

Whitney, My Love Novel Chapter 4

Chapter Four

ON THE DAY BEFORE WHITNEY'S OFFICIAL DEBUT INTO SOCIETY, A letter arrived from Emily Williams that left Whitney lightheaded with relief: Paul had purchased some property in the Bahama Islands and was planning to remain there for a year. Since Whitney could not imagine Paul tumbling into love with a sun-burned Colonial, that meant she had a full year in which to prepare herself to go home. An entire year without having to worry about Paul marrying someone else.

To help quiet her nerves over the ball tomorrow evening, she curled up on a rose satin settee in the salon and was happily rereading all of Emily's letters which were hidden inside a book of etiquette. So absorbed was she with them, that Whitney was unaware that someone was watching her.

Nicolas DuVille stood in the doorway with the note his sister, Therese, had insisted he deliver personally to Miss Stone. Since Therese had tried a dozen other ploys in the last month to put Miss Stone in his way, Nicki had no doubt that delivering this note was a fool's errand devised between the two girls. It was not the first time his sister had tried to interest him in one of her giddy young friends, and from experience, Nicki knew the best way to nip Miss Stone's romantic plans for him in the proverbial bud was simply to fluster and intimidate the chit until she was relieved to see him leave.

His cool gaze took in the fetching scene which Miss Stone had obviously planned in advance so that she would appear to best advantage. Sunlight streamed in the window beside her, highlighting her gleaming cascade of dark hair, a long strand of which she was idly curling around her forefinger as she feigned absorption in her book; her yellow morning dress was arranged in graceful folds, and her feet were coyly tucked beneath her. Her profile was serene, with long lashes slightly lowered, and a faint

suggestion of a smile played about her generous lips. Impatient with her little charade, Nicolas stepped into the room. "A very charming picture, Mademoiselle. My compliments," he drawled insolently.

Snapping her head up, Whitney closed the book of etiquette containing Emily's letters and laid it aside as she arose. Uncertainly, she gazed at a man in his late twenties who was coldly regarding her down the length of his aristocratic nose. He was undeniably handsome, with black hair and piercing, gold-flecked brown eyes.

"Have you had an edifying look, Mademoiselle?" he asked bluntly.

Realizing that she had been staring at him, Whitney caught herself abruptly and nodded toward the note in his hand. "Have you come to see my aunt?"

To Whitney's stunned amazement, the man strolled into the room and thrust the note at her. "I am Nicolas DuVile, and your butler has already informed me that you have been expecting me. Therefore, I believe we can dispense with your pretense of coy surprise, can we not?"

Whitney stood in shock as the man subjected her to a leisurely appraisal that began at her face and wandered boldly down the full length of her rigid body. Did his gaze actually linger on her breasts, or was it only her confused imagination that made it seem that way? When he was finished inspecting her from the front, he strolled around her, considering her from all angles as if she were a horse he was thinking of purchasing. "Don't bother," he said, when Whitney nervously opened the note. "It says that Therese left her bracelet here, but you and I know that is only an excuse for us to meet."

Whitney was bewildered, embarrassed, amused, and insulted, all at the same time. Therese had said her brother was arrogant, but somehow Whitney had never imagined he'd be this horrid.

"Actually," he said, as he came around to stand in front of her, "you are not at an what I expected." His voice held a note of reluctant approbation.

"Nicolas!" Aunt Anne's gracious greeting relieved Whitney of the necessity of replying. "How lovely to see you. I've been expecting you-one of the maids discovered Therese's bracelet beneath a cushion of a sofa. The clasp was broken. I'll get it for you," she said, hurrying from the room.

Nicki's startled gaze shot to Miss Stone. A smile trembled on her lips as she lifted her delicate brows at him, visibly enjoying his chagrin. In view of his earlier rudeness, Nicki felt that some form of polite conversation was now required of him. He leaned down and picked up the etiquette book containing Emily's letters, glanced at the title, and then at Whitney. "Are you teaching good manners, Mademoiselle?" he inquired.

"Yes," Miss Stone replied, her eyes glowing with suppressed laughter. "Would you care to borrow my book?"

Her quip earned her a lazy, devastating smile of admiration. "I see that some form of atonement for my earlier behavior is in order. Mademoiselle," he said with laughing gravity, "would you favor me with a dance tomorrow night?"

Whitney hesitated, taken aback by his engaging smile and open admiration.

Mistaking her silence for coquettishness, Nicolas shrugged, and all the warmth left his smile as he said with mocking amusement, "From your hesitation, I will assume that all your dances are already bespoken. Another time, perhaps."

