

# Prologue

The Wedding of the Century, (November 6, 1895)  
The Cage Door Closes



Everyone was calling it the wedding of the century. I was calling it the worst day of my life.

Granted, I might have been watched like a hawk before—by a maternal hawk—but I had never felt my imprisonment in a gilded cage so strongly. Here I was on my wedding day, trapped in my bedroom with the door guarded by the biggest footman at the house so I would not flee.

“Miss Consuelo, can you please stop crying?” my maid Lucy asked as she sponged my red-rimmed eyes with cool water again. “I am afraid I will make drips on your dress.”

My mother had purchased my wedding gown in Paris before my betrothed, Sunny—as I must now call him, short for Sunderland, one of his secondary titles before he became the 9th Duke of Marlborough—had even asked for my hand. He had become duke four years ago at age twenty. The sobriquet

certainly did not come from his personality, because a less sunny person I'd never met. This marriage was all about dollars and no sense: Vanderbilt money for the Marlborough title, prestige, and power.

"I'm trying not to cry," I told Lucy with a hiccough. My voice was not my own. Mama had insisted on elocution lessons amid all the others, partly so I could speak loud and clear, but now I would sound so stuffed up declaring my vows in that huge church.

And where was my father? I needed him, and his presence has been scarce since Mother was divorcing him. But—ha!—she needed him today to give me away, needed his respectable presence as much as she needed the Vanderbilt fortune to cover all the outrageous wedding bills.

"Oh, thank heavens," I blurted out at the rap on the door. Swathed in silk and tulle, I managed to turn toward it as the footman hovering outside opened it for my father and he hurried in.

Ever handsome, always smiling—well, until the arguments had become so bitter and then the divorce loomed. Papa halted a few feet away, taking me in with his warm glance, and I burst into tears again, so glad to see him, so wishing he could spirit both of us away.

"My dearest, don't cry, not today," he said and carefully came closer, shuffling to avoid stepping on the long, pearl-encrusted satin train. "I know brides are nervous but—"

"You know it is more than that. Lucy, you may leave us now."

"But, Miss Consuelo, you cannot sponge your own tears. And I need to arrange the train and veil."

"Later. Soon. Please wait outside," I said and snatched the sponge from her.

Used to looking at my mother for confirmation, she glanced at my father, who nodded. She fled, probably much relieved.

“My dearest, beautiful girl,” he comforted when the door closed. “Your mother has gone on ahead, so we have a few minutes to pull ourselves together.”

“I need longer than that. A lifetime. You will visit at the palace, won’t you? You are always welcome. The real vow I take today is to not change my beliefs to suit him, husband or not, duke or not! I do not care if the Prince of Wales himself comes to visit—and Sunny says he will.”

Looking both worried and proud at that declaration, Papa came closer, reaching out his strong arms to carefully hug me around my shoulders.

“Of course I shall visit my dear girl, high and mighty duchess though she may be. And you and I shall write. After all, he has promised to love and cherish you, has he not?”

I shrugged. “But Papa, I tower over him by half a head. And there was the most cruel *Life* magazine cartoon by someone called Charles Dana Gibson of us kneeling at the altar where I tower over him and my hands are tied behind my back—and Mama is holding the rope to make me kneel!”

I sniffled as I stepped back and used the eye sponge to wipe once more under my eyes and then my nose. I cleared my throat and tried speaking louder. “But, yes, he said he would try to be a good husband.”

“There, you see. You must learn to ignore the cruel press.”

“It truly is not that which makes me feel oppressed. It is, well, lost opportunities.”

“I know how much you loved someone else. Poor Winthrop too. I am sorry your mother had other plans.”

I longed to scream at him that I had faced her alone on that,

when I could have used his help—but then he would have lost anyway, as had I. We spoke a bit longer, lingering, perhaps pretending this was not real. He tried to buck me up, as my brothers would say.

