

# Chapter One

If she had known that accepting a duke's proposal would involve as much blasted shopping for clothes as it did, Annabelle would never have agreed to marry one.

No, she allowed, wincing as a stray pin caught the underside of her arm. That was a lie. She would have said *yes* to Daniel's proposal if he had been a duke, a gentleman or a chimney sweep.

She did feel, however, that the wife-to-be of a chimney sweep would not be forced into so many shops of dressmakers, milliners, cobblers, corsetieres and glove-makers in a series of shopping expeditions so well-organised that they might well have been military operations. Her mother, Viscountess Spencer, was the general in charge of the expeditions into new sartorial territory. Daniel's mother, the current Duchess of Rothmuir, was her eager lieutenant.

"Well, Lucinda, what do you think of the peach satin?" the duchess asked, moving closer and peering at the half-made dress that Annabelle was currently being fitted for. "It brings out her eyes, I think. Such pretty eyes," her future mother-in-law said, smiling at Annabelle.

"Annabelle has always looked good in peach," her mother proclaimed. "But she will need something more dramatic for the evening. Sapphire blue, I think. Madame," she said, addressing the owner of the exclusive dressmaker's establishment they were currently occupying. "I wish to see anything you may have in a sapphire blue, suitable for a ball gown."

"Of course, my lady," the woman said, her French accent low and melodious. She nodded to a maid standing by the door, who disappeared immediately on her mission.

"May I offer you more champagne while we wait for the sample books to be brought to you?" Madame Gaspard asked, lifting the half-empty bottle from the ice bucket it sat in.

Both of the older women happily drank another glass of champagne, and picked their way through a large box of chocolates, despite the fact that it was not yet lunchtime. Annabelle, stuck standing on a stool to allow the gown to be hemmed properly, was not included in their discussion or luxurious picnic.

“Do I not have enough dresses yet, Mother?” Annabelle asked wearily after a bolt of blue silk was selected and held up against her for the ladies to best judge if she could wear the colour. “We must be employing every dressmaker in London!”

“A lady can never be too well dressed, Annabelle,” her mother said tersely. “And if you and the duke were willing to wait until the start of the next Season to be married, instead of insisting on the end of this one, we wouldn’t be trying to get a trousseau organised at record speed.”

“Oh, young love,” the duchess said, sighing happily. “Don’t scold her, Lucinda, dear. It’s terribly romantic, their not being able to wait a moment longer than they have to!”

Annabelle snorted. If Daniel had been able to have his way, they would have been married by Special License the night that they became engaged. Waiting the five weeks to the end of July—the end of the Season—was tantamount to torture to a man who was used to having his way on everything due to his birthright as one of the highest-ranking members of the nobility.

Annabelle was frustrated by the long wait, too. During her week at Rosemere, Daniel had made good on his promise to give her a taste of the dark carnal pleasures that he enjoyed. A taste was not enough for Annabelle. She wanted him with a passion that almost scared her with its intensity. However, a hasty marriage would give some gossips fuel to speculate that their marriage was required, not desired, so a date at the end of July was agreed on.

As with all compromises, it suited nobody. Viscountess Spencer had five weeks to plan a wedding that would be seen as *the* social event of the Season, equip her daughter with an entirely new trousseau, and begin intensive lessons on what it meant to be a duchess. Of course, a wedding dress that would be the talk of the Season had to be hand-made in that time, too, a nearly impossible task. Lady Spencer handled the stress of it with the grit and fortitude of Wellington himself, throwing herself wholeheartedly into every aspect of the planning and preparation.

Annabelle was forced to wait an unbearably long time before she could be naked and in Daniel’s arms again. Now that the wedding had been announced in the *Times*, everybody knew that they were engaged. They were allowed to be seen together at social events, although Annabelle still had to be chaperoned by her mother. Daniel was permitted to call on Annabelle at the Spencer’s townhouse in Mayfair, but never allowed to be alone with her. If by chance that did happen, the butler, Johns, immediately opened the door to the drawing room widely, making

them visible to anybody who happened to be passing. As Annabelle's six older brothers all suddenly saw themselves as protectors of their sister's good name, there was always a tall young man suddenly clomping his way down the corridor whenever the drawing room door was opened.

