

Chapter One

I had only been out of mourning for a few days when my guardian, Lord Ransome, was called to his family's seat, Somersfield Hall, on urgent estate business. "Must we go to Bath so soon?" I asked, dismayed.

"Yes, I am afraid so."

"We'll miss the start of the Season."

"I'm sorry," he replied.

"And I was just starting to go about, too. I shall have to cancel all my engagements."

"Well, I suggest you get started, then. We're leaving first thing in the morning."

"But I've nothing to wear," I added, still trying to stay behind.

"Then wear your half-mourning a few days longer and I'll buy you all the gowns you need when we get there."

Resigned, I took a sheet of my black-edged paper – I hadn't even got my gold-edged yet – and started writing my regrets. After that, I went to help my dresser, Letty, decide what to pack.

We left for Bath at six in the morning. It was an awful day, dull and wet, and my guardian was determined we should make the trip all in one day. We sent the servants ahead earlier, so there was no one in the coach to talk to but Ransome, and I was a bit put out with him. So I remained silent.

Every so often though, I heaved a dissatisfied sigh. I was dressed in lavender, a colour that doesn't necessarily become me, under a hair-brown pelisse jacket for travel. I'd been invited to a breakfast, with a balloon ride to follow, but here I was with a long coach ride over bumpy, muddy roads to look forward to instead.

I heaved another of my sighs, which Lord Ransome chose to ignore. "How much farther?" I asked.

"About sixty miles."

"I'm hungry."

"Then we'll stop at the next posting house," Ransome answered. To prove it, he let down the glass and waved one of the outriders over. "Go and bespeak us a private parlour at the White Hart. Tell old Grimsby I'd like some of that excellent mutton of his."

"Yes, my lord." The man rode off ahead of us.

"How long until we get to the White Hart?" I asked.

"I'd say about half an hour."

"So long? We'll never get out of this carriage." Crossing my arms, I flung myself back against the cushion.

This time Ransome levelled a severe glance at me. "If you continue to sigh in that vulgar manner, I shall put you over my knee as soon as we get there, is that understood?"

"Yes." I clicked my tongue and leaned back, a deep scowl my face.

"Sabrina, I am warning you," he cautioned.

"About what?" I asked in a waspish voice. "I'm not doing anything."

He pursed his lips. "I've put up with this mood of yours for long enough," he told me. "When we get to the posting house, you're going to be spanked. I'll not drive all the way to Bath with you in this ill-tempered mood."

"You never spanked me while I was in mourning," I told him.

"Lord knows I had a dozen reasons, but I felt you had enough to try your soul. Now that you're out of mourning, expect to be disciplined when you misbehave."

Once we got to the inn, Uncle Matthew made good on his threat. As soon as the landlord installed us in our parlour, he had me lock the door. "Now, come here and place yourself over my lap."

"I won't."

"You will, or you'll get the strap. Now come along. I won't tell you again."

Eyeing him carefully, I crossed the room. I did not get over his lap right away, so he tugged my arm and pulled me down across it himself. I had to spread my fingertips along the rough wooden floor for balance and he began spanking me over my skirts. The swats weren't especially painful, but they certainly were humiliating, and I was highly relieved when he let me up.

"Keep showing your temper and see if I hesitate to repeat this procedure. Next time, however, it will be on the bare," he told me. "Now go unlock the door and sit down."

Embarrassed, I nodded and did as he asked.

We ate our lunch and finished the trip in stony silence, arriving in Bath about seven o'clock in the evening. The storm had passed (or we had passed it) and all at once, the rays of the sun broke through the clouds, bathing the entire city in a wondrous golden glow.

"Oh, it's so pretty," I told Ransome, letting the glass down and leaning out. He joined me at the window and squeezed my hand, and I quite forgot to be cross with him. Finally, we sat back down.

"Tomorrow we shall go to the Pump Room," he told me. "You'll like that. Or should we just go shopping?"

I looked across at him, a smile on my face. "Oh, shopping, please," I begged.

He ran a critical glance over me. "Yes, perhaps we'd better. I've seen enough black and grey to last me for years."

"So have I. Thank you, Uncle Matthew."

"Pray, don't mention it."

In the morning, immediately after breakfast, we were off. Uncle Matthew took me to the finest modiste in town. Hearing I required a whole new wardrobe, her attitude changed from one of bored solicitation to one of true pleasure. She showed us the most flattering attention possible, sending two of her employees scurrying into the back of the shop with instruction as to which dresses to bring up to the front.