Finally, I mentally squared my shoulders, which were already ever straight from years of wearing an iron brace to give me perfect posture. I tossed the sponge back into the bowl of water and lowered my knee-length veil over my face. Thank God for it, as I wanted to hide from all that awaited me. I could hear the crowd outside the house, and more would await us at and in the church. The numbers alone staggered me: twenty-five policemen outside the church to keep order, four thousand guests, a sixty-piece orchestra and fifty-voice choir, and a parade of churchmen to lead us through our vows.

Despite my lingerie, then four layers of satin, and the Brussels lace gown and veil, I felt quite naked and exposed. I wished I could hide forever. Someone—I feared I knew who—had released information to *Vogue* magazine, which had sketched and published each item of the enhancement undergarments I wore today. Suddenly my corset felt so tight I could hardly breathe.

“Ready, my dear?” Papa asked and held out his arm as if we were ready to tread the church aisle. Our cue would come just after the choir sang “O Perfect Love” before the “Wedding March” began. How romantic, everyone thought, but not I.

O perfect love, indeed. I had turned eighteen only eight months ago. I did not want to be the Duchess of Marlborough. I was an American through and through, however much Mama had taken me around the world, put me on display before French and British society, and bred me and sold me for this very event and the life to come.

Yet here I was, going to live on a huge estate still run by

feudal rules. At least my dear governess, who had been with me for years, had lifted my spirits by insisting that, once I was duchess, I could help others. Mama expected me to take over the British social world as she had the New York so-called four hundred. Then there was the need for what I had dubbed “an heir and a spare,” when I knew next to naught about marriage bedroom protocol.

But I was a Vanderbilt and I would somehow—God willing—make the best of this damned gilded cage or die trying.

“Yes, Papa, I’m ready,” I lied, but I kept thinking, *How did it ever, ever come to this?*

# *Part One*



Debutante, 1893–1895

The Golden Cage

## Chapter One



It was a blustery, gray November day. I could not believe how many New Yorkers had come to the pier to see my parents and their friends off. Of course the newspapermen were there shouting questions. But I suppose, since there were eighty-five people on board the Vanderbilt yacht *Valiant*, that some of the crowd could have been related to the crew of seventy-two and our French chef.

But the people on the pier were not what took my attention. Papa had invited his friend Winthrop Rutherford to come with us on our ocean voyage to India and France, and Win stood beside me at the rail.

To tell true, I adored him, however much older he was at age twenty-nine and I only sixteen. So handsome, even-tempered, properly protective and attentive. A trained lawyer but quite the sportsman. And how he looked at me, though his manners in public were impeccable.

On my other side from Win and Papa stood Mama and next to her from Newport, Oliver Belmont, a friend of both my

parents. My youngest brother, Harold, nine years old, had come along, though my brother Willie, a year and a half younger than I, had stayed behind for his schooling. I would like to say I would miss him, but with Win along and his gloved hand so close to mine, well.

I jolted from my reverie when Mama spoke: “Consuelo, the next time you see New York, I will have brought you out in Europe. Your life will be different as a debutante—a Vanderbilt debutante.”

Because I was tall for a woman, at nearly five feet and eight inches, I now looked down on her. After all she’d put me through—put me through my paces, she had called it, as if I were a filly to be trained. But there was no changing her—had I been twelve feet tall, she still would have steered me like this steam yacht, heading out into life’s sea.

She immediately turned back to Mr. Belmont. I saw he dared to cover her gloved little finger with his on the teak rail. Though as was proper, flesh never touched flesh in polite society, it hit me hard that—could it be?—they were more than friends? But no. Mama never did anything to sully the Vanderbilt name. She only decorated it and flaunted it as she did our mansions on Long Island and in New York City and Newport, which she had built with her designing passion and Papa’s money.