It was driving them both crazy with need for each other, and although Annabelle had not known her fiancé for a long time, she was positive that he was reaching a peak of desire that would have to be assuaged soon, in case the pressure of restraint caused him to vent steam from his ears.

There were two weeks left until the date of the wedding. Annabelle wasn't sure if either she or Daniel could wait that long.

Eventually the peach dress was pinned into the correct shape, and Annabelle was allowed to step down from the stool and re-dress. By the time she was presentable again, all the champagne and chocolates had been consumed, and they were late for their appointment at the milliners. Armed with fabric swatches and two rather merry noblewomen, Annabelle gritted her teeth and tried on over a dozen hats before settling on nine of them to be made up to match her new dresses.

They were all hungry for luncheon by then, so they stopped at a tearoom and ordered sandwiches, cakes, and a pot of tea. Society ladies, all of whom were eager to pass on their best wishes to the woman who was to be the new Duchess of Rothmuir, frequently interrupted them. Annabelle was social and liked to talk, but she wished it wouldn't happen during lunch. She enjoyed her food too much to have her meal interrupted so often.

The afternoon was given over to yet more shopping, but this time the duchess was in charge. Instead of the modistes and the milliners, the ladies browsed furniture showrooms and looked at pattern books for wallpaper.

"You must have your rooms redecorated, Annabelle," the duchess said firmly. "Every lady does it when she marries; you must make your stamp on your new home. I know that it is supposed to be vulgar to buy your furniture, not inherit it, but some of the pieces cluttering up Rothmuir Castle are perfectly ghastly. You need to send those to the attics and have something far more elegant."

"I feel awkward doing it," Annabelle admitted. "Taking your place, I mean, not picking out furniture."

“It is all part of the natural way,” the older lady assured her, smiling. “I will be settled in the dowager’s suite of rooms in Rothmuir Castle, and then in the dower house at Rosemere. Here in London I will have my own house, where Flora and the children will stay when we are in London for the Season. You will be the duchess now, Annabelle. You must make your new home your own.”

Annabelle picked up a small Chinese vase in the antique shop they were browsing, then put it down again without really paying any attention to it.

“I really wish you would reconsider,” she pleaded, for the sixth or seventh time. “There is no need for you to move to a new house, or take rooms on the other side of the castle. You are Daniel’s family, and very soon you will be my family as well. You are most welcome to stay with us.”

The duchess smiled, faint age lines wrinkling at the sides of her eyes. She took Annabelle’s arm and threaded it through hers, patting her hand gently. She started them walking through a maze of long-backed sofas and ornate nests of tables that littered the showroom.

“You are a dear girl for saying it, and I know that you mean every word. But, Annabelle, you will be the duchess. You will be the queen of the Rothmuir hive,” the older woman said, a teasing note in her voice. “There is only one queen bee allowed. I must take my dear little swarm and settle somewhere else!”

“I will need you close,” Annabelle said, biting on her lower lip nervously. “I am intimidated at the task ahead of me. You have been such an excellent chatelaine of the Rothmuir houses. I have a lot to learn from you.”

“And I intend to help you,” the duchess said firmly, stopping in front of an elegant dressing table with a three-part mirror and a stool upholstered in a rather garish pink velvet. “My own mother-in-law was a monster of a woman. She left me to sink or swim on my own, and would pass judgement on me daily to my husband. Never kindly, I may add,” she said darkly. “I always said to myself that when it came to my son’s wife, I would be much kinder. And here you are, so easy to be kind to!”

She kissed Annabelle on the cheek.

“Now,” she said briskly, back to business again. “What do you think of the dressing table? I like the elegance of the legs, but of course it’s French, so you would expect elegance from them.”

“It’s very pretty,” Annabelle said helplessly.

