

A BRIGHT YOUNG THING

by Brianne Moore

EXCERPT

“Why don’t we have a game of bridge?” Joyce suggested when the gentlemen joined the ladies in the drawing room after dinner. “Who’ll play?”

There were too many volunteers, so we drew cards to see who would play first, and I came up the loser.

“Bad luck, Astra,” Millicent smirked, taking her seat opposite Dunreaven.

“No matter,” I said airily.

“Lucky for us, though,” said Cecilia. “Won’t you play for us, Astra?”

“If you insist.” I seated myself at the piano and launched into a song.

“What is that?” Millicent asked a few moments in, her voice thick with disgust.

“Gershwin,” Dunreaven answered for me. “Isn’t that right?”

I nodded.

“Gershwin?” Millicent rolled her eyes. “Is that noise all we have to offer the world now? What will our descendants think when they look back on what we call culture? Where is our Mozart? Our Chopin? Can’t you play something civilized, Astra? This isn’t a jazz club, you know.”

If it were, I’d be getting paid for providing the entertainment, I thought acidly, but I obediently segued into my favorite Mahler nocturne.

“That’s a bit better,” Millicent condescended.

Dunreaven, now playing as the dummy, set his cards down. He strolled over to the piano and leaned gracefully against it.

“Astra Davies,” he murmured.

“Lord Dunreaven,” I returned without pausing in my playing.

“It’s been a long time. I hardly recognized you without your braids.”

“Well, little girls have a tendency to grow up. And we get rid of the braids because little boys tug on them.”

He laughed. “Surely I never did that!”

“You surely did. And you kidnapped Cecilia’s doll once and made her cry. Cee, not the doll. You and David held her for ransom in some pirate game. The doll, not Cee.”

“What an awful little boy,” he murmured. “I feel like I should do penance.”

“You should. Fifteen tea parties and maybe we’ll call it even.”

He chuckled. “I’d rather something more grown up. Perhaps some dances?”

“I’m sure Cecilia would be delighted. But you’d have to ask her.” I changed to a light waltz with a cheeky smile.

His eyes (green, I noticed, with amber flecks) flashed momentarily, and he grinned. “So, what else has changed, aside from your hair?”

“So many things.”

“Fortunately, we have all weekend for you to tell me.”

“Don’t you have some birds to shoot?” I asked. “And there are other guests here I may want to spend time talking to.”

His eyes moved toward Beckworth, deep in a conversation about fishing with Cee and Lord Caddonfoot. “You’re right, that was presumptuous of me,” Dunreaven agreed. “I’ll have to work for your attention, then.”

“Anything worth having takes a little effort.”

His smile widened, and I very nearly missed a note. “And you think your full attention is worth the effort?”

“Don’t you?”

“Fishing for a compliment?”

“Like I said at dinner, I don’t fish.”

“You know,” he said warmly, “when Joyce and Cecilia talked you up, I thought they must be exaggerating, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” I said, laughing. “What did they say?”

“Quite a lot about your dazzling wit and charm.”

“Doesn’t sound like Joyce. Must have been Cee.”

He shrugged. “It’s possible I’m embellishing from my own observations.”

“You’re too kind, Lord Dunreaven. I’ll end up being a disappointment.”

“A disappointment? You could never be a disappointment!” Cecilia cried, plopping down on the bench next to me. “She’s lovely and clever, isn’t she, Jeremy?”

“Don’t force him, Cee—it’s not fair,” I protested.

“I can assure you, I don’t need to be forced,” Dunreaven replied.

“Jeremy, we need you back!” Millicent shrilled.

“I think I’ll step out, if you don’t mind,” he replied. “Mr. Porter, would you care to take my place?”

“Then Astra can take mine,” Millicent said, slapping her cards down on the table. “It was a terrible hand, that. Dunny, do be a gentleman and make me forget all about it.”