Win spoke, and I turned quickly to face him. Ah, he was nearly six-foot-three, though I did not need his height to endear him to me. Every kindly move, each smile and intense look in his eyes—

“Shall we stand at the other rail to see the Statue of Liberty go by—well, that is, we are going by,” he said, gesturing with one arm and holding out the other for me to take. With a nod at my father, we walked together across the width of the ship



to the port side. "Not only are you and I going by but we are going far, my dear Consuelo," Win added when we were out of everyone's earshot.

At that, I did not need this massive yacht at all. I could have flown.

I COULD HEAR my parents arguing through the wall between our cabins, however sturdy the mahogany barrier. Papa was shouting back at Mama? Never, never had I heard that. Usually, she ranted, and he walked out the door without fighting back, though now he was a captive audience on this vessel the rough seas were rocking.

"Alva, you cannot act that way with Belmont with the children and our guests about! His middle name isn't Hazard for nothing. He has been a friend to us both, but beware."

"Be grateful he is an honorable person, which is more than I can say for some of the paramours you have run to over the years!"

"Only when your social grubbing made our marriage a living hell, damn it!"

"And you have had a flaming affair with my friend Consuelo Montagu. Our daughter is named for her, for heaven's sake!"

I was astounded at that accusation. My godmother, the Duchess of Manchester, and my father? Surely not. Just before this voyage, Mama had ranted at me, *I do the thinking here. You do as I say!* But I would still side with Papa if I were ever asked for an opinion.

"You do not have time for me," he insisted, his voice a bit quieter now. "Only for spending money to buy our way into society, which we do not need—to climb the rungs of that ladder, not the money, I mean."

“We did need to take our rightful place among Mrs. Astor’s so-called four hundred. We needed to show our true worth, and we have. And you need to show some appreciation for the houses I have designed and built, for they are works of art! Especially our Fifth Avenue mansion and Marble House. They make your favorite Idle Hour on rural Long Island seem tawdry.”

“Just ask the children—especially Consuelo—which they prefer!”

I covered my ears with my hands and curled into a ball on my bed. I was starting to feel queasy from the rolling and tilting of the ship, and from what I was hearing. I could only hope that my governess, Miss Harper, who slept near the door, hadn’t heard their fighting. But Miss Harper, who was bright and wise, no doubt knew more about my parents’ rocky marriage than their own children did.

Except for me. When Mama and Papa were not speaking, I was the one who carried messages between them, both in the Fifth Avenue house and in vast Marble House, which everyone in Newport called a “cottage.” I hated it when my parents did not speak to each other, but how I wished they were not speaking now.

“The wind is picking up,” Miss Harper spoke from her bed across the cabin. So had they awakened her or was she trying to drown out their voices? “Getting a bit rough.”

“I know. It scares me.”

“This is the largest private yacht in America, maybe in the world. It does not roll as hard as their first yacht, the *Alva*.”

“But the *Alva* sank.”

Somehow, suddenly, that seemed the wrong thing to say. The big boat named *Alva* might have gone down, but not the

real Alva. Like a storm, she, too, was a force of nature. Unstoppable, unsinkable.

AFTER SPENDING TWO days ashore in Cairo to get our land legs back while the *Valiant* passed through the locks of Suez, we reboarded the yacht to cross the Indian Ocean to Bombay. There the noise, swarms of insects, smells—the seething humanity of India—nearly overwhelmed me. My legs went weak and my stomach roiled, so I survived on toast and tea, despite some of the wonders we saw.

Win was ever attentive, and I began to love, not just like, him. We found we had a favorite Strauss opera in common, *Der Rosenkavalier*, so that became my private nickname for him. It translated to “the rose bearer,” and he promised to have my arms full of roses when we arrived home. I told him my favorite was the American Beauty rose, and Amber, an amalgam of that name, was his secret, secret name for me, despite my dark hair and my dark eyes and olive skin. He teasingly said that my long, slender neck was the stem for my blooming beauty.