“We will take it,” the duchess announced, motioning to a hovering assistant. “Have it labelled for the Duchess of Rothmuir,” she told him, “and send the stool to be reupholstered. The fabric will be sent to you in due course.”

“Of course, your grace,” the man said, practically bowing as he wrote rapidly in his notebook.

“You will need many wardrobes to fit all those pretty new dresses in,” the duchess said, squeezing Annabelle’s hand again. “Let’s see what they have that matches the dressing table.”

And on they went, spending both Spencer and Rothmuir money all over London in silk warehouses, wallpaper merchants, and furniture showrooms. A soft duck-egg blue was chosen to be the main colour of the duchess’ rooms at Rosemere. For the London house, mint green was nominated to replace the sunshine yellow currently in situ. For Rothmuir Castle, scarlet was decided on. Whether she liked it or not, Annabelle was making her stamp on her rooms one shop at a time.

The duchess left the Spencer women in the late afternoon to return to her own house. They were all due at the opera that evening, and they had to prepare. On reaching her own home Annabelle left her mother to give her father an update on their spending, and tumbled down onto the comfortable settee in the drawing room in a most unladylike fashion, groaning.

“I *hate* shopping,” she said aloud to the empty room. “I am *sick* of spending money.”

“That’s a thing that every husband wants to hear,” a deep voice said from a chair by the fire.

Annabelle’s eyes opened hurriedly, and she propped herself up on one elbow to see her fiancé grinning at her from the armchair.

“Daniel!” she said joyfully, scrambling off the settee and over to him.

With a quick look at the closed door, she ran into his open arms and kissed him deeply. His arms tightened around her like steel bands, trapping her body close to his. Without breaking the kiss he took a few steps backwards, sitting in the chair, bringing Annabelle with him to sit on his lap.

“Oh, I miss you,” Annabelle said, leaning her head against his shoulder. “How much longer is it until we’re married?”

“Fourteen days,” the duke replied, kissing her forehead.

One of his hands lazily stroked Annabelle's thigh. The other hand moved from her waist up to her breast, his thumb unerringly finding her nipple and brushing over it. The sensations created by the small movement of his hand sent sparks fizzing through her body, making the small bud at the meeting of her thighs almost throb with the sensation.

"I am so tempted to just pull this dress right off you and take you here on the drawing room floor," he murmured into her ear.

A finger joined his thumb at her nipple, and he rolled the hard little peak between them. Annabelle gasped at the slight pinch he gave her and opened her legs instinctively. Her skirts prevented the duke from accessing her body any further, and she groaned in frustration.

"So responsive," the duke said admiringly. "God, you will be fun to train."

This was not the first time that he had commented on 'training' her, but she couldn't ask him what he meant by that, as measured footfalls were coming along the passageway outside the drawing room.

"Johns," Annabelle said in panic, hauling herself out of Daniel's lap.

Knowing that her pale skin showed every single blush, she headed for the window and pretended to look out into the street. This meant that there was a good six feet of empty space between Daniel and herself when the door was opened by the butler, who gave a slight nod of approval at the distance between the engaged couple. Lady Spencer breezed through the door and headed to Daniel, who stood to kiss her hand in greeting.

"Oh, your grace, such a pleasure to see you," Lady Spencer said, a little flustered at the courtly gesture from the handsome younger man.

"How many times must I ask you to call me Daniel?" he said, a wry smile on his face. "I am soon to be a son to you, after all."

"It will take some getting used to," Lady Spencer admitted, allowing him to seat her on the sofa her daughter had just vacated at speed. "Johns, we will take tea in here. Do round up any of the children who happen to be about."

"The children" were Annabelle's six older brothers, the eldest of whom was thirty-five. Most of them still lived at home, rather than take the expense of maintaining rooms in bachelor establishments like Albany. Two of her brothers were at home, and joined them for tea and cakes. They pointedly sat between Annabelle and Daniel, keeping their baby sister away for as

long as they could from the man who was going to make her his wife. Annabelle found this most annoying, and told them so in a fierce whisper when her mother's attention was on her guest.

