

---

## Chapter 1

---

Waterloo Station, London, 1880

**T**he large train station bustled with hundreds of people walking briskly to and fro across the station, intent on their destinations. Large, hulking steam engines sat patiently at the edges of platforms, belching huge clouds of black smoke into the air. The noise level was immense; the screech of engine brakes and loud whistles broke through the busy hum of travellers calling to each other and enterprising vendors selling food, drink and other necessities for their customers' journeys.

To a young lady more used to the genteel streets of Mayfair and the quiet green acres of Hyde Park it was a fascinating place that deserved further study. Sadly, her mother did not seem to agree. A firm hand at her elbow tugged the Honourable Annabel Spencer along the platform. Stifling a groan, Annabel turned her attention to her mother.

"Platform seven is this way, I believe," Viscountess Spencer said, peering about the crowded station, looking for some kind of sign, either material or spiritual, to guide her. Waterloo station, notorious for its confusing layout and poor signage, was living up to its reputation.

Convinced they were headed in the right direction, Lady Spencer ploughed forward through the crowds.

"Your father and I will be along to join you at Rosemere in two days' time," she was saying. "Heaven alone knows why the vote in Parliament has to be called now, just before the recess, but apparently this law is more important than the travelling plans of the members of the House of Lords."

"God forbid that the business of ruling the country interfere with a house party," Annabelle said waspishly.

She did not enjoy house parties, as a rule. For a young, unmarried woman there were far too many chances to indulge in reputation-damaging indiscretions, which meant that she was always chaperoned to within an inch of her life. Annabelle's inherent independence of spirit rebelled against such strict control on her behaviour.

"You will be wise to keep such statements to yourself while you are at Rosemere," her mother said sharply. "The Duke of Rothmuir—"

"Whom I have never met," Annabelle interjected.

"—will not be impressed by sarcastic comments—" her mother continued.

"Which he won't hear, because he will have no interest in talking to me," Annabelle added.

"—but by excellent manners, ladylike conversation and a pretty smile!" her mother finished, rather forcefully. Lady Spencer looked her eldest daughter up and down. "One out of three isn't too bad, I suppose," she said thoughtfully.

Annabelle huffed out a loud breath. She knew her mother wasn't being rude about her looks, but there had been many arguments over the years about behaviour and vocabulary. A noise at her back made her turn around; a darkly handsome man, no older than thirty, was walking just behind them. He was tall, with dark hair and deep, intelligent eyes and, if Annabelle was not mistaken, had just stifled a snort of laughter.

Annabelle raised an eyebrow to him. He winked at her. She

turned back around, a blush starting to form on the back of her neck, a curse of her pale complexion. Lord, but he had been handsome. She had met young men before, of course, but none of them had a jaw line like that, as if it had been chiselled from a block of granite. Those shoulders could best be described as a broad expanse, too.

"The house party won't be as large as the Duchess of Rothmuir planned; this last minute vote has stopped some of the guests from travelling."

Her mother's voice returned her attention to the argument they were having and away from the rude but attractive man.

"How lucky I am that you are sending me anyway," Annabelle intoned in the sugary-sweet tone of voice that had been recommended to her by the etiquette mistress at her fashionable finishing school.

Her mother frowned at her, immediately wise to Annabelle's true meaning.

Annabelle was the sole daughter amongst a brood of six strapping sons, a situation that her mother blamed for her less than ladylike habit of speaking her mind, along with some rather boisterous behaviour that did not suit London society's very strict definition of gentle femininity. Repeated exposure to firm governesses and expensive finishing schools had taught Annabelle how to hide her true nature under a thin veneer of ladylike gentility. Unfortunately, and as Lady Spencer was only too aware, that veneer was very thin, indeed, and Annabelle did not require much encouragement for that shell to crack and for her to return to her spirited and tom-boyish ways.

"You are very lucky," her mother snapped. "Rothmuir is that absolute rarity, an unmarried duke. More incredibly, he is young enough for a marriage to be considered. All the other unmarried dukes are widowers past sixty, and far too old for a girl of twenty. Not that it stops some," she added darkly. "Be grateful that your father and I aren't trying for a match with one of *those*."

"Father isn't trying for a match at all," Annabelle said crossly. "He would much prefer it if I stayed at home."

