A BRIGHT YOUNG THING
by Brianne Moore
EXCERPT

Chapter 1

Orphanhood came suddenly on a glass-clear day in February 1930. It was the first dry day that week, so my parents decided to take the new Delage out for a drive.

"Time to stretch her legs," Father said. "We may go have a wander around Rockingham Castle. You should come along and get some roses in those cheeks."

He ruffled the top of my head, and I ducked and playfully swatted him away. How many hundreds of times had I been hauled off to Rockingham over the years? Even my father could only make the place sound interesting so many times. Anyway, I had a cold to recover from and a poem that wanted writing. So, I stayed behind.

"Just an hour or two," they said. They kissed me on the cheek, urged me to get some rest, and were gone. Replaced, seemingly in a blink, by Officer Anson (poor man, only his second week on the job). Helmet in hand, pale, stammering that there had been an accident. That half a mile outside Market Harborough, Mother had cut the wheel too sharply and sent the car tumbling down an embankment.

I stared at him as he stood, sweating, in front of the fire. His blue wool uniform was too tight and cut into his neck. He ran a finger around the collar every now and then and shifted his weight. Funny the things you remember at times like this.

"It's a tricky corner, that, very tricky," he jabbered, unnerved by my blank face and silence. "I've seen plenty of drivers get into trouble there—even men!" He chuckled and received in reply a long, slow blink. The fire snapped twice, sending sparks toward the chimney, and yet I felt chilly. The carriage clock on the mantelpiece hammered out its ticks, further fraying Anson's nerves. He cleared his throat, looked down at the helmet he was still holding, as if unsure what to do with it. "They're sure it was quick, miss. I—I'm very sorry, miss. They were good sorts, your parents. Always had a kind word." Frowning in concern, he bent to peer into my face. "Is there . . . anyone else we should notify?"

"Notify?" The word had no meaning. Not a thing he'd said after "I'm sorry to have to inform you there's been an accident" had actually penetrated the thick shroud that almost immediately

wrapped itself around me. All I could hear was the crunch of collapsing metal. The oddly musical breaking of glass as a distant car somersaulted over dead grass and mud. But no, my parents weren't dead. Of course they weren't. I had that new poem to show them. It would make Father laugh.

Anson had run out of things to say, and the clock filled the silence. Finally, a voice that was not my own, but that of some frigid automaton driven by a lifetime of the right sort of training, thanked the hapless man for all his trouble. "I realize this must have been difficult for you," the voice concluded.

He seemed puzzled. Probably wondering why I hadn't broken down, wailed, sobbed, cursed the fates. Isn't that what women did when met with tragedy? He hadn't seen enough sudden grief to know that some bodies, when shocked, self-anesthetize. He would come to know it, but for the moment he clapped his helmet back on his head and made his escape, probably thinking "the quality" were a strange lot indeed.

Once he was gone, I threw my poem into the fire and retreated to my room. The shroud thickened and settled, swaddling me layer by layer in a protective cocoon in which I felt nothing. It was a relief, that.

This was the first great shock of my life. There would be others—so many others—in the coming months. They would bruise and toughen and soften me all at once. But this first, this greatest, seemed more than I could bear. How could one bear such a thing? A cataclysm that opened the earth beneath you? Left you scrabbling for a handhold as you stared into the darkness that was so eager to eat you alive, and wondering, just for a little while, if it would be easier to simply let go and let the void take you?

How do you bear the silence that follows the death?

I stayed shut away, unable to face a house that was still full of my parents. Beyond my door, Father's aftershave lingered. His artifact collections gathered dust. The seedlings Mother and I had planted were just beginning to sprout.

Aunt Elinor came from London and made all the arrangements so efficiently, it was as if she'd been planning for this moment for years. Not even the death of her only sister could shock *her* into a torpor.

Friends came to coddle and care for me, to try to lift me out of my stupor. But I would not lift. I drifted through the funeral service in a somnambulant daze. Afterward, I was parked by the fire in the drawing room to receive the usual platitudes: "Such a *shame*! Such a lovely couple—and in the *prime* of their lives." And, when they thought I couldn't hear, "Astra will be *quite* the catch now, won't she?" Appraising eyes roamed the rooms, picking up on the new furnishings, thick-

pile carpets, and streamlined sculptures that spoke of wealth and style and a careless sort of spending.

