

Chapter One

On the road to London, November 1816

Choosing a wife is not a task that should be undertaken lightly. Too many young gentlemen allow their hearts to rule their heads and rush into marriage without any forethought whatsoever—but remember! So many who marry in haste repent at leisure.

You must take time to select the perfect bride because a wife is a reflection of who you are. What if she is not a good hostess? Or is too forthright in her opinions? Or prone to temper tantrums or bouts of excessive melancholy?

Such a wife will ultimately turn out to be a hindrance to you and you will rue the day you entered into the Blessed Union.

This collection of advice, gathered from the wisdom of my esteemed late father and the follies of my peers, is intended to warn you of the pitfalls that might lure you into making a regrettable choice and to guide you through the process of selecting the perfect wife.

‘What drivell!’ Amelia Mansfield tossed the book on the carriage seat and stared at it as if it had just bitten her. ‘Your nephew must be a very pompous man indeed to have written that rubbish. After reading just one paragraph, I am already dreading the prospect of spending a month trapped in his company.’

Lady Worsted smiled, clearly amused by her reaction. ‘Bennett is not so bad, Amelia. He is prone to be a little imperious at times, but then again he is a politician and politicians are rather inclined to tell us what to do. And, of course, he is a duke. Therefore, he is expected to be a little pompous. All dukes are bred that way.’

The title, as far as Amelia was concerned, was yet another strike against the man. In all of her twenty-two years she had never met a single man in possession of one who was not completely obnoxious, her own father included. In fact, her father, or Viscount Venomous as she preferred to call him, was probably the most obnoxious and disagreeable of the bunch. Just thinking about him made her mood sour.

‘It is a shame that we are not going to your nephew’s castle. I should have enjoyed that. I have never stayed in a castle before. Do you think he might take us there during your visit?’

‘I believe that we may go there for a few days, if Bennett can be spared. Aveley Castle is just an hour or so away from London and my sister loves it there.’ Lady Worsted’s sister was the priggish duke’s mother. ‘But any visit will be fleeting. In these challenging times Bennett needs to be close to Parliament—he is one of the Regent’s most trusted advisers after all.’ Another strike against him. ‘I am sure that we can find plenty of entertainments in town. The season is in full swing. I do believe that you will enjoy it.’

Having been denied a season because of her father’s treachery, Amelia had long consoled herself that she was completely disinterested in such puerile pursuits. Balls and parties were for silly girls who had no other ambition than to marry well, embroider and live a life of subservience to their well-born husbands. When she had been younger she might have enjoyed the spectacle and the dancing that the season offered, but she had been a viscount’s daughter then and would have been able to dance. Now she was a mere companion, she would be doomed to watch the festivities from the wings while the older ladies gossiped. That was not how she wanted to spend her first visit back to Town in almost a year.

Amelia already had a long list of things that she wanted to do whilst visiting the capital. She had missed the place or, more importantly, she had missed the many political associations and reform groups that represented all of the many causes she held so dear. Unfortunately, a goodly few of those wonderful organisations and the people who ran them had been unfairly labelled as Radical by aristocrats who felt threatened by their common-sense opinions. For too long she had only been able to read about their work second-hand. This winter she would once again attend and contribute to the proceedings and help to campaign for all of the changes that needed to be made in society if poverty was ever going to be alleviated.

More importantly, she would be able to help out at the soup kitchen run by the Church of St Giles. It was a place she owed a great deal to and it would always occupy a special place in her heart. Although she had religiously sent them half of her wages since she had left London last year, she had missed getting her hands dirty. The sense of fulfilment that she got from helping other unfortunates was its own reward. It mattered; therefore, as a consequence she mattered too.

Unfortunately, Lady Worsted would find all of these totally worthy causes totally unsuitable while they were guests of the Duke and would doubtless forbid Amelia from going if she knew about them. The older woman had been most insistent that, as a member of His Majesty's government, he had to be spared the taint of any scandal and, as so much about Amelia was scandalous already, it would probably be best if she avoided all of her dubious good deeds while they were his guests. It would also be prudent, her employer had cautioned, to avoid mentioning her unfortunate past for exactly the same reason.