"Your father's opinion is not required in this instance," her mother said brusquely.

It was true; Annabelle was the apple of her father's eye, and if he had his way she would stay with her parents forever, or join a closed order, if she were that desperate to leave the comforts of home.

"What of *my* opinion, Mother?" Annabelle asked.

"What of it?" her mother replied dismissively. "Annabelle, you must be married. You are too independently minded to be truly happy to stay at home. You need a house to run and a husband to manage. We will aim for the duke; it will be nice to say that there is a duchess in the family. If necessary, we will readjust our expectations."

During their conversation, Annabelle and her mother had been weaving through the many travellers thronging the platforms. Annabelle kept sneaking looks behind her and was all too aware of the winking man dogging her footsteps. He seemed to be heading in the same direction as they were. Suddenly her mother stopped dead, forcing Annabelle to look her in the eye and the man to sidestep hurriedly behind them.

"Nobody expects you to be married at the end of this house party, Annabelle," she said seriously. "I know that you have never met Rothmuir, and I would not be so cruel as to force you to marry somebody you disliked. You know that your father would never allow that, and I would never wish such a fate for you. But you *must* marry, and to do that, you must meet eligible young men. There will be other suitable men at the house party."

"I don't understand how we are suddenly appearing on the guest list of a duke, Mother," Annabelle said, skirting a group of children gathered around a harassed looking governess. "We never have before."

Lady Spencer steered Annabelle past two young men who were surrounded by a collection of confused station officials and

enough baggage to sink a small ship. A heated discussion was going on in regards from which platform the train for Kingston-upon-Thames would depart. A small brown dog of indeterminate parentage barking and jumping around the feet of all concerned did not help the situation.

"The mother of the duke, the current Duchess of Rothmuir, and I were debutantes together," Lady Spencer explained. "Rothmuir is a Scottish dukedom, and the duchess spent much of the time in their holdings there, coming back to London for the Season each year. You know what the Season is like, especially for political wives. No time to escape for a few weeks to the country for house parties and the like. The duchess and I kept in touch, though, and we have maintained a friendship over the years. Now that her husband has passed away, she is intent on seeing her son settled. She wants an English bride for him.

"At all events, I met the duchess again this Season, now that she is out of mourning, and she asked us to attend. I am asking you, my dear, to please try to behave well and just see if you could consider Rothmuir as a suitor."

Annabelle sighed. Her mother was appealing to her better nature, and she hated when she did that. Her mother had a point—there was no way that she wanted to live under her parents' roof all her life. A married woman had far more independence than a spinster daughter, providing she managed her husband effectively. In this she had no better role model than her mother, who was the real authority in the Spencer home. Annabelle did not think herself particularly high in the instep, but she couldn't help but admit that there was an allure to the title of Duchess of Rothmuir, even if the word duchess made her think of large, very old ladies whose stays creaked when they moved.

"Very well," Annabelle sighed. "I will be on my best behaviour, Mother. For you."

"Thank you, my dear," her mother said gratefully. "Er, you may as well know. I met the Countess of Warminster last night at

the Gardiner's supper. She and Lady Lily will be in attendance at the house party. Annabelle? Annabelle, what are you doing?"

"I'm looking for a train to throw myself under," Annabelle said, wrinkling her nose in distaste. "It's bad enough I was forced to go to finishing school with that poor excuse for a human being. I shouldn't have to put up with her now that I've left."

"Just do what you can to avoid her," the viscountess sighed. "Rosemere is a large house. You will not be in each other's way."

"She's vicious, Mother," Annabelle said flatly. "She's exactly the sort of person one wants to punch on the nose."

"We all know she's the sort of person that *you* want to punch on the nose, dear," her mother said with a sigh. "Your headmistress wrote some very—detailed letters on the subject."

"I was fully justified!" Annabelle said indignantly. "You didn't see what she did to—"

"Enough, Annabelle," her mother said firmly. "You will just have to do your best not to rise to her bait. Be the better person. A duke will not want to marry a lady who engages in fisticuffs."

"I'm not promising that I will marry the duke," she said in warning. "He may well find me ugly, or my conversation insipid. Or he may have a big wart on his nose, with little hairs on it, like Great-Aunt Augusta's."