Whitney realized he was withdrawing his invitation, and she instantly decided the man was as arrogant and perverse as she'd first thought. "None of my dances are bespoken," she floored him by candidly admitting. "You see, you are the first gentleman I've met in Paris."

Her deliberate emphasis on the word "gentleman" did not escape Nicki, who suddenly threw back his head and laughed.

"Here is the bracelet," Lady Gilbert said, hurrying into the room. "And Nicolas, please remind Therese that the clasp is broken."

Nicki took the bracelet and left. He climbed into his carriage, instructed his groom to drive him round to his mother's, then relaxed back against the leather cushions. They drove past a park whose winding paths bloomed extravagantly with spring flowers. Two pretty females of his acquaintance lifted pastel-gloved hands at him in greeting, but Nicki scarcely glanced at the Gainsborough-like scene. His thoughts were occupied with the young English girl he had just met.

Try as he might, he couldn't understand how Whitney Stone and his addlepatented chatterbox of a sister had become such boon companions, for they were as dissimilar

as lemonade and heady French wine. Therese was a pretty thing, sweet as lemonade, but she had no hidden depths to interest a man.

Whitney Stone, on the other hand, was a veritable treasure of contrasts, sparkling like rich, red burgundy with the promise of hidden and tantalizing things to come. For a seventeen-year-old, she had borne his mocking disdain with remarkable composure. Given a few years, Nicolas decided, she would be fascinating. A chuckle welled up in his chest as he recalled how adroitly she'd retaliated for his remark about the etiquette book, by offering to lend it to him.

It would be a pity, he decided, for such a rare jewel as she to be relegated to obscurity at the crowded debutante ball tomorrow night, merely because she was a stranger to France.

Gorgeous tapestries adorned one side of the gigantic ballroom, and the opposite wall was mirrored to reflect the light from the thousands of candles in the glittering chandeliers overhead. Catching sight of her reflection in one of the mirrors, Whitney nervously studied her appearance. Her white silken ball gown was trimmed with broad scallops caught up and held in place with pink silk roses which matched the ones entwined in the heavy curls at her crown. She looked, she decided, a great deal calmer than she felt.

"Everything is going to be wonderful, you'll see," whispered Aunt Anne.

Whitney did not think everything was going to be wonderful at all. She knew she couldn't possibly hope to compete with the dazzling blondes and redheads, the demure little brunettes, who were laughing and talking easily with smiling young men garbed in black, but with brightly colored waistcoats of silks and satin. Whitney told herself she didn't care a pin about anything as foolish as a silly ball, but she knew it wasn't true. She cared very much.

Therese and her mama arrived only seconds before the musicians raised their instruments for the first dance. "I have the most splendid news," Therese whispered breathlessly, looking like a confection in her white lace gown with her cheeks pink and her shining blond hair elegantly curled atop her head. "My maid is cousin to Nicki's valet and he told her that Nicki is coming tonight. And he is bringing three of his friends as well-he bet them five-hundred francs against two hours of their time tonight on a roll of the dice, and they lost, so they have to come and dance with you . . ." She broke off with an apologetic shrug to Whitney and bestowed a charming curtsy upon the young man who had come to ask her for a dance.

Whitney's mind was still reeling with embarrassment over this news when the musicians struck the first note of music, and the debutantes were escorted onto the dance floor by their respective partners. Not all the debutantes-Whitney felt her color deepen as she looked helplessly at Aunt Anne. She had known when she came tonight

that she might not be asked to dance at first, but she hadn't expected to feel so wretchedly conspicuous at being left standing there with her aunt and Madame DuVille. The feeling was painfully familiar -it was as if she were back home in England where invitations to neighborhood functions were infrequent and, if she went, she was either treated with derision or ignored.

Therese danced the second and third dances, but Whitney was not asked for either. When it was time for the fourth one, the humiliation of being passed over again was more than she could bear. Leaning toward Aunt Anne, Whitney started to ask if she could go somewhere to freshen up, but there was a commotion at the entrance and she curiously followed the gazes of the other guests.

Nicolas DuVille and three other gentlemen were standing beneath the arched portico at the entrance to the ballroom. Carelessly at ease in their elegant dark formal wear, and serenely indifferent to the wild attention they were receiving, they surveyed the crowd. In frozen apprehension, Whitney watched as Nicolas DuVille's gaze swept the staring masses of giggling debutantes and young dandies. When at last he saw Whitney, he inclined his head slightly in greeting, and the foursome started forward.

Whitney pressed back against the wall, childishly tempted to try to squeeze herself between it and Aunt Anne. She didn't want to risk another confrontation with Nicolas DuVille. Yesterday she'd been too surprised to feel intimidated by him; tonight what pride and self-confidence she possessed were already in tatters, and to add to her discomfort, she was acutely aware of how elegantly urbane and handsome Nicolas looked in his Mack evening attire.