Her selections were enchanting. She knew just what sort of fashions would become me, which sort of embroidery, how many flounces, and what type of trimming should ornament my gowns.

Uncle Matthew had her set aside a mountain of dresses. There were morning dresses of fine lawn and checked muslin, walking dresses, round gowns, evening gowns, and a beautiful ball gown of blush-pink satin. We left there three hours later and went to the milliner's for new bonnets to match, and then off to buy a few other items I needed. To round out our previous purchases, I picked out a pair of Denmark satin dancing slippers, a pair of black half boots of Russian kid, a new reticule, and an evening cloak of wine-red velvet. We returned home just in time for lunch. Uncle Matthew and I sat down together in the breakfast parlour.

"Thank you very much for all my lovely dresses," I told him.

"Not at all," he said, smiling sweetly. "It was my pleasure entirely."

He turned his head and looked at me. Something in that look – admiration, perhaps – sent my pulse racing. Thankfully, he looked away again almost at once, for if he hadn't, I was afraid I was going to kiss him.

Although dragged kicking and screaming to Bath, I found it did have its advantages, chief of which was the Pump Room, to which Uncle Matthew had promised to take me. He was kind enough to make good on his promise, putting my name down in the subscription book and introducing me to the Master of Ceremonies, who in turn made me known to a couple of young men. One of them was a young clergyman, Mr. Cosgrove, who was in Bath with his sister and his mother. He claimed me as his partner to dance.

Uncle Matthew had a large retinue of friends in Bath and a few of his cronies were in the Pump Room when we got there. He surrendered me to Mr. Cosgrove and sauntered off to the card room with a couple of them.

Like Uncle Matthew, Mr. Cosgrove was a tall, young man, but much more slender. He had dark hair and eyes as blue as a robin's egg, and he was quick to laugh and smile. He was a good dancer and a considerate companion, and I let him take me in to tea when we were finished dancing.

His sister, Miss Jane, was quick, quiet, and shy, without being shrinking. I liked her very much, for she reminded me of a friend of mine from back home. "I went to London for the Season," she confessed, "but I didn't take. Mama is hoping I'll do better in Bath."

"I wish I could've gone, but I've only just come out of mourning."

"My poor, dear creature, how very trying. I perfectly understand. We were in mourning for my aunt two years ago, and it put my come-out off for a whole year. Besides, crape is so depressing." She took a sip of her tea and looked at me. "Your uncle is very handsome, isn't he?"

"The truth is, he's not really my uncle," I told her. "He was Father's closest friend, and has known me since I was a small child. And yes, he's quite handsome, but I warn you, he has the devil's own temper."

"Truly? Do not say so, my dear creature."

"No, it's true. Not that he hasn't a lot to bear looking after me, which I own would tax the sweetest disposition," I admitted, thinking of my behaviour coming to Bath.

"No disposition can be sweeter than yours," said Mr. Cosgrove.

"Thank you. I hope I may prove you right."

So we fell to getting better acquainted, and Miss Jane told me about a bonnet she saw in a shop window nearby. "I've just had the best idea," she said. "We must make Edward take us down there, for it was quarter-day yesterday and I've just received my pin money, and what must I need do but spend it?"

"I'll have to ask my uncle," I said, glancing around for Uncle Matthew.

"My dear creature, by all means," Miss Jane said. "He'll no doubt be in the card room, won't he?"

So we tracked him down and got permission. He gave me a bit of money for myself, and then we were off down Milsom Street in search of the bonnet.

"Why, it's the prettiest hat I've ever seen," I told her. "How becoming it looks on you. And only look at this chip-straw bonnet. It would be perfect for a drive in the country or a picnic luncheon."

"Look at this new jockey bonnet. Oh, my dear creature, is it not perfection itself?" Miss Jane cried.

Mr. Cosgrove stood by patiently while we were thus busy, having met a friend of his in the street. By the time we were done, we were both the owners of several new bonnets, and when we went around the corner to Gay Street, I bought ten yards of sprigged muslin and an ell of Alencon lace.

When we at last returned to the Pump Room, Uncle Matthew had come out from playing cards. The orchestra had just struck up and Mr. Cosgrove solicited my hand for the dance, leaving Ransome to dance with Miss Jane.

I'd not seen him dance for ages, but Uncle Matthew was a surprisingly good dancer, light on his feet and a good partner. He and Miss Jane had joined a different set, and I could see they were having a wonderful time together. Miss Jane was no beauty, but she was a handsome young woman who dressed to her own advantage. I could easily see her matched with Uncle Matthew.