It was during the several days my parents spent away from us that I treasured most on the voyage, for, though Miss Harper or my maid Lucy always tagged along or sat nearby, I spent hours up on deck with Win.

“Your mother will have real visions of grandeur after staying with the British viceroy and the vicereine at Government House,” Win told me. “It’s not some plain outpost like it sounds. I hear they live like royalty as they oversee India for the queen.”

“Then my mother will fit right in.”

“Somehow we will win her to our side,” he promised, keeping his voice low so Miss Harper, who was sitting on a deck chair holding a book, would not hear. “I come from acceptable

‘stock,’ and would not pursue you for your money—though I do not mean to say you are not worthy of great love without a dowry or settlement of any kind.”

However sophisticated I was trying to be, I sighed. Staring at the passing life, as we anchored near the Bay of Bengal along the Hooghly River, it was so hard to picture a future with Win—to picture anywhere but here. I had glimpsed on the wharf below, amid food sellers and workers, that veiled and swathed women in the heat walked two steps behind their men, some bearing pots or pitchers upon their heads with one hand up for balance. So picturesque and exotic, but somehow strange and . . . and wrong. Wrong that the British rulers lived in luxury here when there was all this.

“You are trembling in this heat, sweetheart,” Win said. “We had best go back inside. Miss Harper is coming over, as she must have noticed, too.”

The three of us were barely seated in the stateroom when my parents came back from their two nights away. As faint as I had suddenly felt—though, who knew, perhaps the vapors were caused by Win’s intensity as well as the sweltering scene below—I came to attention.

“They rule here as royalty!” Mama declared, pulling the pins from her hat and sailing it onto the spare settee. “Almost like a king and queen, or at least duke and duchess.” Papa poured himself a tumbler of brandy from the sideboard and dismissed the footman with a wave of his hand.

“They are about to have a changing of the guard,” Papa said, “but we were entertained in luxury. Lord and Lady Elgin will be replacing our hosts, the Lansdownes. Yet still there is a pall hanging over the place and—”

“Hardly a pall,” Mama cut in, “and it is appalling you would

say that. Consuelo," she said, turning toward me, "the wife of the viceroy, the vicereine, does much good here and has power of her own, quite independent of her husband. So, there is a British precedent for feminine power far beyond the duties or mere self-indulgence or luxury."

"I hope," I said, sitting up straighter, "she sees to the wretched masses I have observed, especially the women. And what is that you said about their practice of purdah, Win?"

Mama had seemed so engrossed in her opinions and observations that she turned to Win for the first time.

"It is the Hindu practice of secluding women," he said. "They wrap them in clothing head to foot or keep them behind high walls. It has just been outlawed here, but that does not mean the customs will change."

"Dreadful," Papa said.

Mama chimed in with "Despicable, primitive, and quite unfair!"

I bit my tongue to keep from blurting out something like "But isn't that how you have treated me?"

I shuddered at the thought and was grateful once again I was an American, though Mama and I had both agreed that women at home should be able to vote, else it was another, more civilized, kind of purdah, I supposed.

I saw that Mama studied and frowned at Win and me.

"Consuelo," she said, "let us leave the men to their brandy. Come with me. You looked peaked and need your rest before your first coming out event in Paris, and none too soon. You and I both need a change of scene."

Win made a move to help me rise, but she took my arm, pulled me up, and subtly elbowed him away.

## Chapter Two



Mama and I, our maids, Miss Harper, and our nearly one hundred pieces of luggage disembarked in Nice so we could then travel on to Paris. Papa journeyed on with the yacht, taking along Oliver Belmont and my dear Win, but we planned to travel through the countryside and would see them soon.

Yet barely were we off the *Valiant* that Mama took me aside and told me quickly and curtly that my parents' marriage was definitely over. She explained she would seek a divorce when we returned to America. She said Papa agreed that she would tell me, but I vow, it was so I would not throw a scene and cling to him. With the others, I tried to keep my chin up. I had seen it coming, but it still cut deep. I could only tell myself that perhaps Papa would be better off.