"That's why we're doing it," the brother sitting next to her said solemnly. "Not that much longer left to annoy you, Ding-Dong."

"Don't call me that," Annabelle said, rolling her eyes.

Her mother called her Annabelle. Her father called her Annie. Her brothers, to a man, called her Ding-Dong, a childish play on the third syllable of her name. It was one of things that Annabelle was most definitely *not* going to miss about moving out of home.

"Her Grace Ding-Dong, Duchess of Rothmuir," the brother on the other side of her snickered. "It's got a ring to it. Ha! A *ring* to it," he said, nudging her in the ribs.

"As ever, your wit is underwhelming," Annabelle said through gritted teeth, looking up at the ceiling and praying for the patience to cope with brothers who thought they were clever.

Lady Spencer's maternal senses for misbehaviour kicked in about then, and she shot her children a quelling look. All three settled down, sat up properly and tried to look innocent. Annabelle had the feeling that her mother was not at all convinced.

"The duke was just saying that he was looking forward to the opera this evening, Annabelle," her mother told her. "Of course, we have seen *Carmen* before," she said, addressing the duke again, "but never with Adelina Patti singing."

"Speaking of the opera," the duke said, reaching to the side of his chair. "I have brought Annabelle a present. It would please me greatly if you would wear it tonight," he added to his fiancée.

They both rose and met in the middle of the room. The duke was holding a pretty, finely-carved wooden box inlaid with delicate inserts of different coloured woods to form a picture of a bird.

"It's beautiful," Annabelle said, running her fingers carefully across the top of the box.

The duke opened the box, revealing an ornate diamond necklace, set in gold. The gems sparkled in the light of the afternoon—they would look even better in candlelight.

"Oh, my word," Annabelle said reverently as she picked the necklace up. "Oh, Daniel, it's the most wonderful thing I've ever seen in my life! Look, Mother!"

Lady Spencer came to examine the jewels.

“This is a most elegant piece of jewellery, your grace—Daniel,” she amended. “You have excellent taste.”

“There is a bracelet, also, and earrings,” Annabelle said, her eyes as round as saucers. “Oh, Daniel, this is really too much!”

“Hush,” he said fondly. “When it comes to you, my dear, there is no such thing as too much. Come to the mirror, and admire yourself wearing it.”

He guided Annabelle to the mirror that hung over the mantelpiece and stood behind her in order to drape the jewels over her neck.

“There is another gift for you in the box,” he said quietly as he fastened the clasp at the back of her neck. “There is a secret compartment.”

Annabelle looked at Daniel’s reflection in the mirror. He was wearing that smug smile he had when he was doing something wicked and getting away with it.

“It’s something naughty, isn’t it?” Annabelle asked as she turned this way and that in front of the mirror, pretending to admire the jewels when her attention was really on the box that her brothers were holding, admiring the construction.

“It is actually several naughty somethings,” Daniel assured her. “And this evening, when we are at the opera, I would like you to be wearing the diamonds, and one of the other presents in that box.”

“Will I like it?” Annabelle whispered.

Daniel took a moment to consider the question. “I will like it,” he answered finally. “And I hope that will be enough for *you* to like it. Although, if I know you as I think I do, I believe you will grow to like it very much indeed.”

“You speak in riddles, *your grace*,” Annabelle said pointedly, watching Daniel’s eyes flare with a strong emotion.

“That’s seventeen times now you’ve ‘your graced’ me in private,” he pointed out to her. “I will be punishing you for that, you know.”

“I should hope so,” Annabelle said cheekily. “We should have something to do on our wedding trip, after all!”

The time was growing late for the ladies to prepare themselves for attending the opera that evening, so the duke did not spend much longer at the Spencer house. The Mayfair



townhouse lacked the fantastic bathing facilities that Rosemere boasted, and Annabelle had to make do with a tin bath filled with water set to warm over a fire downstairs in the kitchens.

