

THE MOST ELIGIBLE BRIDE IN LONDON

by Ella Quinn

EXCERPT

Nate glanced back over his shoulder, but the lady's coach was already turning around. When she'd first faced him with her brows imperiously raised, he'd thought she was Dotty Stern, but that was impossible. Miss Stern had married the Marquis of Merton shortly after Nate had left Town four years before. Surely Merton would not allow his wife to engage in that type of activity. Also, the lady looked like Miss Stern had four years ago.

Whoever she was, she was beautiful. Her hair was as black as night, and her eyes appeared as if they might be light. But what struck him most was her courage. He'd never met a female who had so little fear of using a weapon to shoot a man. Yet even though she was a lady—a fact that had been clear once she'd abandoned her country accent—she was not dressed like a female who would be attending the Season. The cloth was good enough, but the styling was not that of a London modiste. At one time, when he'd been a well-known dandy, those things had actually mattered to him. He was still able to recognize the differences, but he didn't care about them anymore. Now, he was much more interested in the person instead of the way they dressed.

Yet, because he was a gentleman and she was a lady, he could not insult her by introducing himself. That was unfortunate.

He hoped the infant lived. Most babes would have given a loud screech when tossed. This one had only a small, pathetic cry.

Her carriage traveled up the street at a smart pace, and he went around to the door of his coach and found Mr. Odell, the young woman, and her child already inside. "I see you are ready to leave."

"We are." Odell's smile was wider than Nate had ever seen it as he gazed at the infant in his arms. "Mary has agreed to be our daughter, just as if she and John had wed."

Mary's tears were gone and she too was smiling broadly. "From now on I am Mary Odell."

"What is the child's name?" Nate climbed into the coach.

"John for his father. Papa"—she looked shyly at Mr. Odell—"said that he was to have the same rights as if John and I had married."

That did not surprise Nate at all. Odell and his wife had several daughters, all of whom had married well, and one remaining son. The younger son was studying to be a lawyer and had taken little interest in the farm. And there were no entailments to stop Odell and his wife from leaving the property as they wished.

Today had definitely been a good day. Nate returned her smile. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Papa"—Nate was pleased to see how comfortable she was calling Odell "Papa." But she would have known them fairly well. Nate briefly wondered why she hadn't gone to the Odells in the first place, but not only was it water under the bridge, it wasn't his business —"told me how hard you looked for me," Mary said as the coach started. "If I live to be a hundred, I don't think I'll find a lord as good as you are."

A flush heated Nate's neck. "Thank you. I'm glad I was able to help." The coach had turned and was headed back up the street. "Mrs. Odell should be at Fotherby House by now." He decided to ask a question that had been bothering him. "How did you survive?"

"My, my." She straightened her shoulders. "Mr. Bywater made me leave. But my mother gave me all the money she had been able to save, and I got work sewing. But after the baby came . . ."

"Well"—Odell's voice was rough with emotion—"at least you had the sense to go to the workhouse. That's the only way we found you."

"Yes." Her tone was barely above a whisper. "It was really my only choice."

Nate and the older man exchanged a glance. They were both glad she thought that way. Too many young women and girls on their own were forced into prostitution.