I might still be there, among the curio cabinets and cream velveteen, if not for Father. One fine day in April, Mr. Edgry, our family solicitor, rolled up the drive and informed me that if I didn't make a change to my living standards soon, I wouldn't have a penny to my name by July.

"What sort of change do you mean?" I asked, my cottoned-up brain struggling to make sense of the ledgers and papers before me.

"Economies, my dear," he answered, leaning back in the chair he'd assigned himself (Father's leather armchair, naturally). "Economies *must* be made. Serious ones."

"Well, I suppose we could do without a housemaid," I suggested.

He regarded me across the expanse of Father's desk with a mixture of pity and contempt. "You don't seem to understand," he said, carefully enunciating every word.

"The under-gardener too, then," I offered, though I was loathe to lose garden staff. "Perhaps the butler?"

Beside me, Aunt El made a mortified noise, quickly strangled with a harsh cough.

Edgry closed his eyes as his face steadily reddened. His blood-sausage fingers clenched his lapels. I had the disturbing sense he was trying very hard not to throttle me. He slowly rose, looming over me.

"The housemaid must go, *and* the under-gardener, *and* the butler, *and the house*!" He snatched a handful of bills and waved it at me. "Don't you understand? You can't afford any of it. Your Father lost it all. You have *nothing*."

Those words—you have *nothing*—somehow penetrated the cocoon I'd been sheltering in. They tore right through it—*riiiiip*—and light and air flooded in, stripping the last comforting threads away and shaking, slapping me awake. Everything was too loud and too bright: the tweeting of the robins in the stone birdbath just outside hammered at my skull, and the brilliant blue of the morning glories stung my eyes.

Something began expanding in my chest, ballooning so massively it would surely blow me to pieces. Instead, it traveled upward into my throat and came out not as tears, as expected, but as hysterical laughter.

Edgry was so startled he leaned away, as if he thought I might suddenly be a danger to him. Aunt El, in horror, hissed: "Astra, control yourself!"

And then the tears came. I'd laughed hard enough for my sides to hurt, but the laughter vanished just as soon as it had come, and I exploded into loud, messy sobs that utterly defeated the handkerchief Aunt El shoved toward me.

"H-how could this happen?" I gasped. "*How*?"

"Millions of people all over the world are asking themselves that question." Edgry pushed away from the desk and paraded angrily around the room. "The fact of the matter is, Astra, your Father, God rest him, was a fool. No sense at all, that man. And then of course he started to get desperate when your mother—"

Another noise from Aunt Elinor interrupted him—a bizarre sound this time, like a goose being throttled while playing a trumpet. Edgry glanced at her, then cleared his throat and pressed on, circumnavigating the room as he spoke.

"Well, you know how it is. Plenty out there in the same pickle you're in, my dear. At least you still have something of worth." He waved his arm at the walls as he came to a stop at the window overlooking the garden. After a few moments' silence, he turned to me, hands clasped behind his back, and said, "The best thing you can do is to sell up. Go live with your aunt and cousin, pay off the debts, and put away anything left."

Aunt El stifled another cough and agreed. "Yes, of course you must come stay with Toby and me." Though I could practically see her calculating the cost of housing another person.

"Sell Hensley?" With everything that had happened, I would lose my home as well? Leave the echoes of my parents behind and let them become the property of strangers? And that was even assuming I *could* sell it. I didn't know anyone who was buying places like Hensley. Most people were getting rid of them. "I'm *not* selling the house. The Davieses have been here for a century. My mother built those gardens." I gestured to the flowery expanse beyond the French windows. "There must be something else I can do."

I grabbed a ledger and scanned it, wishing I'd been better prepared for this sort of thing. But my governess had said, "What does a girl need sums for? You'll scare off your suitors." And Mother had smiled and promised to teach me what I needed to know "when the time came." Had that time not come and gone? I was twenty-three years old—what had she been waiting for?

"What's this?" I asked, pointing to an entry for Vandemark Rubber. It looked like the only thing in the ledger that didn't have a minus sign next to it.

Edgry huffed and flopped back down into the chair. "I told your father not to get mixed up in that, but he never listened to me," he said. "'Helping a friend,' he called it, and gave that fool enough money to buy a twenty-five percent stake in the company."