"Let us assume," her mother said in a very patient tone, "that the duke is wartless, shall we?"

"Do you know that?" Annabelle queried. "Have you ever met him?"

"Never seen him before in my life," her mother said cheerfully. "Unmarried young dukes do not move in the same social circles as middle-aged viscountesses. But let's give the man the benefit of the doubt, shall we, dear?"

Together they carried on walking to their platform, Annabelle's maid, Ellen, following behind them carrying her valise and jewel case. Their trunks had been unloaded from the carriage by railway porters, who would hopefully see that they were put onto the correct train.

From the corner of her eye Annabelle could see the man who had winked at her hanging back behind them. She did not turn to stare at him directly; that would be giving him attention, which he clearly wanted. Instead she made do with small glimpses as he dodged his way through the crowds, staying close to their party. He was as tall as her brothers, who were all around the six-foot mark, and he was built along the same lines—sturdy, not slender. His clothes were well made, his shoes well shined, and he seemed to take care with his appearance; or, at least, he had a valet who took pride in his work.

Waterloo Station was confusing. They took two wrong turns and had to be guided to their correct platform by the harassed porter Lady Spencer had strong-armed into helping them.

"You never said who would be chaperoning me at the party, Mother," Annabelle said as they waited on what they could only hope was the correct platform.

They were early—too early, in fact, as their train had not arrived yet. Instead, the previous service that ran along the same line was waiting to depart. Carriage doors clattered as people began to seat themselves in the first and third class compartments, and large clouds of sooty black smoke began to belch forth from the scarlet steam engine at the far end of the platform.

If Lady Spencer had a fault, in her daughter's eyes, it was that she could not bear lateness in herself or others. She was so punctual, in fact, that the Spencers often arrived unfashionably early for parties and the theatre. Lady Spencer's third son, Thomas, was often heard to remark that he was the black sheep of the family for having the temerity to be born a week later than anticipated. Arriving at the train station an hour ahead of schedule was therefore not considered unusual Spencer behaviour.

"Didn't I, dear?" her mother said vaguely, scanning the platform, as if looking for somebody in particular.

"Is it Aunt Hannah?" Annabelle asked.

Her mother's sister was widowed, but past her year of

mourning and moving happily in society. She would be a natural chaperone for her only niece.

"No, I asked, but she is unwell," her mother replied, still looking about the platform.

"I suppose Ronald would do, in a pinch," Annabelle said doubtfully.

Her eldest brother was perfectly respectable, but seemed an unlikely escort.

"He's in the middle of courting the lovely Miss Debenham, and refused to leave London," her mother said sourly.

Annabelle had no doubt that Ronald was in for a maternal drubbing in the near future, and hoped she was around to witness it. It was an unwise Spencer child who refused maternal commands. She frowned. Who else could do the job of protecting her just-about-blemish-free reputation? The Spencers weren't blessed with a number of convenient maiden aunts, and none of the boys had married yet, so she had no sisters-in-law who could chaperone her. Her mother usually did the job. Of course, in the past, when she had been in the schoolroom, her governess had doubled as a chaperone when they went about town.

Oh, *no*.

Annabelle could feel herself going pale. "Mother, tell me you did not!" she said, appalled.

Lady Spencer had the grace to blush a little. "I had no choice," she said apologetically. "Your Aunt Hannah is ill, and Ronald is in a delicate part of the courtship, and I can't leave your father until after the vote. I called in personally at the agency, and Miss York was sitting in the receiving parlour. She is between positions at the moment, and was grateful for the work."

"No wonder she is between positions," Annabelle ground out. "That woman is a monster. No doubt she was sacked from her last job!"

"Be fair," her mother chided. "She was an excellent governess."



"She was a prison warden!" Annabelle exclaimed. "I had no freedom to do anything that wasn't sanctioned by her list of approved activities!"

"You were an extremely difficult child," her mother said defensively. "Miss York did the very best she could, in the circumstances. And, you must admit, you had a first-class education."

"You weren't in that schoolroom," Annabelle muttered. "You have no idea what I endured."

"I have a good idea what Miss York endured," her mother said darkly. "And the whole point of hiring a governess is so that a mother does not have to do battle with her children over French verbs and the multiplication tables. As far as I am concerned, Miss York did a superb job with highly questionable material. "

"She is loathsome, and I won't tolerate her," Annabelle said mutinously.