On the way home that afternoon, he spoke to me about her. "Miss Jane has a good head on her shoulders," he told me. "I like her very much. Her brother, too."

At breakfast the next day, I received a very provoking letter from Sir Chauncey, an admirer of mine in London from the time before my father died. He expressed his sworn intent to come down to Somersfield and claim me. But I did not want to be claimed. Not by him anyway, and the high-handed way he worded it – as if it were a given I should fall on my knees at his feet the moment he arrived to pop the question – irritated me to no end.

I threw down his letter and picked up the letter opener lying on the desk. I flung it down with a curse and it bounced along the desktop in a most satisfying way. Unfortunately, the old housekeeper had come into the room just then to discuss something with me and it came within a foot of hitting her. "Oh, dear," I cried. "You are unhurt?"

"Yes, my lady, no thanks to you," she said crossly.

"Please don't tell my uncle."

"Not tell your uncle that you've had a wild, violent fit?" She sounded incredulous at my request.

"Please."

"I won't, but have a care next time, my lady, or you'll find yourself in the suds, and no mistake."

Nevertheless, the story came to his ears anyway. He summoned me to the book room, and when I appeared, cautiously peeping around the door, he called me in. "What's this I hear about you throwing the letter opener and dashed well nearly skewering Mrs. Dobson?"

"I didn't mean to throw it," I told him. "I was just in such a state. Anyone might be, with the letter I got. Can you believe Sir Chauncey means to come posting down here and 'claim' me?"

"That's no excuse. Other people lose their tempers without throwing things." He gave me a few moments to digest this, and then he said, "Do you remember what I told you might happen if you showed your temper again?"

I hung my head. "Yes."

"Well, then. Go to the desk over there and open the third drawer on the right."

I did as he asked and walked over to the desk. When I opened the drawer I gasped, for lying there within was a thick wooden paddle.

"Yes," he told me. "Get it and bring it here."

I started whining, having no taste for the feeling of that wood on my bottom. "But, Uncle—"

"Come along. I have things to do," he interrupted.

I handed him the paddle and he jerked me down over his lap. He immediately pulled up my skirts and started in. "You'll do better when you're broken to the bridle," he told me. "How your father came to allow these wild, intemperate outbursts I shall never know, but I'll not countenance such behaviour, is that understood?"

"Yes, Uncle Matthew. Ow!"

"Such language as you used, too. It is the outside of enough, let me tell you."

"Yes, Uncle Matthew."

"Throwing things," he said with another hard swat. "So unbecoming in you."

He spanked on and on over my drawers while I kicked and moaned. His iron grip on me allowed for no possibility of escape, so I was forced to lie there and take every hot stroke. When at last he let me up, my bottom was ablaze and I was panting heavily. I stood there staring at him, unsure what to do next, but he set the paddle down on the sofa beside him and held his arms out to me, clearly inviting me to come sit on his knee.

"Come along," he said imperatively. I obeyed and sat down, and he pulled me in tighter and gave me a kiss on the forehead. "I'm sorry I had to punish you so, but you can't say you didn't deserve it."

"No. I'm sorry I misbehaved, Uncle Matthew."

"Then let's make it all up and be friends again, shall we?"

I nodded, and a moment later he dried my eyes ever so gently, speaking in a soft, quiet voice about how I must behave in a manner befitting my station in life. "You're a lady, Sabrina. Not a common fishwife."

"Yes, Uncle Matthew. I'll try to do better."

"That's all I ask. Now run along and go wash your face." He kissed my forehead again and released me, and I climbed off his knee, my bottom throbbing pitifully.

Happily, Bath has good libraries, and a constant influx of coaches from London, so we were not completely out of the world. My circle of acquaintances enlarged by the day, as well. One afternoon in particular, I met a Miss Traverty – Violet – a lovely girl, tall and lithe and very

biddable. We happened to bump into each other and she spilled some of her water down the front of my dress.

I got my handkerchief and started dabbing at it frantically while she stood there apologizing.

"My darling, how very clumsy you are," said an older woman behind her, in a voice of impatience. She was a skinny, moon-faced, stick of a woman who couldn't possibly be the mother of such a young beauty, but so she turned out to be.

"I'm sorry, Mama," the girl told the woman.

"It's nothing," I said, seeing the blush of embarrassment on the young girl's face. "It was my fault, really."

The girl smiled at me and pressed my hand in thanks.