"Well, it couldn't have been *such* a bad idea," I pointed out. "It's making money."

His face darkened. "Not for long, I'm sure. It's owned by the Ponsonby-Lewises."

My cousin, Toby, who up until now had been content to recline on a sofa and watch the show, groaned.

"There's nothing wrong with the Ponsonby-Lewises, Tobias!" his mother snapped. "They're a fine family. And sit up like an adult, for heaven's sake!"

"They aren't fine at all, Mums," Toby countered, slowly rising and giving me a pitying look. "They're an *old* family, and that's not the same thing. I knew their son and believe me: this is a family whose tree hasn't branched enough."

"What are some of these others, then?" I asked, again turning to the ledger and hoping for a miracle. "Who's this Clarence Ha—"

"Never mind that. It was something that didn't work out, just like the rest of them." Edgry snatched away the ledger and snapped it shut. After tucking it away in his satchel, he folded his hands over his belly and glared at me.

"If you're determined to be foolish about this and hold onto the place, you'll have to let it to someone," he said. "You don't have the money to keep it up; you can hardly even pay the servants. Your father was about to start mortgaging it just to keep you all afloat. Get a tenant until you can find a man who can afford to help you keep it."

Even through my confusion, I resented that last bit. Was it so outrageous that I find a way to keep up my own house?

And so, the house was let. I was surprised, given the state of things, that we found someone. But though millions suffer, there will always be some people with money. The one we found was a flash theatrical producer who wanted his family out of London so he could continue his affair with a promising young actress from the chorus line of *Rio Rita*.

"They agreed to a generous price," Edgry told me in a tone that still indicated disapproval. "Between that and what comes in from Vande-mark Rubber, you should have an income of around a thousand pounds a year. Do try not to spend it all on hats, will you?"

So, to London, with its tarry air stinking of motor oil, coal, and manure. London, with its cacophony of noise: the clatter and crash of traffic and trains, tooting horns and bleating whistles, bellowing newsboys and beggars and buskers—all clamoring for money and attention. Streets that darkened prematurely, hiding tramps and pickpockets hovering just outside the ghostly ring of light cast by globe-shaped lamps.

To Aunt El's house on Gertrude Street, one in a row of staid, respectable homes. White stucco on the ground floor and brick above. Inside: decor that had been very popular the year Prince Albert died.

I arrived on a clammy day in November and took in my new surroundings: the saints and crosses, threadbare carpets, heavy furniture, and light-smothering draperies. And I thought, *I need to go home.*

But to go home, I needed money.

How far would a thousand pounds a year stretch? What did I need? What could I trim and set aside? It had taken this disaster for me to realize I didn't know what the simplest things cost. And I needed to know because economies, as Edgry had said, would have to be made. So the day after my arrival, I sat down and, using one of Mother's account books as a sort of guide, attempted a budget. Two hours later, this was what I had:

Income: £1,000/year

Projected Expenditures:

Lady's Maid: £65–100

Clothes:

Entertainment: free, with the right friends Card games: £100–200 (?)

Travel: variable

Just like Edgry's ledgers, Mother's accounts were a mystery to me: pages and pages of pounds and pence and who was paid and who was owed, but nothing to suggest money was coming in. How was she paying for these things? And what *were* some of them? I puzzled over entries for something called "Rosedale": the rather princely sum of 50 pounds paid promptly the first of every month, going back as far as the ledger did. It was nearly the only thing paid on time. And more recently, "Dr. H" appeared, accompanied by amounts so large my stomach actually knotted.

But that was the least of it. There were huge sums that I knew could be attributed to me. To the things I needed to be a fashionable young lady. Dressmakers and travel expenses and gifts for friends who were get-ting married or having babies. I almost cried at the sight of them. Where to even begin?

As I gaped at the ledger, Toby strolled in, glanced at my work (if you could call it that), tsked, and commented, "Grim stuff, old girl." He patted me on the shoulder and eased over to the window to claw back the layers of curtains and starched net. A feeble finger of sunlight penetrated the gloom for all of ten seconds before retreating behind a passing cloud.

Toby sighed and turned his attention to the sofa, pummeling cushions that, under the pressure of nearly half a century's worth of bottoms, had redistributed most of their plump to the outermost edges, as if the stuffing were trying to flee.