Though I was devastated, Mama forbid my moping about. We moved into a lovely hotel overlooking the Tuileries Gardens. At least the beautiful City of Light, as they called Paris, was balm to my soul. Mama and I walked and walked, talked and talked.

I blamed her and was angry at first, but she seemed to cater to me, taking me to museums and churches and lectures at the Sorbonne. We visited the Paris Opera and the Comédie-Française. I loved speaking French, and I loved the French people, so elegant and gay. The spring of 1894 helped to heal my heart and perhaps Mama's, too.

I was excited to have my portrait painted by the artist Carolus-Duran, whom Mama assured me was famous for his portraits of aristocratic women. So was I now, at age seventeen, an aristocratic woman? At least I trusted that the portrait would make me look that way.

"No, no, not red velvet behind her. Too heavy-looking!" Mama told the bearded artist in French when he tried to pose me before huge swags of tasseled draperies in his studio. "I want a classical look, a portrait to hang in Marble House, our Newport estate, for a while and then who knows, perhaps in an English palace."

My head snapped around. Whatever was she talking about?

"But the Prince of Wales in England, he is already married, madam, and his son the Duke of York last year, too," the artist protested with a roll of his eyes and a little smile that peeked through his mustache.

"Ah, but," she said, tugging me over to another backdrop, a realistic rendering of a classical landscape with an Ionic column, "don't you know there is one palace in Great Britain not owned by the royals? Its name is Blenheim Palace, and it belongs to the Duke of Marlborough. I have it on the best authority—Lady Lansdowne, an English aristocrat herself and the duke's aunt."

Why, I wondered, would Mama have been discussing that when she was spending time in a palace in India? I had briefly

met Lady Lansdowne, too. How she had looked me over, a bit rudely, I thought, but that was almost all I recalled about her.

But I did love the painted backdrop Mama had chosen here and, later, the portrait itself. In it I stand as if I were indeed mistress of a grand house or palace, draped in white with the most calm, confident look on my face. One foot peeks from my gown, as if I were stepping forward into my future.

How I tried to emulate that feeling and look the night Mama brought me out into French society at the all-white ball for unmarried *jeune filles* at the palatial home of the Duc de Gramont. Yet however elegantly gowned in one of the many dresses Mama had bought for me from Monsieur Jean Worth's fabulous displays, I was frightened to death.

"MAMA, I LIKE this gown, but why should my hair be piled so high with curls?" I asked as my maid prepared me for the evening while Mama watched. "My hair isn't curly and it takes so long to get it that way. The height of the hair makes my neck look even longer. And everyone will have a necklace of some sort, so why only a simple white ribbon around my throat? You know my neck is too long, you have said so."

"Less is more with you tonight. We do not want people looking at your jewelry, but at you. My girl, your elegant, swanlike neck is part of your allure."

"Swanlike? Allure? But—"

"Consuelo, you have no taste!" she exploded, rising and pointing a finger nearly in my face. "I buy the gowns; you wear them. I decide the look; you display it. Believe me, I know what I am doing."

Still, that did not calm my nervous demeanor. The ballroom was vast. This was called a white ball because all the guests



were unwed. It would have been deemed a pink or rose ball if married women were guests of honor. The men—and it looked to me as if there were an army of them—sat on one side of the room while we, with our chaperones, sat on the other quite on display. The men came across to ask for dances, and my card was soon filled, my evening a busy whirl. Yet wasn't this all a sham? I was certain Win would propose when I returned to New York, but I suppose I must go through this pantomime until both of us could present our plans. I tried to enjoy it despite my upset stomach and trembling hands.

Still, it was fun to whirl around the floor to a lilting waltz. I began to confuse names and, in some cases, the French titles of my dance partners. Mama was in her element, conversing with each would-be beau before and after dances or when one of them went to fetch us punch. I had strict orders not to go near the drink tables myself because, she said, that is where stains splashed on gloves and gowns.

