

Whitney, My Love Chapter 3

Chapter Three

FRANCE 1816-1820

SITUATED BEHIND WROUGHT-IRON GATES, LORD AND LADY Gilbert's Parisian home was imposing without being austere. Huge bow windows admitted light to the spacious rooms; pastels lent an air of sunny elegance to everything from parlors to second-floor bedrooms. "And these are your rooms, darling," Anne said as she opened the door to a suite carpeted in pale blue.

Whitney stood mesmerized on the threshold, her gaze roving longingly over the magnificent white satin coverlet on the bed splashed with flowers of orchid, pink, and blue. A dainty settee was covered in matching fabric. Delicate porcelain vases were filled with flowers in the same hues of orchid and pink. Ruefully, Whitney turned to her aunt. "I'd feel ever so much better, Aunt Anne, if you could find another room for me, something not quite so, well, fragile. Anyone at home," Whitney explained to Anne's amazed expression, "could tell you that I've only to walk by something delicate to send it crashing to the floor."

Anne turned to the servant beside her who was shouldering Whitney's heavy trunk, "In here," Anne said with a firm nod of her head toward the wonderful blue room.

"Don't say you weren't forewarned," sighed Whitney, removing her bonnet and settling herself gingerly on the flowered settee. Paris, she decided, was going to be heavenly.

The parade of visitors began promptly at half past eleven, three days later, with the arrival of Anne's personal dressmaker, accompanied by three smiling seamstresses who talked endlessly about styles and fabrics and measured and remeasured Whitney.

Thirty minutes after they departed, Whitney found herself marching back and forth with a book on her head before the critical stare of the plump woman whom Aunt Anne was entrusting with the formidable task of teaching Whitney something called "social graces."

"I am atrociously clumsy, Madame Froussard," Whitney explained with an embarrassed flush as the book plummeted to the floor for the third time.

"But no!" Madame Froussard contradicted, shaking her elaborately coiffed silver hair. "Mademoiselle Stone has a natural grace and excellent posture. But Mademoiselle most learn not to walk as if she were in a race."

By the dancing instructor who arrived on the heels of Madame Froussard's departure, Whitney was whirled around the room in time to an imaginary waltz and judged, "Not at all hopeless-with practice."

By the French tutor who appeared at tea time, she was pronounced, "Fit to instruct me, Lady Gilbert"

For some months, Madame Froussard visited for two hours, five times each week, instructing Whitney in the social graces. Under her relentless, exacting tutelage, Whitney worked diligently to learn anything which might eventually help her win favor in Paul's eyes.

"Exactly what are you learning from Madame Froussard?" inquired Uncle Edward as they dined one evening.

A sheepish look crept across Whitney's face. "She is teaching me to stroll not gallop." She waited, half expecting her uncle to say that was a nonsensical waste of time, but instead he smiled approvingly. Whitney smiled back, feeling unaccountably happy. "Do you know," she teased, "I once believed that all one needed to walk properly were two sound limbs!"

From that night on, Whitney's laughing anecdotes about her day's endeavors became a delightful ritual at each evening meal. "Did you ever observe, Uncle," she asked him gaily one night, "that there is an art to turning around in a court dress with a train?"

"Mine never gave me any trouble," he joked.

"Done incorrectly," Whitney informed him with mock solemnity, "one is likely to find oneself wrapped in a train that has just become a tourniquet."

A month later she slid into her chair and fluttered a silken fan, eyeing her uncle with a speculative sparkle over the slats. "Are you over-warm, my dear?" Edward asked her, already into the spirit of the inevitable fun.

"A fan is not really for cooling oneself," Whitney advised him, batting her long eyelashes with an exaggerated coquetry that made Anne burst out laughing. "A fan is for flirting. It is also for keeping one's hands gracefully occupied. And for slapping the arm of a gentleman who is too forward."

The laughter vanished from Edward's face. "What gentleman has become too forward?" he demanded tersely.

"Why, no one has. I don't know any gentlemen yet," Whitney replied.

Anne watched the two of them, her smile filled with joy, for Whitney now occupied the place in Edward's heart, and hers, that would have been their own daughter's.

One evening the following May, the month before Whitney's official debut into society, Edward produced three opera tickets. Tossing them with artificial casualness in front of Whitney, he suggested that-if her schedule permitted- she might enjoy accompanying her aunt and himself to the Embassy's private box.

A year ago, Whitney would have whirled around in a rapturous circle, but she had changed now, so instead she beamed at her uncle and said, "I would like that above anything, Uncle Edward."

In silence she sat while Clarissa, who had been Susan

Stone's maid before she became companion and maid to Susan's daughter, brushed her hair and swept it upward, smoothing it into curls at the crown. Her new white bock with ice-blue velvet ribbons at the high waistline and frilled hemline was gently lowered over her head. A matching ice-blue satin cloak completed her ensemble. Whitney stood before her mirror, staring at herself with shining eyes. Tentatively, she dropped into a deep throne room curtsy, her head bowed to the perfect angle. "May I present Miss Whitney Stone," she murmured gravely. "The belle of Paris."

A fine, chilly mist descended, making the Paris streets gleam in the moonlight. Whitney snuggled deeper into the folds of her satin cloak, loving the feel of it against her chin, while she looked out the window at the teeming mass of humanity scurrying along the wide, rain-swept boulevards.