"Do be quiet, dear, here she comes," her mother said, elbowing her sharply in the ribs. "Smile and be nice. It's only for two days, until your father and I can join the party. Three days, possibly. No longer than a week, certainly."

"A week!" howled Annabelle, to the amusement of the man who had been following them across the station.

He had stopped at the same platform, the one for the Oxford-bound train. She glared at him, and he smiled, clearly enjoying her displeasure. He bowed his head politely, and headed towards the train waiting at the platform edge. He disappeared into a cloud of steam and smoke, and was gone. Annabelle hoped he had fallen off the edge of the platform, with only his strong jaw line to break his fall.

Across the crowded space, Miss York plodded inevitably towards the Spencers. Her habitual frown was in place, and her spectacles sat primly on her large, hooked nose.

"Mother, I beg you, don't make me put up with her," Annabelle pleaded.

"The matter is settled," Lady Spencer said with heavy finality.

"Don't be such a child, Annabelle. Ah, Miss York!" she called, waving.

Annabelle looked around the platform in desperation. They would have a whole hour, possibly longer, to spend in polite small talk before she was despatched to Oxfordshire with Miss York for company. She would have to tolerate her, alone, at a house party where she probably would not know anybody else, for possibly a whole week.

Something inside her snapped. This was going to happen; there was nothing she could do to stop that. It was a *fait accompli*. However, if she moved quickly, she could have the entire train journey to Oxfordshire alone, as well as a few hours at the house party without the confining presence of Miss York. She'd bat her eyelashes and blame a mix-up at the railway station, and have a bit of an adventure. It would be the last such adventure she would be able to have for a week, at the very least.

The guard on the platform was waving his flag.

"All aboard!" he called.

The train started to billow more smoke. Doors slammed shut with finality. The cars were beginning to move slowly. It was now or never.

"See you soon, Mother!" Annabelle said suddenly and darted for the train.

She had moved so quickly that her mother did not have time to grab her arm. She ran for the nearest compartment and yanked the door open. Annabelle's mother had put her foot down about tightly laced corsets several years previously; Annabelle was to wear only the more sensible and loosely-laced Jaeger corset that was lined with cord, not whalebone. This maternal sensibility allowed Annabelle to clamber up into the moving carriage and slam the door just as the train began to pick up speed. She stumbled backwards into a seat and laughed with glee as they began to leave the platform behind. She looked back through the window and saw her mother scowling with fury as Miss York began a decent attempt to catch the moving vehicle.

However, the power of steam locomotion was more than that of a determined, middle-aged woman in a tight corset, and Miss York quickly dropped out of sight.

Sighing happily, Annabelle pulled out the pins securing the hat to her dark blonde hair. She settled the small blue confection on the seat next to her, glad that it had not been lost in the dash for the train. She was fond of a good hat.

"That was a surprise exit," a deep, masculine voice said dryly. "I take it you were fleeing the monstrous Miss York?"

Annabelle looked around in alarm. The carriage was not empty, as she had imagined it to be. Sitting in the middle of the seats on the opposite side of the compartment was the man from the station. He had been reading the newspaper, and was now peering at her over the top of it, an amused smile on his face.

"Eavesdropping on private conversations is an ungentlemanly act," she said with all the hauteur she could muster.

"Ah, but when they're so amusing, how can one resist?" he said, his dark eyes lit with humour. "And, if I may be so bold, leaping onto trains unescorted is hardly the act of a properly behaved lady."

"I did not *leap*, I—entered," Annabelle blustered. "At speed," she allowed. "And it's my mother's fault," she added, seemingly unable to stop herself under the scrutiny of those dark eyes. "If she weren't so keen on being early all the time, there wouldn't have been a train for me to board. As it is, I'll just be slightly ahead of my chaperone. There is no danger."

"But you're here, alone, with me," the man pointed out. "There is danger in that, is there not?"

Annabelle looked at him properly and took in the width of bicep shown by the tight cut of his coat, the size of the hands holding the newspaper.

"You may be no gentleman, sir, but I do not take you for a villain, either," she said bravely. "I do not believe those ghostly penny rags with their stories of the dangerous railways. I do not think you would do me harm."