Fortunately, life as Lady Worsted's companion meant that Amelia always had a considerable amount of free time as her employer made so few demands on it. It was a mystery why she even bothered with a companion in the first place. It was not as if she was lonely. Lady Worsted had a great many friends and acquaintances who liked to visit her and, better still, the old lady was rather fond of her afternoon naps. Which meant that Amelia hoped to be going on a great many 'long walks' while she was a guest at the Duke of Aveley's conveniently located London town house. She was not prepared to miss the opportunity to become fully involved in her good causes rather than dreaming about them from a distance. Political groups were not that well organised in Bath, nor were the people, and even the poor muddled along without needing a great deal of her help. But London was the heart of it all, the beating, pulsing, putrid centre of everything, and she was determined to make up for lost time. For the next month she would be useful again and her voice would be heard. Amelia could not wait.

Noticing that Lady Worsted had already nodded off in the seat opposite, Amelia reluctantly picked up her host's book again and glared at the cover. *The Discerning Gentleman's Guide to Selecting the Perfect Bride*. The Duke probably thought himself to be quite the wit in making the title rhyme too. The man sounded like the most crushing of bores, full of his own paternalistic self-importance and too bothered with social etiquette and appearances to be able to see further than his protruding aristocratic nose. Men like that were all the same. With nothing else to do to pass the time, Amelia selected a random page and began to read.

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Bennett Montague, Sixteenth Duke of Aveley and member of His Majesty's Privy Council, glanced at his pocket watch in annoyance before slotting it back into his waistcoat pocket. It was already six o'clock and his aunt should have arrived by now. Whilst he did not blame her personally for the inconvenience—even this late in the day the London traffic could be horrendous—dinner was always promptly served at seven. At this rate, it would have to be put back.

His butler, Lovett, appeared at the door to his study. 'The carriage is arriving, Your Grace.'

'Thank goodness!' He would not have to adjust his tightly organised schedule after all. All was well in the world again. As was expected, Bennett went out to the hallway to greet his aunt, conscious that he still had several letters and one speech to write before the night was done. He found his mother and Uncle George already there. As they waited, he noticed something odd about his usually ramrod-straight butler. He was listing slightly to the left.

'Lovett,' he hissed, 'have you been availing yourself of my port again?' Bennett wouldn't have minded but they had guests after all—an uncommon event in recent months due to his enormous workload.

Still listing, Lovett had the good manners to look sheepish. 'I am sorry, Your Grace. I had a moment of weakness.'

One of many. If the man had not been such a loyal and resourceful servant with a keen sense of timing when it came to helping him to escape, Bennett would have dismissed the man on the spot years ago. However, he was rather fond of him despite his wayward tendencies. Without Lovett, he would have had to have spent hundreds of pointless hours socialising with people he had no interest in. 'Is it Mrs Lovett again?' If his butler was to be believed, that woman was apparently the reason why her husband turned to drink on a regular basis, although Bennett was confident this was just a convenient excuse.

'Indeed it is, Your Grace. I have just found out that she is expecting again.'

'Again! Clearly I do not give you enough to do, Lovett. How many children are we up to now?' He knew the answer full well and all of their names, but this was the game they played when Bennett could not muster the enthusiasm to properly tell his impertinent, invaluable servant off and spared his butler from admitting that he just had a penchant for good port.

'This will be the tenth, Your Grace, providing Mrs Lovett does not have another set of twins.'

Fortunately, the front door opened, relieving Bennett from any further pretence of admonishing his servant, and he stepped forth to welcome them. His aunt looked as robust as usual and would expect him to

see that. Another social game that served no purpose. ‘Aunt Augusta, you look well. Clearly the air in Bath suits you.’

She accepted his compliment and presented him with her powdered cheek. ‘You look as though you could do with a little restorative air yourself, Bennett. You are altogether too serious for a young man. I have scarcely been here a minute and already I can see that you wish to be elsewhere.’ He did not correct her assumption because he did have a great many more important things to be doing right at this very moment than standing in his hallway and making small talk, and it would not hurt if she knew that. His aunt smiled at his bland expression. ‘Allow me to introduce you to my new companion, Miss Amelia Mansfield.’

A petite woman with the darkest eyes he had ever seen stepped forward. Usually, Bennett took no real interest in his aunt’s companions. There had been so many of them over the years that their plain faces had all begun to merge into one interchangeable and banal façade and he barely bothered flicking her a glance. But Miss Mansfield was quite different so his eyes lingered. For a start, and even though she was wearing a very large, very dull bonnet, there was nothing plain about her. The dark, cat-like eyes were framed with ridiculously thick sooty lashes. Two bold black slashes formed her eyebrows and her full mouth was quite the most impertinent shade of red. If it had been appropriate, which it wasn’t, and if he had the talent for it, which he most definitely did not, it was exactly the sort of face that might have inspired him to flirt with the lovely owner of it. Therefore, Bennett inclined his head politely because that was the correct thing to do.

