

## Whitney, My Love Novel Chapter 5

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### Chapter Five

FOR THE THIRD TIME IN TEN MINUTES, WHITNEY REALIZED THAT she had again lost track of the conversation, and she glanced guiltily at the girls who were paying a morning call on her. Fortunately, they were all enraptured with Therese's enthusiastic description of her new life as a married woman and seemed not to notice Whitney's wandering attention.

Nervously, Whitney fingered the letter from Emily which had just been handed to her, wondering as she always did, if this was going to be the letter that brought the dreaded news that Paul had chosen a wife. Unable to bear the suspense any longer, she opened it, and her heart doubled its already rapid pace as she began to read:

"Dearest Whitney," Emily wrote in her neat, precise hand, "henceforth, I shall expect you to address me as 'Lady Emily, Baroness Archibald, the Happiest Woman Alive.' I shall expect you to bow and scrape and mince about when next we meet, so that I will truly believe this has happened." The next two pages were filled with wondrous praise of Emily's new husband and details of the marriage which had been performed by special license. "What you said about France is also true of England," Emily said. "No matter how grotesque he is, if a gentleman has a tide, he is considered a great matrimonial prize, but I promise when you meet him, you will agree that my husband would be wonderful without any title."

Whitney smiled, knowing that Emily would never have married her baron unless she loved him. "Enough about me," she continued, "I have something else to tell you which I forgot to mention in my last letter. Six of us from home were all at a rout party in London, where our hostess introduced a gentleman who at once took the ladies' fancy. And no wonder, for he was very handsome and tall, and from a distinguished French family. Whitney, it was M. Nicolas DuVille! I was quite certain he was the same gentleman you mention in your letters, and I asked M. DuVille if he was acquainted with you. When he said that he was, Margaret Merryton and the other girls flocked around him to try to offer their 'sympathy.'

"How you would have laughed, for after giving them a look that should have turned them to stone, M. DuVille quite flayed them alive with tales of all your suitors and conquests in Paris. He even implied that he was rather taken with you himself, which made the girls absolutely livid with jealousy. Is what he said true? And why haven't you told me that 'Paris is in the palm of your hand'?"

Whitney smiled. Although Nicki had mentioned meeting Emily in London, he had never mentioned meeting Whitney's childhood arch foe, Margaret Merryton, or the

other girls. The pleasure she felt at his defense of her vanished, however, when she considered the possibility that Nicki might truly want to be something more than just her friend. For nearly three years, he had merely been a handsome vision who appeared without warning at her side to claim her for a dance or tease her about one of her many suitors. Then he would vanish with some dazzling female clinging possessively to his arm.

But a few months ago that had suddenly changed. They had met each other at the theatre and Nicki had unexpectedly invited her to an opera. Now he escorted her everywhere, to balls and routs, musicales and plays. Of all the men she knew,

Nicolas DuVille was the one Whitney most enjoyed being with, but she couldn't bear the thought that he might actually have serious intentions toward her.

Whitney stared blindly at the letter, her eyes cloudy and sad. If Nicki were to offer for her, and she were to decline (which she would), she would be jeopardizing her friendship with Therese, her aunt and uncle's friendship with the senior DuVilles, and her own friendship with Nicki, which meant a great deal to her.

She forced her attention back to Emily's letter. At the end of it was news of Paul. "Elizabeth is in London for the season, and when she returns home, everyone is expecting Paul to offer for her, since her parents now feel it is past time for her to marry."

Whitney, who had been bursting with joy for Emily's wonderful news, now felt like crying her heart out. After all her practicing, all of her planning, she was at last ready to win Paul's love, but her father was keeping her in France, ignoring her pleas to come home.

As soon as she had ushered her friends from the house, Whitney went to her room to write to him. This time, she would send her father a letter he couldn't just ignore as he had her others. She wanted to go home-had to go home- and she had to do it at once. After considerable thought, she composed a letter to him, this time appealing to his wounded pride and dignity, by telling him how she longed to come home and prove to him that he could be proud of her now. She finished by telling him how dreadfully she missed him. Then she wrote to Emily.