Outside the theatre crowds milled about in gay defiance of the dampness. Handsome gentlemen in satin coats and tight-fitting breeches bowed and nodded to ladies who glittered with jewels. Stepping from the coach, Whitney gazed in wonderment at the unbelievably gorgeous ladies who stood, poised and confident, talking to their escorts. They were, she decided then and there, the most beautiful women in the world, and

she instantly dismissed any future hope of ever really being "the belle of Paris." But she did so with very little regret, for there was a wonderful exhilaration in simply being here among them.

As the trio made their way into the theatre, only Anne observed the younger gentlemen whose idle glances flickered past Whitney, then returned for another, longer look. Whitney's beauty was a blossoming thing, a vividness of features and coloring that promised much more to come. There was a radiance about her that sprang from her lively spirit and zest for life, a regalness and poise in her bearing that came from clashing head-on for so many years with adversity.

In the Consulate's private box, Whitney settled her beautiful new gown about her and picked up her ivory fan, using it, as Madame Froussard had instructed, to occupy her hands. She could have laughed at how silly she'd been, wasting so much time on lessons in languages and mathematics, when what she'd really needed to learn in order to please Paul and her father was so incredibly simple. Why, the fan in her hand was far more useful than Greek!

All about her a sea of beads bobbed and dipped, feathers fluttering from elaborate headdresses. Whitney could have hugged herself with the joy of it all. She saw a gentleman receive a playful slap with his lady's fan, and she felt a kinship with all women, as she wondered what impropriety he'd whispered to his lovely lady, who looked more flattered than distressed.

The opera began and Whitney promptly forgot everything else, lost as she was in the haunting music. It was all beyond her wildest dreams. By the time the heavy curtains swept closed to permit a change of scenery on the stage, Whitney had to shake herself back into reality. Behind her, friends of her aunt and uncle had come to the box, lending their voices to the incredible din of talk and laughter in the theatre.

"Whitney," Aunt Anne said, touching her shoulder. "Do turn around so that I may present you to our dear friends."

Obediently, Whitney stood and turned and was introduced to Monsieur and Madame DuVille. Their greeting was warm and open, but their daughter, Therese, a winsome blonde of about Whitney's years, only eyed her in watchful curiosity. Under the girl's penetrating gaze, some of Whitney's confidence slid away. She had never known how to converse with people her own age, and for the first time since leaving England, she felt gauche and ill at ease. "Are you enjoying the opera?" she managed at last.

"No," Therese said, dimpling, "for I cannot understand a word of it."

"Whitney can," Lord Edward proudly announced. "She understands Italian, Greek, Latin, and even some German!"

Whitney felt like sinking through the floor, for her uncle's boast had probably branded her as a bluestocking in the DuVilles' eyes. She had to force herself to meet Therese's startled gaze.

"I hope you don't play the pianoforte and sing too?" The little blonde pouted prettily.

"Oh no," Whitney hastily assured her. "I can't do either one."

"Wonderful!" declared Therese with a wide smile as she settled herself into a chair beside Whitney's, "for those are the only two things I do well. Are you looking forward to your debut?" she bubbled, passing a swift look of admiration over Whitney.

"Not," Whitney admitted truthfully, "very much."

"I am. Although for me, it is merely a formality. My marriage was arranged three years ago. Which is just perfect, for now I can devote all my attention to helping you find a husband. I shall tell you which gentlemen are eligible and which are only handsome-without money or prospects- then when you make a brilliant match, I shall come to your wedding and tell everyone that I was entirely responsible!" she finished with an irrepressible smile.

Whitney smiled back, a little dazed by Therese's unreserved offer of friendship. The smile was all the encouragement Therese DuVille needed to continue: "My sisters have all made splendid marriages. Which only leaves me. And my brother, Nicolas, of course."

Whitney suppressed the urge to inquire laughingly whether Nicolas DuVille fell into the category of "eligible" or "only handsome," but Therese promptly provided the answer without being asked. "Nicki isn't at all eligible. Well, he is- because he's very wealthy and terribly handsome. The thing is, Nicolas isn't available. Which is a great pity and the despair of my family, for Nicki is the only male heir, and the eldest of the five of us."

Avidly curious, Whitney nevertheless managed to respond politely that she hoped it wasn't because Monsieur DuVille was suffering from any affliction.

"Not," Therese said with a musical giggle, "unless one considers excessive boredom and shocking arrogance an affliction. Of course, Nicolas has every right to be so, with females constantly dangling after him. Mama says that if it were up to the females to do the asking, Nicolas would have had more offers of marriage than us four girls combined!"

Whitney's demure facade of polite interest disintegrated.

"I can't imagine why," she laughed. "He sounds perfectly odious to me."

"Charm," Therese explained gravely. "Nicolas has charm." After a thoughtful pause, she added, "It is such a pity Nicki is so difficult, because if he were to attend our debut and single you out for special attention, you would be an instant success!" She sighed. "Of course, nothing in the world will persuade him to attend a debutante ball. He says they are excruciatingly boring. Nevertheless, I shall tell him about you- perhaps he will help."

Only courtesy prevented Whitney from saying that she hoped she never met Therese's arrogant older brother.