‘Miss Mansfield.’

And she just about inclined hers in return.

‘Your Grace.’

Then, as an afterthought, she bobbed him a lacklustre curtsy. It was customary when curtseying that the woman also dipped her eyes in deference to the illustrious person she was curtseying to. That was the correct form, after all, and everybody understood it. Everyone, apparently, except Miss Mansfield. She held his gaze in the most disconcerting way before turning towards the others. There was certainly no attempt at deference in that pointed stare. In fact, if he was not mistaken, he was almost certain he saw a flash of some other emotion hiding in those chocolate depths, although he could not quite put his finger on what it was. Despite her blatant disregard for etiquette, Bennett could not stop watching her as she was introduced to his mother and Uncle George.

‘Do you read, Miss Mansfield?’ his mother asked.

‘Amelia reads everything she can get her hands on,’ Aunt Augusta answered in her stead. ‘And she reads aloud with tremendous skill. It is most entertaining. She has a talent for bringing the words and characters on the page to life.’

‘Then you will be an asset to my reading salon. I do hope that you will join us. Every Wednesday evening a select group of us gather to read and discuss writings that have had a profound effect on us. It makes no difference whether you like fiction, poetry or academia—we are an eclectic bunch and it is a lively way to spend the evening. And it is my only chance to properly entertain at the moment while my son is so busy in Parliament.’

When Miss Mansfield smiled he noticed that it made her unusual eyes prettier.

‘I should like that very much.’

Perhaps Bennett was imagining it, but she definitely greeted them with more enthusiasm than she had him—although why he was put out by that he could not quite fathom. Uncle George was instantly smitten with her and had no problem in showing it. ‘I am positively charmed already, Miss Mansfield, and would be thrilled if you sit next to me at dinner. It has been far too long since I have enjoyed the company of such a delightful creature over a meal.’

‘Be wary, Miss Mansfield,’ his mother cautioned, smiling affectionately at the man who had been a surrogate father to Bennett for so many years. ‘I am afraid George still thinks that he is in his prime. He will spend the entire meal flirting with you outrageously or telling you scandalous stories that are completely unsuitable for your delicate young ears.’

‘You wound me, Octavia!’ His uncle pretended to be affronted by this suggestion, which made all of the ladies laugh instantly. Bennett had always envied his uncle’s easy way with the female sex but this time he found that talent irritating. Unfortunately, judging by the charmed expression on her pretty face, Miss Mansfield was similarly smitten with Uncle George.

‘I shall look forward to it.’ She positively grinned at the old rogue in return. It was like being blindsided by a sunbeam; everything about her lit up. Her rosebud mouth curved mischievously, transforming her face into a thing of complete beauty, two adorable dimples appeared on her perfect cheeks and those big brown eyes grew warm and inviting. ‘It has been far too long since I heard a genuinely scandalous story over dinner.’

A dinner that would be severely delayed at this rate unless Bennett intervened and put an immediate stop to all of this nonsense. He snapped open his pocket watch again and frowned to make the point. 'I will get Lovett to show you straight to your rooms as dinner is in less than an hour.' Which gave him enough time to conquer the small mountain of paperwork lying unattended on his desk. 'If you will all excuse me.'

To his own ears his voice sounded a bit clipped, yet for some reason he was decidedly out of sorts. Bennett forced a polite smile before turning on his heel and heading purposefully back to his study. He felt the oddest tickle of awareness, which instantly raised his hackles and made him glance around. He caught Miss Mansfield openly staring at him again and not in a good way.

Bennett was not prone to vanity—he did not have the time required to dedicate to such an endeavour—but he knew that he was considered quite handsome by most women. He was used to female admiration and, on occasion, even blatant flirting. He was a duke, after all, and a very eligible one at that. However, Miss Mansfield was regarding him as if he was some sort of scientific specimen that she did not fully understand. People just did not do that. Not to him. If they did, basic good manners dictated that it was done covertly and he was blissfully unaware of their scrutiny. It was most disconcerting. Bennett scowled as he marched onward towards his study, for the first time in as long as he could remember feeling very uncomfortable in his own skin and ever so slightly offended.