"You may," he continued, "have to start buying your frocks *from the shops*. And—dare I say it?—you might need to trade your holiday in Cannes for a week in Biarritz instead." He tossed me a cheeky smile before giving up on the sofa assault and stretching across the cushions with a wince.

"Hardly the time for jokes!" I rubbed my forehead as the deep pulsations of an impending headache began. How much did aspirin cost? Could I still afford headaches?

"Au contraire, my dear. The bleak times make for the best jokes. Gallows humor and all that. Something about dreadful situations brings out the cleverness in people."

"Not me." I put my pen aside and slumped in the chair, feeling defeated.

"Oh, give it time, darling. Once the dust has settled, I'm sure you'll come up with something." Toby drew a tortoiseshell cigarette case from his pocket and scrutinized the contents before selecting one.

"I'll have to, won't I?" I said, shaking my head as he offered me the case.

"No, thank you. A whole one will make me jittery. I'll draw off yours."

Toby's eyebrows rose. "You're lucky I'm a generous soul." He struck a match, lit the cigarette, took a drag, and leaned back, eyes closed, slowly exhaling the smoke. He smiled, a private, satisfied sort of smile and then handed the cigarette to me. I took a quick puff and returned it.

Toby mournfully shook his head as he accepted the cigarette. "You have to learn to appreciate things."

"You know how your mother feels about girls smoking," I reminded him, glancing toward the door to make sure Aunt Elinor hadn't suddenly appeared, summoned by sin. "And that's just what I need—to have her toss me out."

"Nonsense, Mother would never do that. Throwing over the orphaned niece would put her hopelessly behind in the sainthood stakes." Toby took another careful drag of the cigarette and began absently rubbing his left knee. "You're assured of a roof over your head for the time being, at least."

"But not the roof I want. How can I find enough money to save Hensley when I don't so much as know the cost of a hairpin?"

"It's less than a thousand pounds. You should be safe there."

"But what about everything else? It's not the individual things—it's all of it together. And just look at this! I'm hopeless." I waved the budget in the air, then tossed it back onto the writing desk and began attacking the fire with the poker. Angry sparks shot upward and out, spattering and hissing on the hearth.

Toby sat up and eased away before he got singed. "There, there," he soothed. "No need to burn the house down over it. Why don't you do as Edgry said and find a nice, rich young man to marry you? I'm sure you could find someone. You're not so decrepit."

"Oh thank you very much. But I've reviewed my current offerings, and they aren't promising. No, I'll just have to get *myself* out of this mess."

"Well, you might be at risk of a matching, whether you want it or not," he warned. "Mother's got *plans*. She's been after me to invite friends 'round to throw at you."

"Bachelors bouncing around like tennis balls," I groaned.

"And you joyfully swatting them away!" he chortled. "I think that might be rather entertaining. I may sell tickets!"

"Ahh, we've found the way to make my fortune at last," I declared. Then, more seriously, "How long before she starts serving in earnest?"

"I give her fifteen minutes the next time she sees you."

"Goodness!" I sank back into the armchair. "She *is* desperate to get rid of me."

Toby waved his cigarette case. "No. She's just of the generation that thinks the only thing for a girl to do is to marry well and quickly, before the bloom's off the rose."

"If that's how she feels, then why did she wait so long herself?" Toby struck a match and lit the cigarette. "She was waiting for the right man to sweep her off her feet."

We laughed, both at the idea of Aunt El being swept and of pliant, colorless Augustus Weyburn doing the sweeping. My uncle's death had probably been the most dramatic thing to ever happen to him, and even then he went as quietly as he lived: choking to death on a grape. Poor man.

Toby gave me the cigarette, and I puffed away for a moment, thinking.

"There is Vandemark Rubber," I mused. "That's something. I spoke with Mr. Ponsonby-Lewis, and he said the business was going quite well. They make tires, he said, and they've got an exclusive contract with Mr. Porter to supply his automobile factory."

"Not sure I'd take P-L senior's word for it," Toby warned. "He's a bit . . . off. A few years ago he got it into his head to create a line of green chickens, and when breeding them that way didn't work, he just had his flock dyed."

I paused. "All right, he may be a bit eccentric," I allowed. "But he seemed confident. Maybe I could work on Mr. Porter. Convince him to increase his order or something. I could charm him."