She watched the men threading their way through the watchful crowd, coming right toward her, and even in her state of paralyzed horror, Whitney recognized the sharp contrast between Nicolas DuVille's group and the other gentlemen in the room. He and his party were not only several years older than most of the young men paying lavish court to even younger girls, there was also an aura of smooth sophistication about them that further set them apart.

Madame DuVille laughed with delighted surprise as her son greeted her. "Nicki, I could not be more astonished if the devil himself strolled in!"

"Why thank you, Mama," he murmured drily, making her a brief bow. Abruptly, he turned to Whitney and grinned as he took her cold hand in his. Raising it to his lips for a formal kiss, he said with an infuriating chuckle, "Stop looking so astounded to find

yourself the object of my attention, Mademoiselle. You should act as if this is nothing more than you expect."

Whitney stared at him wide-eyed, not certain whether she was insulted or grateful for his unsolicited advice.

He raised an ironic eyebrow, as if he knew what she was thinking, then he turned and introduced his three companions to her.

The music began and without asking, Nicki simply took her hand, placed it on his arm, and escorted her onto the dance floor. He guided her effortlessly through the swirling waltz, while Whitney concentrated on following the steps she had learned from her dancing instructor.

"Mademoiselle." Nicki's deep voice vibrated with humor. "If you will look up at me, you will find that I am gazing down at you in what our bewildered audience sees as a warm and admiring manner. However, if you continue to memorize the folds in my neckcloth, I am going to stop looking besotted and begin looking quite weary and bored. If I do, instead of being launched into society tonight, you will remain a wallflower. Now, look up at me and smile."

"A wallflower!" Whitney burst out, her gaze flying to his. She saw the humor in his eyes, and her indignation dissolved. "I feel so conspicuous," she admitted. "Everyone in this room seems to be watching us and ..."

"They are not watching us," he contradicted with a tolerant chuckle. "They are watching me, and trying to decide if you are what has lured me to this dull assembly of virtuous innocents-"

"-And away from your usual pursuit of vice and depravity?" Whitney teased, while a slow, unconsciously provocative smile dawned across her vivid features.

"Exactly," Nicki agreed with a grin.

"In that case," she mused in a laughter-tinged voice, "won't this waltz ruin my reputation before I even have one?"

"No, but it may ruin mine." Nicki saw her shocked look and said lightly, "It is not at all in my style to appear at debutante balls, Mademoiselle, And for me to be seen like this, actually enjoying myself dancing with an impertinent chit of your tender years, is unheard of."

Whitney pulled her gaze from Nicolas DuVille's ruggedly chiseled face and glanced around at the young dandies in their bright satin waistcoats. They were staring at Nicki in open irritation, and no wonder! Nicki's impeccably tailored midnight Mack attire, his air of smooth urbanity, made them all seem somewhat overdressed and rather callow.

"Are they still staring?" Nicki teased.

Whitney bit her lip, trying to hold back the laughter that was already sparkling in her eyes as she looked up into Us handsome face. "Yes, but I can't really blame them-you are rather like a hawk in a room full of canaries."

A slow, admiring smile swept across his features. "I am indeed," he breathed softly. And then he said, "You have an enchanting smile, cherie."

Whitney was thinking that he was the one possessed of a wonderful smile, when it vanished behind a dark frown. "Is-is something wrong?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied bluntly. "Do not let a man you aren't betrothed to call you 'cherie.'"

"I will stare them out of countenance if they dare!" Whitney promptly promised.

"Much better," he applauded, and then boldly, "... cherie."

At the conclusion of the waltz, he guided her back to her aunt, keeping his head bent toward her as if he were positively hanging on her every word. He waited there, rarely taking his eyes off of her as she danced in turn with each of his three friends.

Whitney felt a little giddy and reckless and wonderful. Already there were a gratifying number of gentlemen asking for introductions to her. She knew it was because of the extravagant and unprecedented attention she was receiving from Nicolas DuVille and his friends, but she was too relieved and grateful to care.

Claude Delacroix, a handsome, fair-haired man who had come with Nicolas, instantly discovered that Whitney loved horses, and the two of them had a thoroughly enjoyable disagreement about the merits of one breed over another. He even asked if she would care to go for a drive with him one day soon, which was certainly not at Nicki's prompting.

Whitney felt very pleased and flattered, and she was smiling as he returned her to her aunt.