I'd been out for a very long time, but I'd never seen a girl so beautiful before. Her eyes and hair were dark like a gypsy's, but her skin was very white. She wore a cream-colored Norwich silk shawl draped over her elbows, the embroidered border of which perfectly complemented her gown of slate-blue muslin.

"You're Lady Sabrina, are you not?" asked the mother, a rapacious gleam in her eye. "Lord Ransome's ward?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And he's a bachelor, I understand."

When I glanced at Miss Traverty, another blush stained her cheeks. "Yes, ma'am," I answered, beginning to feel a bit of her embarrassment over such a pointed question. "He's a bachelor."

"You must make me known to him."

"I think you'll want to wait. He's in the card room and it vexes him when he's interrupted," I explained.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I quite understand."

"Perhaps your daughter..." I trailed off, not yet knowing the beautiful girl's name.

"Violet. Traverty," the mother supplied.

"Perhaps Miss Traverty would like to go refill her glass of water."

"What an excellent idea. Do you go with Lady Sabrina, my love, and I'll see you later."

So Miss Traverty and I went off arm in arm. We took a turn about the room before stopping to have her glass topped off.

"I'm so sorry about Mama," she said confidingly. "She means for me to make a brilliant match and she never will let off of it."

I'd fended off matchmaking mothers before, and I knew just how to handle her. I could see Miss Traverty was mortified by her mother's manners and it made me feel kindly towards her. She finished her water and set down the glass, and then we made another turn about the room. It was getting very crowded, so she suggested we find somewhere to sit and chat.

We talked for about half an hour and she told me about her life at home. "My older sister married well, but there are three more after me. I am determined to meet someone and fall in love."

"It's a love-match you want?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. But Mama says you marry first, and then you grow to love one another."

"I don't know about that. It seems very sad to me if there's no love or romance to the thing."

"Now she'll want me to marry your uncle," Violet sighed deeply.

"Well, we must prevent it, that's all." I glanced up and saw Uncle Matthew approaching, so I smiled at him.

"You look to be in a good mood," he told me, smiling back. "But I'm afraid we must go."

"First, let me present my new friend, Miss Traverty."

Violet held out her hand stiffly and Uncle Matthew kissed it. "Servant, ma'am. Now we really must go."

In the carriage, on the way home, I teased him. "Did you not recognize your bride-to-be?"

"Who?"

"Why, Miss Traverty, of course. Her mother will probably waylay you next time we're in the Pump Room. She asked me flat out if you're a bachelor. She wanted to meet you, but I did my poor best to prevent it."

"Good God," he groaned.

We fell silent for a few minutes, and then he spoke again. "I didn't see Mr. Cosgrove and Miss Jane today."

"They weren't there. I had a note of them telling me they couldn't come due to an engagement with their mother." I watched his face, but he betrayed no look of disappointment.

"Uncle Matthew?"

"Yes?"

"Have you ever been in love?"

His eyes narrowed suspiciously and he answered with great care. "Once, when I was fifteen, with the milkmaid."

"Oh, dear."

He nodded his head gravely. "Yes. My father was less than pleased. He threatened to send me to the army. And you?"

"Of course not. I haven't had a chance."

"Good. Let's keep it that way."

"I'm in no hurry."

He glanced at me again, and this time he looked pleased. I took his arm and lay my head on his shoulder. He called me to order at once and told me I'd ruin his coat, but there was no bite to his words and I caught him with a satisfied smile on his face.

Later, Ransome came to me while I was out in the rose garden clipping some blooms. He had a piece of paper in his hand, and I could see the royal crest on the letterhead.

"What's that?" I asked him.

"It's a letter from the Prince of Wales," he told me.

"Oh? What's he doing?"

"He's coming to stay on the twenty-second of this month on his way back from Scotland. We're to give a ball in his honour."

"How amusing," I cried.

"You won't be quite as amused when you find out how much work it is, but yes. We'd better start planning it right away. It won't do to have a shabby affair for Prinny."

Despite the ball planning we were tasked with, we went back for the assembly that night. It was quite a crush. There were people everywhere, lots of whom I'd never seen before. Thankfully, the Cosgroves were back, and so was Miss Traverty. I introduced them and turned to

break the news to them. "The most exciting thing is going to happen," I told them. "The Prince of Wales is coming to stay. Uncle Matthew says we're going to have a ball."

"My dear creature, how thrilling for you!"

"For you, too, my dear," I exclaimed. "We mean to send you all cards."

The Cosgroves looked very happy, but Miss Traverty shrank away.