Toby chuckled. "Yes, I daresay you could."

I stood and examined myself in the spotty mirror over the fireplace, assessing my qualities. I was fortunate as far as looks went. Like both of my parents, I was tall and willowy, with Father's dark eyes and heart-shaped face and Mother's chestnut-colored hair. It fell to just below my ears, in carefully arranged waves and pin curls. My lips could, perhaps, be a little rounder, but lipstick could fix that.

I sighed. Was this all I could do? Become someone's decorative wife or simper to an old man?

In disgust, I threw the remains of the cigarette into the fire, watch-ing the coals eagerly consume the last of it. "It isn't fair, Toby, that things should be so hard." I turned and leaned

against the mantelpiece, arms crossed, scowling. "You men can always go out and . . . I don't know, discover something or build a railway somewhere."

He laughed. "Can we indeed?"

"You can. And you do. You're all *usefully* educated."

He threw back his head and laughed. "No, my dear, you have it quite wrong: the more expensive the education, the more useless it is. I spent most of my schooldays on Latin verbs, and what good is that? I can assure you, very little has ever been accomplished purely by saying '*veni vidi vici'* properly."

"That's still more than I can do. The sum total of my education was curtseying, music, and penmanship. I know how to properly address a duchess but don't know the price of a packet of tea."

"Surely that's in the ledger somewhere?"

"The thing is practically written in code." My eyes moved toward it. "You don't know what 'Rosedale' or 'Dr. H' are, do you?"

Toby shrugged and shook his head.

"Well, I think they have the Davieses to thank for *their* holiday in Cannes."

I turned back to the fire, clutched the mantelpiece, closed my eyes, and silently counted to ten. It was a soothing technique my mother had taught me.

"*And if that doesn't calm you, imagine a flower slowly unfurling*," she'd said.

I heard the flutter of paper as Toby picked up the budget. A moment after, he said, "Perhaps you could do without the lady's maid."

I shook my head. "No, I can't. It's not respectable for me to travel alone, now I don't have Mother to accompany me. And every heiress I know got one as soon as she was able. It'll be a dead giveaway if I don't have one."

"Would it? No one cares if a man doesn't have a valet." He shrugged and lit another cigarette.

"Of course they do; they just don't make quite as much of a thing of it. If I don't have a maid, everyone will start to wonder why, and then they'll guess I'm hard up."

Only those with titles and great names to hide behind could be poor and still receive invitations to everything. Others who fell on hard times quietly slipped out of the social circle and were forgot-ten. A family I knew had once owned three mills near Leicester, but they'd shut down, one by one, and then the family had simply disappeared. Sold up and went somewhere without so much as a goodbye. I'd heard the eldest daughter was working as a waitress, but I was sure that couldn't be true, because Effie was as clumsy as she was stupid. At the time, I hadn't felt much pity for them—they were a brash and spendthrift lot—but now I was thinking of them a little

more kindly. But that was really the best one could hope for: pity. And I would not be an object of pity.

"Suit yourself." Toby examined me critically. "Probably for the best: you're starting to look like a woman who does her own hair." He shuddered.

"Beastly creature!" I lobbed a needlepoint cushion at him. "Make it up to me by helping me persuade your mother this is a good idea. We'll need to do it soon too. I've already placed the advertisement for the post and need to have someone hired by the time I go to Gryden Hall in two weeks."

"Gryden!" He flinched. "Bit of a mixed blessing, that."

"I know. But I need to start getting out, and Cecilia's just dyyyying to see me! That's how she put it in the letter, too—lots of extra 'y's'."

He chuckled. "Sounds like her. She probably can't wait to see a friendly face after having been trapped out in the godforsaken countryside with that sister of hers." Toby gave me a warning look. "Tread carefully, my dear."

"I can manage Millicent. She's the least of my worries."

"It's not just her you have to worry about. They'll all be staring you down, all weekend long. Couldn't you have found a more relaxed event for your return to public life? Weren't there any drawing rooms at Buckingham Palace?"

"Not a single one. Everyone's off hunting, the king included."

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, of course. They've all run off to stand around

in the damp and deliver England from the scourge of grouse." He shuddered again.

"Well, anyway, Cee says that Joyce and David will be there too. It feels like years since I last saw Joyce."

