

AMERICAN HEIRESSES • 1



Flights of Fancy



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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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In memory of Dolores Turano

Love you always!

Jen



CHAPTER 1



JULY 1885
NEWPORT

“Wonderful news, darling. I have it on good authority from none other than Mr. Ward McAllister that the Duke of Montrose has taken a special interest in you.”

With her brief respite from the frivolities transpiring at Mr. Theodore Davis’s Newport cottage clearly at an end, Miss Isadora Delafield pulled her gaze from the sight of the moon casting its beams over the ocean. Turning, she discovered her mother, Hester Delafield, advancing toward her over the seashell path that meandered through the back courtyard.

Keeping her back ramrod straight, because doing anything less would bring on a certain lecture from her mother, she refused to sigh when she noticed Hester was bubbling with excitement as she stepped directly underneath a gas lamp.

“Isn’t that the most *marvelous* news?” Hester all but gushed.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to claim it’s marvelous. Pleasant perhaps, but . . .”

“You’ve attracted the notice of a duke,” Hester countered. “A circumstance that warrants the word *marvelous*, especially since

I learned of the duke's notice from, again, Mr. Ward McAllister, the social arbiter of our day."

Isadora tilted her head. "You may be putting too much stock in Mr. McAllister's assessment of the duke's interest in me. I only recently met the gentleman. It was not as if we spent more than a moment exchanging the expected pleasantries as I was presented to the duke in the receiving line."

Hester lowered herself onto the bench beside Isadora. "From what I understand, the duke lingered over your hand. *And*, according to my most trusted sources, he's been questioning everyone endlessly about you, which leaves me to believe the gentleman is well and truly smitten."

While there was no debating that the duke *had* lingered over her hand, Isadora was convinced that the lingering had merely been a ruse used by the duke to afford him the luxury of perusing the low neckline of her gown. His gaze had all but devoured her charms, making her so uncomfortable that she'd finally, and with a great deal of determined tugging on her part, retrieved her hand from his, earning a narrowing of the duke's eyes in the process.

Because she'd been instructed from a tender age that a lady was not to annoy a gentleman with lofty connections no matter the circumstances, she'd quickly summoned up her brightest smile, which seemed to have gone far in appeasing the duke's displeasure. He'd immediately returned the smile, shot another gaze to the neckline of her gown, and then, to her utmost disbelief, he'd had the audacity to send her what could only be described as a roguish wink.

His boldness, combined with the notion that he was apparently questioning everyone about her, left Isadora with the distinct impression that the man had traveled across the ocean to secure himself an heiress, as many aristocrats were doing these days. Regrettably, he'd apparently decided she was an heiress worthy of his consideration.

"I don't have the words to describe how delighted I am by this fortuitous turn of events," Hester continued. "I've always known

your beauty and reputation for adhering to the proprieties would land you the cream of the crop, but a *duke*? Why, I'm all aflutter." She flipped open her fan and began applying it vigorously to her face, the furious fanning displacing strands of dark locks streaked with only a touch of gray that her lady's maid had spent hours arranging. "This is exactly why I've been so earnest with your upbringing. It's also why I insisted you wear that back brace for years, because it forced you to maintain a rigid posture, which draws attention to your lovely neck."

"I don't believe the duke is interested in me because I possess perfect posture."

Hester stopped fanning herself. "He's undoubtedly interested in your posture. He's a duke, and as such, he needs a wife who'll do justice to the title of duchess." She released a throaty laugh. "I don't imagine there are many slouching duchesses to be found over in Britain."

"I imagine you're right about that."

Hester released a satisfied sigh. "All the dance instructions, decorum lessons, fittings at Worth, and, well, I could go on and on, but allow me to simply say that you've been groomed from birth to make a most splendid match. All of my hopes and dreams for you are now coming to pass." She began waving her fan at a furious rate again. "When word of the duke's interest spreads, I do believe our standing in society will rival that of *the* Mrs. Astor."

Realizing matters were quickly getting away from her, Isadora rose from the bench, smoothing out a wrinkle from the fitted skirt of her ball gown. She summoned up a smile, even though she was fighting a curious urge to scowl. "Not that I care to disappoint you, Mother, but I must be perfectly candid before you begin picking out my trousseau. If it has escaped your notice, the Duke of Montrose is at least twice my age. I cannot in good conscience allow you to continue believing I would ever encourage him to pursue me."

Hester got to her feet and rapped Isadora's arm with her fan. "Don't be absurd. Of course you'll encourage him to pursue you. He's a duke, and there aren't many of those roaming around these

days.” She rapped her fan against Isadora’s arm again. “And yes, he’s older than you, but older gentlemen possess an air of sophistication that I’ve always found most appealing. There’s been many a time I’ve wished I’d married an older man. Your father, as you know, is only two years older than I am. That right there could be to blame for why we’re rarely in accord these days.”

“You and Father are rarely in accord because he cannot abide society and you thrive in it.”

“I suppose that is an excellent point. However, if he’d been older when we first met, I would have known straightaway that he didn’t care for society. Not that you could be aware of this, but your father, at one time, adored attending balls, operas, and the frequent house parties. It wasn’t until he reached his thirties that he grew bored with what he began calling ‘ridiculous frivolities,’ and that is when we began living separate lives.”

“If you don’t care to continue living separately from him, you could always join him on his yacht as he travels the world.”