When she brought the letters downstairs to have them sent off, she was informed by a footman that Monsieur DuVille had just arrived and wished to see her immediately. Puzzled by this imperative command from Nicki, Whitney went down the hall to her uncle's study. "Hello, Nicki. It's a lovely day, isn't it?"

He turned. "Is it?" he replied tersely, and there was no mistaking the rigid set of his shoulders or the taut line of his jaw.

"Well, yes. Sunny and warm, I mean."

"Just exactly what possessed you to engage in a public horse race?" he snapped, ignoring the polite amenities.

"It was not a public horse race," Whitney said, amazed by his vehemence.

"No? Then perhaps you will explain how it appeared in the paper today."

"I don't know," Whitney sighed. "I imagine that someone told someone who told someone else. That's the way it usually happens. Anyway," she finished with a pretty toss of her head, "I won, you know. I actually beat Baron Von Ault."

Nicki's voice rang with authority. "I will not permit you to do a thing like that again!" He saw her stiffen in angry confusion and drew a long breath. "I apologize for my tone, cherie. I will see you at the Armands' masquerade this evening, unless you will change your mind and permit me to escort you?"

Whitney smiled her acceptance of his apology, but shook her head at the suggestion of his escorting her to the Armands'. "I think it's best if I go with my aunt and uncle and meet you there. The other ladies already resent me for monopolizing so much of your attention lately, Nicki."

Momentarily, Nicki cursed himself for allowing her to get under his skin, when for nearly three years his own good judgment had warned him away. And then, four months ago, after an exceedingly disagreeable evening with a lady who had once amused him and now bored him with her clinging ways, Nicki had encountered Whitney at the theatre and impulsively asked her to accompany him to an opera.

By the end of the evening, he was utterly captivated by her. She was an intoxicating combination of beauty and humor, of exhilarating intelligence and disarming common sense. And she was as elusive as hell!

He looked at her now. Her sensuous mouth was curved into an affectionate smile of the sort one bestows on a loved brother, not one's future husband, and it irritated Nicki into action.

Before Whitney could guess his intent, his hands caught her upper arms, pulling her against the length of his hard frame as his mouth began a purposeful descent. "Nicki, don't! I-" Instantly his mouth silenced her startled protest, his lips moving sensuously, tasting and courting hers. In the past, only clumsy, overzealous suitors had tried to kiss her, and Whitney had easily put them off, but Nicki's arousing kiss was awakening a response in her that amazed and alarmed her. She managed to remain perfectly still and unresponsive, but the moment his arms loosened, she stepped back quickly. "I suppose," she said with false calm, "that I ought to slap your face for that."

She looked so coolly unaffected that Nicki, who had been unexpectedly shaken by the feel of her soft mouth beneath his, and the pressure of her breasts against his chest,

was furious. "Slap my face?" he repeated sarcastically. "Why should you? I can't believe that I'm the first, or even the hundredth, man to steal a kiss from you."

"Really?" Whitney flung back, stung to the quick by his intimation that she would play fast and loose. "Well, I've obviously just had the honor of being your first!" The words weren't past her lips before Whitney saw the rigid anger in his expression and realized that she'd made a serious tactical error in insulting his masculinity. "Nicki-" she whispered in warning, cautiously stepping backward and out of his reach. Nicki advanced on her. She scooted behind her uncle's desk, facing him across it, her hands braced on the top. Each time Whitney moved one way, Nicki countered. They stood, two combatants separated by Uncle Edward's desk, each waiting for the other to make a move. Suddenly, the childish absurdity of the situation struck Whitney, and she began to laugh. "Nicki, have you the faintest idea what you're going to do if you catch me?"

Nicki had an excellent idea what he would like to do if he caught her, but he also appreciated the foolishness of the scene. He straightened, and the mask of anger fell away.

"Come out from behind the desk," he chuckled. "I give you my word I shall behave as a gentleman."

Scanning his face, Whitney assured herself that he meant it, then obediently did as he bade her. Linking her hand through his arm, she escorted him to the door. "I'll see you tonight at the masquerade," she promised.

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