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Amelia had two good frocks that were passable to wear to dinner. Neither filled her with enthusiasm. Out of sheer defiance she picked the one with the lowest neckline, grabbed her finest shawl and pinched some colour into her cheeks and lips to give herself some confidence. The Aveley residence on Berkeley Square was the grandest house she had ever set foot in and she hated the fact that she found it more than a little bit intimidating. From the moment she had walked up the marble steps towards the imposing black double front doors, the sheer opulence of the place had taken her breath away. But inside? Well, that was a completely different level of exquisite altogether.

The floor in the hallway was a striking chessboard of black and white marble. An ornate and sweeping staircase drew the eye upwards to a painted ceiling that had literally left her awed by its beauty. The artist had turned it into a window to Heaven. Cherubs floated amongst clouds, gazing down at the viewer below in angelic serenity. Amelia had really never seen anything like it. If the shock of her new surroundings was not enough, she had blinked in surprise when she had first glimpsed the owner of all of that splendour. The Duke of Aveley looked nothing like the haughty, beady-eyed and paunchy aristocrat she had imagined him to be.

Like the angels suspended above her, this man appeared to have been created from the brush of the most talented of artists. He was broad-shouldered and golden. That was the only word for him...golden. Over six feet of manly magnificence had stood in front of her, completely at odds with the arrogant pomposity that had apparently spewed from his pen. Aveley had thick, slightly wayward blond hair, weaved with threads of wheat and bronze, intelligent cobalt eyes and a tempting mouth that drew her eye just as effectively as his wonderful ceiling did. The female part of her, which she always tried to ignore, had reacted in the most peculiar way. Her pulse began to race, nervous butterflies began to flap in her stomach and her knees felt decidedly weak. If she did not know better, Amelia would have said that she was *all aquiver*, which was a ludicrous but apt description for the way she'd suddenly felt. He was a square-jawed, straight-nosed delight to behold. Exactly the sort of fairy tale man she had once dreamed she would live with happily ever after before the harsh realities of life had taught her that there were no such things as fairy tales.

And then he had looked at her as if she was exactly what she was—little more than a servant and nothing of any consequence—bringing her crashing soundly back to earth with a thud. For the briefest of moments Amelia had felt a rush of pure, unadulterated disappointment before she'd shaken herself and reminded herself that she was a fool to have expected anything less. She knew better than to judge a book by its cover, no matter how splendid that cover might first seem, and she was not usually prone to silly fluttering or even sillier ideas that involved a titled man in her future.

At the time, her uncharacteristic reaction to him had bothered her immensely but, after a small period of reflection in her luxurious new bedchamber, she now understood that she had simply been completely overwhelmed. Not just by the handsome, pompous duke, but by her surroundings and the prospect of being amongst proper society again for such a prolonged period of time. It *had* been a long journey and she *was* quite tired. It was hardly surprising that she was a little out of sorts and she had been surprised that the pompous duke had not looked anything like she had imagined. It was rare that a title did not immediately disappoint. She had not been expecting someone who resembled Adonis, therefore she could forgive herself for her brief moment of disbelief and the understandable nervous reaction that followed. Equilibrium restored, she stiffened her spine and walked with purpose.

A footman directed her down a long corridor to a formal dining room at the end, where she was seated in the middle of a grand table set for five. Sir George was the first to arrive and plonked himself down in the chair opposite her and instructed a servant to fill up both of their wine glasses with a flick of his hand.

‘How splendid, Miss Mansfield, that I have you all to myself. I dare say you are burning with curiosity and have a hundred questions about this house and its family that you want to have answered. Unfortunately for you—’ he took a healthy glug of his wine and grinned conspiratorially ‘—I have a very loose tongue when under the influence of even the merest drop of alcohol; therefore I suggest you grasp the opportunity to take advantage of that fact before the others arrive and I have to behave myself.’

Already he was her favourite person here and she had known him less than a few minutes in total. ‘The house is very impressive. Has it always been in the family?’

Sir George rolled his eyes in irritation at the apparent banality of her question. ‘It was designed for the fourteenth Duke by none other than Robert Adam himself. It is also the biggest house on Berkeley Square. Surely that is not the best thing you could think to ask me about—I, who have an intimate knowledge of this illustrious family and all of their goings on? Bennett’s father was my elder brother after all.’

There was a look of challenge in his face that encouraged her to be bolder. ‘Is the Duke a close friend of the Regent?’ If he was it would confirm all of her worst suspicions about the man.

Sir George took a thoughtful sip of his wine before answering. ‘Bennett is one of his advisers—however, the King’s son is not particularly good at taking his advice.’