Hester shuddered. “And miss the New York season? I think not.” Hester’s gaze suddenly sharpened as she settled her attention on something behind them. “But enough about that. I shouldn’t have broached the subject of your father because our talk has caused your cheeks to heat. You know I find blotchy skin most unattractive on you.” She took hold of Isadora’s arm and spun her around to face the ocean. “Let us hope the sea breeze remedies that situation because, don’t look now, but the duke is heading our way. I imagine he’s taken leave of the amusements inside the cottage because he longs to become better acquainted with you.” Hester waved her fan, not in front of her own face, but in front of Isadora’s. “Now, chin up, my dear, and for goodness’ sake, smile. We mustn’t allow the gentleman to get the impression you’re a surly sort.”

Fighting the impulse to bolt in the opposite direction, one that would take her straight off a cliff and into the sea, Isadora lifted her chin, forced a smile, and turned to greet the approaching duke. Her smile slipped, though, when she noticed that the duke had stopped a few feet away and appeared to be waiting for them to join *him*.

Before she could point out that breach of etiquette to her mother, Hester was off like a shot, stopping directly in front of the duke and dipping into a curtsy.

As the duke presented Hester with a bow, Isadora took a second to study the man, something she'd not bothered to do when she'd been presented to him in the receiving line, since she'd been more interested in getting away from him than taking note of his appearance.

Like all the gentlemen tonight, the duke was wearing a formal black jacket, matching trousers, and a brilliant white waistcoat and white tie. However, unlike the other gentlemen, he'd embellished his ensemble with a variety of jeweled pins and brooches, as well as added a good deal of lace to the cuffs of his jacket.

His blond hair, which could only be considered sparse, was combed over the top of his head, and his eyes appeared small in a face overly broad and somewhat flaccid, suggesting the duke was a man who enjoyed his food.

Shaking herself from her perusal when she realized the duke and her mother were watching her expectantly, Isadora forced feet that felt as if they'd been weighed down by chains into motion. Stopping in front of the duke, she reluctantly placed her hand in the hand he was holding out to her, finding herself oddly mesmerized by the large cuff link shaped like a snake that was attached to the lace at the edge of his sleeve.

"You've led me on a merry chase, Miss Delafield," the duke began. "I was beginning to fear I'd not be able to run you to ground before my most favorite of dances is to begin, that being the waltz. But here you are and looking just as lovely as I remembered."

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her gloved fingers. Keeping a firm grip on her hand after he was finished, he sent her a smile that had revulsion crawling up her spine.

Why the mere sight of him smiling repulsed her she couldn't say with any certainty, although it might have something to do with the ominous air she felt swirling around him, an air that was dark and . . .

“Shall we return to the ball before we miss our opportunity to waltz?” he asked.

Pulling her hand from his, Isadora consulted the dance card attached to her wrist, lifting her head a second later as a large dose of relief swept through her. “I must beg your forgiveness, Your Grace, but I’m afraid the next waltz has been claimed by Mr. Arthur Langdon.”

The duke’s smile turned smug. “Mr. Langdon, you’ll be happy to learn, has agreed to relinquish his waltz to me after I discovered he’d claimed that dance from you earlier. But there’s no need to fret that he was uninterested in taking to the floor with you.” He leaned closer. “It was only through my most fervent persuasion that I was able to convince him to grant me his spot on your dance card, a circumstance that proved that you, my dear, are in high demand.”

Isadora glanced to her mother, finding Hester quirked a telling brow back at her. Knowing the look was her mother’s way of encouraging her to say something of a witty nature in response to what the duke clearly thought had been a compliment, she managed a rather weak “Thank you.”

That less-than-witty response had Hester stepping directly next to the duke. “I’m certain Mr. Langdon was honored to relinquish his dance to you, Your Grace,” Hester said. “And while I know Isadora is honored to take to the floor with you, she seems overwhelmed by the privilege you’ve extended to her, which has rendered her almost speechless.”

The duke inclined his head. “It is a privilege I’m more than willing to extend, Mrs. Delafield. From the moment I saw your lovely daughter in the receiving line, I knew she was a young lady deserving of my *particular* attention. Her beauty and charms—or rather, *charming* attitude—drew my notice at once. You’ll be pleased to learn I’ve decided I desire nothing more than to become better acquainted with her as the evening unfolds.”

“How delightful,” Hester breathed.

“Indeed,” the duke agreed. “And to expedite the process of becoming acquainted with your lovely daughter, I’m certain you’ll

want to repair to the ballroom, allowing me a few moments to converse with Miss Delafield without any disruptions.”

Hester blinked. “You wish for me to return to the ballroom and leave you alone with Isadora?”

The duke beamed at Hester, showing a mouthful of sharp teeth. “I knew you were a lady possessed of keen insight, Mrs. Delafield. So—” he waved a hand toward the cottage—“we’ll join you inside momentarily, but no need to fret that our being alone will be remarked upon. Being a duke, I’m afforded certain liberties, if you will, and those liberties include the luxury of not needing a chaperone to hover over me when a young lady has procured my fancy.”

For the briefest of seconds, Hester hesitated, but then, to Isadora’s disbelief, her mother dropped into a curtsy, straightened, and began walking across the courtyard without another word, leaving Isadora standing beside the dreadful duke with her mouth slightly agape.