And then, near the last dance, a handsome, dark-haired, blue-eyed man bowed before us to present himself. He had no title, and introduced himself as Jacques Balsan. Something about him, his assurance, his poise—his intent look—made me blurt out before Mama could give her yea or nay. "Yes, I would enjoy a dance," as if I had been a wallflower all night and was desperate. For the first time this evening I was happy not to be overdressed or glittering with jewels like many of the other maidens.

"Oh, yes, Balsan," Mama said after he made further introductions to both of us. "From the industrial family with the textile empire—the heir."

"I have traveled the world, Madam Vanderbilt, but, I admit, mostly to buy wool for our Balsan mills."

I thought Mama might not like such a plebian concern, but

she said, "Actually, my family dealt in cotton before our dreadful War Between the States. But as for the Balsans, of course, any family that is friends with the Gramonts is surely well respected."

He hastily signed my dance card, and we were off onto the floor. It was strange, but, as his gloved hand took mine, it was as if we really touched. He was not as tall as Win, just my height, so our eyes met and matched. He seemed to smile with his eyes as well as his mouth, which flaunted white, even teeth.

"Mama may be American and I too," I told him in French, "but she seems to know of your family."

"The Balsans' businesses are all earthbound, but I love to take to the skies. My passion—one of them," he added, smiling at me again. "My favorite pastime is ballooning aloft in the clouds."

"Oh, but is that not dangerous?"

"A bit, but worth it. To see the earth which mankind has tried to divide into fenced fields and roads and city blocks gives one a whole new vision for life. If our earthbound paths cross again, and I pray they shall, Mademoiselle Consuelo, I shall propose that I take you up into the heavens with me."

What an amazing conversation we had, when all evening I had heard little but comments on how beautiful I looked, questions as to whether I liked Paris and what were the Vanderbilt homes and businesses like, as if everyone did not already know railroads and more railroads had made my family's fortune. Of course, I should tell this Jacques Balsan that I could promise nothing in the future. That my mother would never let me go up in a balloon in a basket—oh, yes, I told him I had seen a newspaper drawing of such a daring deed.

I sighed and not from the exertion of the waltz. For the first

time tonight, I did not wish that my dance partner was my dear Win.

"It sounds wonderful," I told him and felt quite let down to earth when he returned me to my mother with a smile and a quick squeeze of my hand before he bowed and left us.

"You will not believe this," Mama said.

"I know—oh, believe what?"

"You, my dear, have had five proposals of marriage this evening, brought directly to me, two of them in writing."

"Oh, no. I—from one dance?"

"From your beauty I—we—have showcased tonight, and your name, of course."

"Papa's money, you mean."

"The place I have made for us and you with it. But any French noble will not do, so do not fret."

I exhaled in relief, still a bit out of breath from dancing with Jacques. But there was something about the way she had worded that. Hopefully, she meant an American would be better for me, and I would convince her that Win, after all, from a respected and well-to-do family, would be quite perfect.

"Would you believe," she said as the evening ended, "that we have an invitation to meet His Serene Highness Prince Francis Joseph of Battenberg tomorrow? The great nephew of Tsar Alexander III, no less. He was not here tonight but an emissary of his family was."

My heart flip-flopped then sank. I could only hope there was no connection between Mama's European husband-hunting for me and that name and title. I didn't want a title and I didn't want to be linked with anyone serene and high. As much as I loved Europe, I wanted to marry in America to an American. And where was Battenberg anyway?

I searched the crowded room for another glimpse of Jacques but did not see him again. Not for many years.

MY DREAMY DAYS in France collapsed like a stuck balloon when I entered the evening salon of the grande dame Madame de Pourtalès to be presented to Francis Joseph of Battenberg. I had learned he was a German princeling, but I did not care a flip if he were a king or a saint. Mama had not exactly said so, but was she actually dangling me as a possible princess to an alien, distant, and no doubt backward Balkan state called Serbia?