The knowledge that there was some kind of secret gift for her in the jewellery box was driving her crazy, but she had to wait until her maid had finished organising the footmen bringing the buckets of hot water into her bedroom before she could open it.

Finding the compartment was not easy. It took some careful poking and prodding to discover where the release catch was located. A loud click surprised her, and she whipped her fingers away from the box. The bottom of the box sprang upwards, revealing itself to be a shallow wooden tray instead of the solid piece of wood it appeared to be. On removing the tray, the duke's secret presents were revealed.

Annabelle put her hand into the box and removed one of the five carefully shaped pieces of smooth metal from its restraints. Flared at the base and rising into the shape of a phallus, it was one of several training aids the duke had purchased while Annabelle had been a guest at Rosemere.

He had informed her that on her wedding night she would be submitting her body to his total appropriation, and that he would use all of her holes. In order to train her tightest and most private entrance, he had ordered constructed a set of phalluses that would, with careful use, prepare Annabelle for his length and girth. The smallest and thinnest of the plugs the duke had already used on her. The largest replicated his exact dimensions.

In the box along with the phalluses was a bottle of oil. She unstopped it and took a quick sniff. The delicate smell of oranges took her back to her last night with the duke at Rosemere, where he had massaged the oil into her skin before applying it liberally to her rosebud to allow the phallus to penetrate her.

There was a short note, in the duke's hand, with a terse list of instructions. She was to start with the second-smallest plug, which was noticeably smaller and thinner than the greatest. Her bath was probably the best place for her to insert it into herself, he informed her. As long as she dried herself and put on her drawers before her maid came to help her dress, nobody would be able to see that she was wearing it.

Annabelle looked dubiously at the phallus in her hand. Nobody else might be able to see it, but she was sure that she would be able to feel it inside her. It was unyielding, and would make its presence known every time she stood or sat down—especially when she sat down.

She rolled it back and forth, feeling the cold of the metal warm in her palm. She did not have to wear it, of course; Daniel had said that he would never force her to do anything that she did not wish to do, and she believed him. She eyed the last of the series again, looking doubtfully at its length and girth.

It was like Daniel's member—she had used both her hands and her mouth on that part of his body several times, and she could vouch for the accuracy of the size. If something that large were going to enter her through her back passage, then she would have to train her body to accept it.

She bathed herself thoroughly, all the while looking at the plug sitting next to the bottle of oil on the floor. When she was ready, she coated the length of it in oil, settled back against the raised lip of the bathtub and parted her legs.

She couldn't see what she was doing, of course; the next time she did this she would have to try and find a mirror to angle towards her nether regions. The phallus, slippery in the water, bumped against her more natural entrance once or twice before she found her rosebud. She pushed gently, and felt the tip of the phallus breach her. She remembered how slowly Daniel had worked her body open to receive the smallest metal member, so she too moved as slowly as she could. She entered the tip of the phallus seven or eight times before she allowed another inch of the metal to disappear into her.

The metal was not cold, warmed as it had been by her hand, then the hot water of the bath. Slowly and carefully she moved the phallus in and out of her body, feeling it push her open and then slide back out. In total, she spent more than ten minutes preparing her tight little hole before taking a deep breath and sliding the whole phallus inside her.

The flared base held it in place; despite her body's instinctive reaction to bear down on the intruder, it stayed in place. She pulled herself to her feet and stepped out of the bath. The chair with her bath towel on it was only a few steps away, but she felt the effect of the plug in her backside immediately.

It wasn't painful, Annabelle concluded, after a short experimental walk around the room. It was definitely intrusive; there was no way that she could ignore that it was there, that was for sure! But it was not too heavy, and it stayed firmly in place.

She let out a deep breath and tried to adjust to the bizarre sensation of being filled in such a forbidden place. This was only the second smallest of the plugs—what on earth would it be like to be filled by the largest, or Daniel himself?

The tick of the clock on the mantelpiece reminded her that she had to get ready for that evening's entertainment. She hoped that Daniel had more in mind than just the opera!