"Perhaps not," he said, his head dropping to one side as he looked at her properly. She felt his assessing gaze drift down from her face, down to the swell of her bosom and down over the length of her legs, hidden from view in her neat, pale-blue traveling dress. "But a lady can never be too sure of these things. We are, after all, alone in this compartment."

"There is a guard," Annabelle said, her voice challenging him to retort.

"This is the last carriage," the man responded, immediately. "And the first class carriages are separate from the third. The guard will not enter this carriage until we stop at the next station which will not be for—" he paused to flip open his pocket watch, an attractive gold timepiece that looked both old and expensive. "Forty-five minutes."

He looked up from the watch and caught her gaze straight in the eye.

"Anything could happen to you in forty-five minutes."

Annabelle bit her lip. He was right; anything could. A sudden wickedness bubbled up inside her. Oh, how she wished *he* would do something.

"I refuse to believe that you would do anything that I did not wish you to do," she said with boldness that she did not quite feel. "Or that I would let you do it," she added for good measure.

He let out a bark of laughter, truly amused by her words.

"You think that you are capable of defending yourself?" he asked, putting down the newspaper.

"I think that I have six brothers, and that I have learned how best to defend myself against their constant attacks," she said dryly. "I know how to hurt a man."

She did, too. Once she had elbowed a brother in a particularly vulnerable spot, she soon caught on to how quickly a male would fall to the ground howling. She also paid attention to the impromptu boxing lessons that sprang up amongst them, and she had blackened the eyes of four of her brothers at various times, the last being a fortnight past.

"You know, I do believe that you could," the man said, smiling again.

Annabelle did not know what to say to this, so remained silent. She turned her head to look out the window and watched London fall behind the steaming locomotive. Soon streets full of houses turned into pleasant green fields, which were decidedly less interesting to look at. Annabelle had been carrying a small bag with some necessary items for the trip. She had her coin purse and train ticket, a small comb, mirror, and a slender novel. The cover proclaimed it to be called *Agatha: The Story of a Virtuous Maid* but that was only because Annabelle had switched the cheap paper cover from that novel onto the far more salacious one she was now reading. There was nobody called Agatha in this book, and no virtuous maids, either. There were a number of young ladies getting up to all sorts of licentious behaviour which Annabelle should have known nothing about.

The beauty of having so many brothers still living at home was that they were bound to have a stash of contraband items. Andrew, her second eldest brother, had a predilection for naughty novels, and Annabelle had been borrowing them without his knowledge for years. She merely kept the disposable dust jacket from a far more worthy tome and wrapped it around the scandalous one. Nobody had ever been the wiser.

"Your book still has the dust jacket on it."

Annabelle sighed aloud. Of course this insufferable man would notice that.

"I find it protects the book," Annabelle said, without looking at him.

"Most people throw them away," the man said, sounding interested.

"I am not most people," Annabelle said through gritted teeth.

"No, you are not," he said in a measured tone.

He moved quickly for a large man; before Annabelle could react, he reached over and snatched the book out of her unsuspecting hands.

"*Agatha: A Virtuous Maid*," he said aloud. "How very —improving."

"Please give it back to me," Annabelle said icily, extending her hand.

"A good book, is it?" the man enquired. "Exciting?"

"Not particularly exciting, no," Annabelle said warily. "Please give it back. It's not mine."

"That's odd," the man said knowingly. "Because you were blushing."

"I was not blushing," Annabelle said hotly, cursing her pale skin.

"You were, too," the man said, flipping the book open. "I wonder what virtuous things *Agatha* was doing to make you so worked up."

"Please don't do that!" Annabelle cried, lurching for the book.

She misjudged the length of her dress, and stepped on the hem, sending her stumbling forward towards the man. He caught her deftly, his quick reflexes evident again, but he did not release her. Instead he lifted her off her feet and sat her on his lap. His left arm wrapped around her like a steel band, trapping her in place. In his right, he held the book.

"Let go of me," Annabelle commanded through gritted teeth. She struggled against his grip, but he held her firmly.

"Stop that wriggling," he said sternly. "Or continue it, if you wish, but you will be responsible for the consequences."