"Ahh, still married, then? There's a wager I've lost."

I had run out of cushions to throw, so I just settled for a glare. "Yes, still married, *and* enjoying it. At least, I haven't heard any complaints from Joyce, and you know I would have if she had any."

"She does speak her mind," he agreed. "Must be the American in her." The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour. "Ahh, teatime. Gird your loins, Mums will be here any moment. But perhaps talk of this lady's maid will distract her from the bachelors." He stretched back out on the sofa, grinning.

With a sharp cough and a terse: "Hasn't Jeffries brought the tea yet?" Aunt Elinor announced her arrival.

"Ahh," Toby crowed. "Speak of the devil!"

His mother paused in the doorway, the very picture of Severe: spear-straight posture, tightly scraped back dark hair, high-necked, floor-length black dress.

My spine stiffened as soon as I saw her, but Toby drawled: "Afternoon, Mums."

"Tobias!" his mother gasped. "You're smoking!" Her hand reflexively clutched the cross she wore around her neck.

"Am I?" He glanced at the cigarette in his hand. "Why, yes, I believe you're right."

"You know I abhor smoking, Tobias! The smell never leaves the furniture. Put it out this very moment." Aunt Elinor sailed over to an armchair and settled on its edge, coughing once more as soon as she had landed.

"Terribly sorry, Mums," Toby said. "But since the damage has prob-ably already been done, may I finish my ciggie?"

"You may not, and don't use slang. And sit up *straight*!"

Toby sighed, handed the cigarette off to me, and hauled himself into a sitting position. I smiled sympathetically as I tossed the cigarette into the fire, resisting the urge to sneak a final drag.

"I'll be hungry now," Toby fretted. "Hope Jeffries brings the tea soon." Right on cue, the door opened and the butler entered, magisterially wheeling a cumbersome tea cart laden with the teapot and a single plate of bread and butter sandwiches. He eased awkwardly around my piano, which had been jammed into the overstuffed room and was already proving a trial for anyone expecting a clear path through the door.

Toby groaned, "Bread and butter! Can't we have cake or something, Mother?"

"I don't see why we should eat extravagantly when it's only the three of us. Plain food is good for the soul, don't you agree, Astra?"

"I'm sure it is, Aunt Elinor. Nothing like a penitent's diet to consider one's sins."

She pulled out a handkerchief and coughed into it as I began pouring the tea.

"You really should see someone about that cough," I commented, handing her a cup.

She waved a hand at me even as she coughed again. "Never mind that. Come and sit by me, dear, we need to have a talk."

Toby raised his eyebrows and looked pointedly at the clock as I took a seat next to his mother. "She's quick off the mark: that was under five minutes," he murmured.

Aunt El set her teacup aside, took both my hands, and smiled in a way she probably meant to seem kind, but which actually felt slightly menacing. Smiles did not come naturally to her.

"Now, Astra, it's been some months since your tragedy, and of course it's entirely proper that you took plenty of time to mourn your parents. But now you must start considering practical matters. I don't need to remind you how dire your situation is . . . "

No, she certainly did not.

"And while I'm content for you to be here, you can't expect to stay indefinitely."

"Don't you feel welcome, my dear?" Toby asked with a half smile. Aunt El continued: "The best thing for a girl in your position is to secure herself a husband."

"Ah! You see, Astra, what did I tell you?" Toby crowed.

"What are you going on about?" Aunt El asked sharply.

"Nothing at all." He winked at me and smirked into his teacup.

"Well, there it is, dear," she said, turning back to me. "Now, since you show no urgency in the matter, despite having been introduced to any number of excellent young men, it seems to have fallen to me to find someone suitable." She sighed, as though put out by this inconvenience.

I tried not to look too horrified, but dear lord, what sort of man would Aunt Elinor consider an appropriate life partner? Probably some-one like—God help me—*her*.

She scowled. "Don't look at me like that, young lady! You children nowadays think you have all the time in the world to do what you want, but you simply don't. You must start thinking seriously about this; you're leaving things rather late."

"You can't have it both ways, Mums," Toby piped up. "Either Astra's a child or she's socially ancient. You have to choose one."

"It's foolish of you to sit by and expect suitable men to keep appear-ing," Aunt El told me, ignoring her son. "All of your friends are starting to snap them up. Why not Lord Beckworth? His mother's gone off to France, and now I hear the poor man's quite lonely."