Nicki, however, was not pleased, nor was he smiling, when he immediately claimed her for the next dance. "Claude Delacroix," he informed her curtly as his arm encircled her, "is from a fine old family. He is an outstanding whip, an excellent gambler, and a good friend. He is not, however, a suitable companion for you, nor should you think of him as a possible suitor. In matters of the heart, Claude is an expert, but he loses interest very quickly, and then ..."

"He breaks the lady's heart?" Whitney guessed with mock solemnity.

"Exactly," Nick said severely.

Whitney knew her heart already belonged to Paul, and so it was not in any danger. With a soft smile, she said, "I shall guard my heart with great care."

Nicki's gaze lingered on her soft, inviting lips, then lifted to her glowing jade eyes. "Perhaps," he breathed with a tinge of self-mockery that Whitney couldn't understand, "I ought to warn Claude to guard his heart. If you were older, Mademoiselle, I think I would."

When Nicki returned her to her aunt, there were more than a dozen gentlemen, all eager for a dance with her and waiting to claim it. Nicki detained her with a hand on her arm, and nodded toward the young man at the end of the line. "Andre Rousseau," he said, "would make an excellent husband for you."

Whitney gave him a look of laughing exasperation. "You really shouldn't say things like that."

"I know." He grinned. "Now, am I forgiven for my rudeness yesterday?"

Whitney nodded happily. "I would say that I have just been 'launched' as beautifully as one of England's ships."

Nicki's smile was filled with warmth as he raised her fingers to his lips. "Bon voyage, cherie," he said.

And then he was gone.

Whitney was still thinking about the night before and smiling softly to herself as she descended the stairs the following morning, intending to ride her uncle's spirited mare. Masculine voices drifted into the hallway from the drawing room, and as Whitney started to walk past, Aunt Anne appeared in the doorway, her face wreathed in a smile. "I was just coming up to get you," she whispered. "You have callers."

"Callers?" Whitney repeated, panicking. It was one thing to mouth the usual prescribed platitudes during the dancing last night, another thing entirely to charm and interest these gentlemen who had now exerted themselves to pay a morning call on her. "Whatever shall I say to them?" Whitney begged. "What shall I do?"

"Do?" Anne smiled, stepping aside and firmly placing her hand against the small of Whitney's back. "Why, be yourself, darling."

Hesitantly, Whitney entered the room. "I was about to ride-in the park," she explained to her callers-three of the gentlemen she had danced with last night. The three young men leapt to their feet, each one thrusting a bouquet of flowers toward her. Whitney's

gaze slid to the bouquets they were holding, and a smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "It appears that the three of you have just come from there."

They blinked at her as it registered on each of them that she was teasing them about having purloined the flowers from the park beds. And then-surprise of surprises-they were smiling at her and arguing good-naturedly over who was to have the honor of accompanying her to the park.

In the true spirit of fairness, Whitney happily permitted all of them to accompany her.

That year Miss Stone was proclaimed "an Original." At a time when young ladies were models of dainty fragility and blushing coquetry, Whitney was impulsive and gay. While other young ladies her age were demure, Whitney was clever and direct.

During the following year, Anne watched as nature collaborated with time, and Whitney's youthful face fulfilled all its former promise of vivid beauty. Sooty black lashes fringed incredibly expressive eyes which changed from sea-green to deep jade beneath the graceful arch of her dark brows. Burnished mahogany tresses framed an exquisitely sculpted face with a softly generous mouth and skin as smooth as cream satin. Her figure was still slim, but ripened now, with tantalizing curves and graceful hollows. That was the year she was proclaimed "an Incomparable."

Gentlemen told her that she was "ravishingly beautiful" and "enchantingly lovely" and that she haunted their dreams. Whitney listened to their lavish compliments and passionate pledges of undying devotion with a smile that was part amused disbelief and part genuine gratitude for their kindness.

She reminded Anne of an elusive tropical bird, surprised, and delighted by her own appeal, who landed tentatively and then, when one of her suitors reached out to capture her, flew away.

She was beautiful, but gentlemen left the sides of equally beautiful young women to cluster around her, beckoned by the gaiety that seemed to surround her and the easy playfulness of her manners.

By the beginning of her third year "out" in society, Whitney had become a challenge to more worldly, sophisticated men who sought to win her merely to prove that they could succeed where others had failed-only to find themselves rather unexpectedly in love with a young woman who hadn't the slightest inclination to reciprocate their feelings. Everyone knew she would soon have to marry; after all, she was already nineteen years old. Even Lord Gilbert was becoming concerned, but when he observed to his wife that Whitney was being excessively fussy, Anne only smiled.

Because it seemed to her that Whitney had lately developed a decided partiality for Nicolas DuVille.