She writhed some more, and then suddenly came across what he had referred to as *the consequences*. She had read enough of those naughty novels to understand what that bulge in his trousers indicated. She felt a blush stain her cheeks and a familiar wetness start to moisten the meeting of her thighs. Her body did that when the books made her excited. When she was in that state, her natural instinct was to rub against something firm. The books had guided her towards understanding the pleasure her body could give her. This was the first time that a real person had given her those feelings.

"Now, let us see what Agatha has been getting up to," the man said, flipping the book open to a random page. He scanned the page, muttering the words under his breath. "I say," he said admiringly. "Old Agatha *is* having some fun. No wonder you were blushing."

Annabelle had been trying to break the man's vice-like grip, but she was unable to free her arms. She slumped against him in defeat.

"It gets better in chapter four," she told him, resigned.

"Chapter four," he said, letting the pages fall open. "Let me see—"

He was a fast reader, Annabelle noted. His eyes scanned the pages quickly. He seemed to tighten his grip on her as he read; he jostled her slightly so she was shifted enough for his left hand to reach her breast. He squeezed it almost absent-mindedly, as if it were the natural thing to do to a woman perched on his lap. His touch sent instant messages to Annabelle's core, and she could feel herself becoming wetter and wetter. Everything about this situation was wrong, Annabelle knew, but at the same time it just felt *so* right. She was torn between screaming for help from the next carriage, and begging him to slip his fingers into her dress and touch her skin.

He let the book snap shut suddenly, and placed it on the empty seat next to him with great care.

"Jumping into moving train carriages," he said, his voice sounding even deeper than it had before. "Avoiding the company of chaperones. Possessing books that describe some of the most lascivious sexual acts ever put down on paper. I think you, young lady, are a very naughty girl indeed."

"So what if I am?" Annabelle challenged him. "What is it to you? You don't know me. You shouldn't call me *young lady* in that tone, either. You cannot be much older than I am."

"No," he said thoughtfully. "I do not know you at all. I do not know your family name. We have never met before today. You, in turn, know nothing of me."

Annabelle nodded her head. This was true. Other than his being the most shockingly attractive man she had ever met in her life, she knew nothing of him.

"You read novels about naughty young women punished by strong, stern men," he said, with a nod to the book. "I am a strong, stern man who just happens to have a *very* badly behaved young lady here in this carriage. I think it is my responsibility to punish you for your lack of decorum and proper behaviour, just as the heroine of that book is punished."

Annabelle's breath caught in her throat. Was he suggesting—did he want to—

"You are, of course, an unmarried young lady," he went on. "I would not relieve you of your virginity."

Was what she felt relief? She should be relieved, she knew. She didn't think she *was* relieved at his statement of intent, though, which was a whole other worry.

"I will spank you," he said decisively. "And if I think that you bear the punishment bravely, I will reward you with the pleasure you read about so voraciously."

"And if I say no?" Annabelle asked weakly. "If I do not wish to be punished?"

There was a pause before he answered.

"Then I will let you go," he said, his mouth close to her ear. "You will sit in your seat across from me, and I will not speak to you or touch you for the rest of our time together in this carriage."

Why did this sound like the real punishment? And why did the heat from his breath send such shivers down her spine?

"What do you say?" he asked. "Will you be punished, or not?"

"Yes," she gasped, and the hand on her breast squeezed reflexively.

"Say it," he ordered.

"Yes, I want to be punished!" she said, crying out as his fingers on her breast found her nipple and squeezed.



Pain lanced through her body, followed quickly by a quick bolt of intense pleasure. The iron band of his arm suddenly released her.

"Stand," he ordered. "Pull up your skirts."

Blushing furiously, Annabelle did as he said. Up went the pale blue silk of her travelling dress, and up went the long white linen petticoat beneath it. She wore drawers underneath, of course, long ones hemmed at her knees. Now, though, she was beginning to wonder about the practicality of the slit at the back that left her most private parts exposed.

"You may leave those on for now," he said, looking her up and down. "Get over my knee. Quickly, now."

Annabelle glanced at the glass window in the door. The blind that would block them from view was not pulled down. Should other first class passengers wander along the passageway, they would see everything. She moved towards the door with her hand raised, intent on pulling down the blind.

"I said *quickly*," he bit out sharply. "Leave that blind alone and get over my knee!"