chuckled. “Oh, come now, Miss Hart. You can be honest with me. We both know why you’re here. Why any American heiress of a marriageable age comes *here*.”

Her heart stopped as the earl repeated the exact words the

viscount had said earlier. Her gaze instantly snapped to Lord Wellesby, watching them from the edge of the crowd. Was that anger she saw in his face, or retribution? He must have shared his conversation with the earl, who had taken it upon himself to mock her.

She gritted her teeth and replied, "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, sir."

He winked at her then, confirming her suspicions. "Of course you don't." Darting a glance at the other couples spinning around them, he lowered his voice, "I see no reason to make this any more difficult than it has to be."

To make *what* more difficult than it had to be? Ridiculing her? Deriding her? Making it clear that she and her kind could not be more unwelcome on English soil if they tried?

The earl continued, "I require the assistance a marriage to someone such as yourself would provide, and my understanding is that you are looking for a husband who can provide you a distinguished title."

Calliope's breath caught. Surely she couldn't be hearing him right. Was he . . . proposing?

"So instead of wasting our time courting one another and lying to one another about what this really is," he said, "I am going to be very upfront with you so there will be no confusion."

They spun again, and Lord Wellesby's sneer came back into view.

Noticing her attention was fixed elsewhere, the earl cocked his head into her line of sight, his determined gaze meeting hers with steely resolve. "I intend to marry you, Miss Hart."

Calliope stopped.

Another couple nearly collided into them, but she didn't care. Her head, which just moments before had been light as a balloon, was growing heavier, and the room was spinning. The viscount turned and whispered something to the gentlemen next to him, and that was when she knew for certain. This proposal

was nothing short of revenge, a joke Lord Wellesby and the Earl of Hayward would laugh about later as they commiserated over the rush of American heiresses gracing their shores.

What exactly did these men take her for? “*Someone such as yourself.*” The words, no doubt chosen to complete Calliope’s humiliation, sounded filthy in the earl’s mouth, as if she were nothing more than some commonplace harlot, and worse, as if he had peered into her very soul and had found her wanting. As if he had stripped her bare so that the whole of English society could see past her privileged upbringing to the silly little girl playing dress-up underneath.

“I’m so sorry to disappoint you, *my lord*,” she bit back, wrenching herself from his grasp. “But I wouldn’t marry you if I were marched to the altar at gunpoint.”

And with that, Calliope picked up her skirts and stormed away before the earl could respond, quickly finding her mother and informing her that she didn’t feel well at all and that they would need to make their excuses quickly. Calliope feared her mother would insist they stay longer, but she must have looked just as terrible as she felt, for Mrs. Hart did not argue but rather rushed Calliope from the room and into their car as if her hair were on fire.

They had just made it past the estate’s property line before Calliope asked the driver to pull over so she could get out, at which point she promptly vomited onto the damp grass on the side of the road, further cementing this as the worst, most humiliating night of her life.