The man I was to meet had a long, serious face and was attired in a military uniform heavy with medals and ribbons. He spoke French sharply and swiftly, and his quick smile did not reach his cold gaze as he assessed me. Was Mama mad? Even I was now onto the game of men who knew me not at all—and did not think that mattered—because they were mostly interested in being bankrolled by the Vanderbilt fortune.

It was a painful night as I sat next to him at dinner. Thank the Lord, Mama sat on his other side and kept him greatly occupied with her questions. I was so upset and so angry that I could barely eat the delicacies set before me. At least there was no dancing. Why, I would have taken any of my dance partners, especially that Jacques Balsan, and lived in a scow anchored on the Seine rather than live in any sort of palace with this man.

“Mama, I can only hope you did not intend him for me!” I insisted when we were back alone in our rooms at the hotel. “He is cold of heart and—”

“And not what I had in mind, though he is a prince, so do not fret and save your passion for England, where we are going next. I discerned tonight that the man is not really going to remain royal despite his title. His family has no palaces of

their own, and his German arrogance toward women—oh, yes, I could tell—is despicable.”

“Oh. Good. I thought—”

“I am sure the next titled man you meet will be of the true nobility—in character and heritage.”

I was coming to grasp her game. She intended to marry me to nobility, even royalty. So Win and I must get Papa on our side, however much my parents were estranged now, then present our plans to her. That is, if Win would just propose when we get home, before some other catastrophe occurred.

BUT IT DID not take me long in London to feel I was on the marriage mart again. Instead of a conniving French grande dame this time, the liaison was Mama’s distant acquaintance, the American Minnie Stevens, now Lady Paget, a friend of the Prince of Wales set, no less. Well, I told myself, I survived the maidens-for-sale ball and that dreadful German princeling, so I can survive here long enough to get home to Win. His letters, which were delivered to my maid so that Mama would not find them, were passionate and endearing. Mine were harder to sneak out, but with Miss Harper’s willingness to look the other way, we managed to correspond.

But I was appalled anew when Mama and I had a meeting with Mrs. Paget. At least nothing was kept secret from me. Oh, no, they discussed my flaws openly, which they hoped to “work around” as if I had no ears or feelings.

“I know she brings a fortune trailing her skirts,” Lady Paget told Mama, “but you will still have to dress her a bit more daringly. More bare flesh, lower necklines. The retroussé nose and long neck, not to mention her gangly height will be the drawbacks, not for the untitled, of course, but to win a coronet. She

is not in the ugly duckling stage, but an awkward one, I am afraid.”

I actually gasped at her blatant manner—or lack of manners—but Mama only nodded. “No more baby girl décolletage, I can see that,” Mama agreed, “especially if you can arrange a meeting at that dinner party.”

“He is young, only twenty-two, and somewhat attached to a person, but he loves his palace above all else, if you know what I mean. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately for you—the place absolutely drinks money, and the two previous dukes spent much of the family treasure to keep it going.”

His palace? What duke? Indeed, I was being sold but, hopefully, not bought. I absolutely panicked. I was almost sick upon the Aubusson carpet in front of my small, gilded chair. My mother was mad to try to trade me for some sort of title. How desperately I wanted my father’s help and to belong to my dear Win. I needed to go home! Of course, there were social classes and snobs there, but when I became my own woman, I could work around that, maybe change things. And had I just heard that this mystery man was also attached to someone he cared for, and that mattered not one whit?

“We will be ready and be there in fine fettle the moment you can arrange it,” Mama told the woman and finally turned to look at me with a bright smile. I just stared back at her, quite distraught.

Papa had told me once that my mother, Alva, the former Miss Smith, had saved her impoverished southern family after the Civil War by stealing his heart and his hand. *Stealing?* I believed that now. But must she steal my wishes, my plans, my very life?