‘That does not answer my question, Sir George.’ If the pompous duke was a great friend of Prinny’s she would find every second in his company loathsome.

To his credit, he laughed at his attempt at evasiveness. ‘If the point of your question was to find out whether or not the Duke of Aveley holds the Regent in high regard, then I have to tell you that to say that he does not would be tantamount to treason and would place his position in the Cabinet in jeopardy. However, to answer you in a roundabout way, I can say that my nephew, like his father before him, is a statesman and to be an effective statesman you have to be a diplomat. As such, I believe he uses that diplomacy to his advantage in order to get things done for the good of the country. He does not socialise with the Regent very often, if you get my meaning, and when he does it is only at events that are important to the state.’

The fact that her host did not gamble or carouse with Prinny made him only slightly less offensive. It was no secret that Lord Liverpool, the Prime Minister, put a great deal of stock in Bennett Montague’s opinions—which made him her natural adversary. Liverpool was unsympathetic to the plight of the poor and preferred to repress dissenters rather than negotiate with them. ‘The newspapers claim that the Duke will be Prime Minister before he is forty.’

‘Oh, dear!’ Sir George chuckled as he swirled his wine around in his glass. ‘Please do not say that in front of Bennett. He has every intention of taking that office before he is thirty-five and even that is too long a wait for his ambitions for the nation.’

Further prying was prevented by the arrival of the Dowager and Lady Worsted. The Duke’s mother took her seat at one end of the table and Amelia’s employer sat down next to her. ‘Where is Bennett? I am famished.’

Sir George glanced pointedly at the clock on the sideboard. ‘It is still two minutes before seven. He will arrive exactly on time, as always.’ He gave Amelia another amused conspiratorial glance. ‘I set my watch by him. He is far more reliable than all of the other timepieces in the house.’

As they made polite conversation, Amelia could not help tuning into the gentle rhythmic ticking of the clock and counting the seconds going past. Surely the man was not such a dull stickler that he would be so precise? But he was.

Chapter Two

It is essential that a good wife has a basic knowledge of politics. As your hostess, she will need to ask pertinent questions designed to stimulate worthy discussion between your male guests...

—*The Discerning Gentleman's Guide to Selecting the Perfect Bride* by Bennett Montague, Sixteenth Duke of Aveley

As the big hand finally touched the hour, the Duke of Aveley strode into the dining room as if he owned the place, which she supposed, in all fairness, he did. Amelia flicked a glance at Sir George and could see her own amusement reflected in her new friend's eyes.

'Good evening everyone.' The Duke sat himself down and snapped open his napkin with almost military precision. 'Lovett—we are ready.'

At his command, the servants began to swarm around the table with the first course, a delicious thin soup. However, and no doubt just to vex her, Amelia's heartbeat became more rapid at the sight of him again. He really was quite splendid to behold. It was such a shame that the interior was not as wonderful as the exterior. A bit like a beautifully iced cake that was old and dry beneath its fancy casing.

The Duke did not bother with unnecessary social chit-chat. 'Mother, I have looked at the list of invitations that you gave me. Whilst I believe that I can manage the Renshaw ball and the Earl of Bainbridge's soiree in December, I am afraid I cannot spare the time for any others in the coming month.'

'That is a great shame, dear,' his mother said with obvious disappointment. 'Are you sure that you cannot squeeze in a fleeting appearance at Lady Bulphan's? Your presence would be quite a coup for her and I did promise her that you would. Priscilla was so looking forward to seeing you.'

'I am afraid not. It is a particularly taxing week at Parliament. Besides, I will still see Priscilla at the reading salon. I am sorry.' Amelia noticed that he did not look particularly sorry at all. He was more interested in his soup than the invitation.

'Who is Priscilla?' Lady Worsted asked her sister.

'She is Lady Bulphan's eldest granddaughter and one of the young ladies on Bennett's Potential list.'

As everybody else around the table apparently knew what this was, Amelia felt obliged to ask her employer for clarification, although she was well aware that, as a companion, she really had no right to ask. 'The Potential list?'

Lady Worsted smiled innocently but there was definitely a spark of something mischievous in her wily old eyes. 'It is Bennett's list of prospective candidates for the future Duchess of Aveley. He has been working his way through it these past two years. The last I heard, there were ten in the running.'

'We are down to five now,' his mother explained helpfully as she tilted her bowl to one side to spoon up more soup. 'He hopes to have narrowed it down to the final choice by late spring—but you know how these things are.' Clearly she did not think that such a thing was a tad odd—but then again her son was a duke.