"He can get a Labrador, then," I suggested tersely. "What does he need me for?"

"I wouldn't subject an animal as intelligent as a Labrador to life with Ducky," said Toby. "I think they have laws now against animal cruelty."

"There's nothing wrong with Lord Beckworth, Tobias!" his mother snapped.

"Nothing at all, Mums. But mark my words: when we were at school he definitely wasn't one of the finest minds of his generation, and, like this sofa, he hasn't improved with age. No, Mums, keep your desperate bachelors: nobody's good enough for our Astra." Toby made a gallant half bow, twirling a sandwich in the air. I giggled.

"For heaven's sake, Tobias, be serious!" Aunt Elinor snapped. "There must be some friend of yours Astra hasn't been introduced to yet."

"If she hasn't been introduced to him, there's probably a *very* good reason."

"Oh, come now, they can't all be idiots," she huffed.

"Of course they are, Mother. But they're the finest idiots in Britain. One must have standards."

"You're being deliberately difficult," she snarled.

Toby shrugged. "Maybe Astra doesn't want to be married."

"Of *course* she wants to be married. What else is there for her to do?"

"I've been thinking about that," I said. "I'm trying to work some things out, just . . ." I went and picked up the ledger. "You don't know what Rosedale is? Or Dr. H?"

Somehow, she managed to stiffen further. "Never mind about any of that," she said in a tone so chilly I actually shivered. "We have important matters to settle. My friend Mrs. Jeffries has a box at that new Noel Coward play next weekend. I'll ask her to invite you and Lord Beckworth along. And you've accepted Lady Cecilia's invitation to Gryden Hall?"

"I have," I confirmed warily.

"Good. I'm sure there'll be some worthwhile young men there. Lord Hampton wouldn't miss out on that shooting. He was *so* solicitous after your parents' funeral. I'm sure you could make some inroads if you just tried."

Toby shook his head. "Mustard's spoken for, mother," he informed her. "Jossie Bfyddlye told me all about it last week."

"What?" she cried, aghast. "Lord Hampton *engaged*? That can't be correct, I would have heard."

"It only just happened, Jossie said. But he had it right from the horse's mouth after Mustard had one drink too many. He never could keep secrets, old Mustard. Not when he's spifflicated, anyway."

"Who's the lucky girl?" I asked, pleased for Hampton.

"Belinda Avery."

"What? Lord and Lady Crayle's girl?" Aunt El exploded. "That plain little bit of nothing! What an absolute *waste* of a coronet!" She bit a sandwich in half with such rage I was sure she imagined it was Belinda's head.

"I say good for him," I declared. "She's a nice girl, and that's just what he needs." I didn't want Hampton anyway, despite his future dukedom. He was sweet, but he wasn't for me.

Aunt El sighed and raised her eyes skyward, clenching the cross once again. Having evidently prayed for patience, she released the cross and leveled her eyes at me. "Now, Astra, about Lord Beckworth . . ."

"I promise I'll give him some serious thought if you agree to just one thing."

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "What's that?"

"Allow me to hire a lady's maid."

I braced for her reaction. Unsurprisingly, she looked at me as though I'd just proposed something utterly outrageous.

"A lady's maid! You must be joking!"

"Not a bit. Even the most hard-up people keep personal servants. No man wants to marry a pauper," I added slyly. "And anyway, the expense won't be too great. I could probably get one quite cheaply with things the way they are right now."

"Don't talk about money, Astra—it's common," said Aunt El.

"Astra must have a maid, there's no question about it," Toby piped up. "Of course you'd say that," Aunt El huffed. "You've always taken her side."

"Well, she's always right. It seems a good policy to back the person who's always correct. Let her have the maid, Mother. She's right about it being a dead giveaway if she doesn't have one—see how frumpy she's looking lately! No man wants a frump either."

"I'll contribute to the cost of her upkeep, of course," I added. "Shall we say"—I grappled for what seemed a reasonable amount—"two pounds two shillings a month?"

She turned to me in horror. "Two pounds two shillings? What do you intend to feed this person, caviar and Montrachet? One and one should be more than sufficient."

"One and one it is, then."

At least now I knew the cost of a bread-and-butter diet. Not much, but certainly a start.