"I?" she said in a hollow voice. "Meet the Prince of Wales? Mama will be so pleased."

"Yes," I told her. "If you play your cards right, you might nab yourself that rich beau your mother's hoping for."

She looked like she'd rather be boiled in oil, but she nodded anyway. When we had a moment alone, she tugged on my arm and looked up at me, her expression one of misery and anxiety. I wondered why. "My dear Miss Traverty, whatever is the matter?"

"My mother wants me to marry Lord Ransome, just as I knew she would."

"No. Impossible."

"It's not impossible. She says so and she always gets her own way."

"Well, she shan't get it in this instance," I assured her. "We'll just have to outmanoeuvre her, is all."

Miss Traverty didn't look like she put much faith in this pronouncement, but she nodded all the same. By then, we'd come up beside Uncle Matthew, and even though she looked like she wanted to disappear, he asked her to dance.

She was a beautiful dancer, as well as being excessively pretty, and I saw her mother across the room, looking on proudly. When the dance was over, Miss Traverty hurried off to another part of the Pump Room, her face flushed and her eyes gleaming. I gave her a reproachful glance and took off after her, thinking he'd said something horrid to make her cry. When I got to her, though, I saw she'd completely changed her opinion of him, and I was much dismayed.

"Oh, Lady Sabrina," she said to me, her voice ecstatic, "would you ever credit such a thing? He spoke to me so kindly. Isn't he the best sort of man?"

I returned a noncommittal answer but she persisted. "Such a gentleman. How lucky you are."

"Yes," I said dryly, thinking of that wooden paddle he kept in his desk drawer. "How lucky, indeed."

This sally was lost on her and she went on talking. As she did so, my heart sank. I could see she meant to oblige her mother and at least consider marrying him.

I had several reasons for not wanting him to nibble at the lures she meant to cast, the chief of which was the awkwardness attached to having an aunt-in-law younger than I was. Besides, it was humiliating enough to be spanked like a schoolchild. If Miss Traverty was successful in bringing him up to snuff, then no doubt my shameful secret would be found out, and I lived in dread that anyone should discover I received physical punishments.

Even worse than that, what if he married her and decided to punish her, too? What if we were punished together?

Intolerable.

Indeed, I began to feel even more anxious when Mrs. Traverty and Violet paid a morning call the next day. I did not for an instant bamboozle myself. I knew they'd come in hopes of seeing Lord Ransome, but unhappily for them, he was absent from home. We drank our tea and ate some cakes, and in the end, all they were able to do was leave cards.

When he returned home that afternoon, I began to roast him. "I believe Miss Traverty is forming a *tendre* for you," I told him.

"Do you really think so?"

"Indeed, I do. She has the most nauseating habit of extolling your virtues to me every time we meet." I laughed.

"Good God. I rather thought she was afraid of me," he said.

"She was, but not anymore. Not after that dance. You were too much the gentleman and you set her at her ease."

"That means I shall have the Traverty woman flinging her at me everywhere."

"There's only one thing for it," I told him. "You must set up a grand flirtation with some other woman. Surely she – *they*," I quickly amended, "won't persist after that."

I knew from long experience that finding a flirt would be the merest nothing for him, but I was mistaken in thinking the Travertys would give up on him. Instead, Violet now seemed to feel she was saving him from himself. "Oh, Sabrina, how sorry I feel for him," she told me, about a week later. "Dangling after that woman, why, she's married!"

And the safest kind to dangle after, thought I. "That woman?" I asked, following the direction of her stare. "Why, that's only Mrs. Weaver, a very old friend of his."

"I feel sure he only flirts with her in order to hide his broken heart."

"Broken heart?" I asked, incredulous. "What on earth has he to be heart-broken about?"

"Why, anyone with two eyes in her head may see that. He's lonely. Indeed, I sincerely pity him and would help him, if only I knew how."

But she did know how to cure a broken heart, and that was to love him. She sought my guardian out at every turn. If she wasn't busy running him to earth, then her mama was, while Violet watched him closely from her place near the windows.

"Oh, here's my daughter," Mrs. Traverty told Uncle Matthew on more than one occasion. "She must have a partner for the dance," or "Dear Lord Ransome, can you take Violet in to tea?"

"If she doesn't mind Sabrina on my other arm," was his most frequent response. "She has no one to take her in to tea, either."

Well, if he thought that was a shake-off, he was destined for disappointment. Violet clung to him like a lamprey until he set chairs for us and stalked off to speak to an acquaintance.

"So civil and considerate," Violet whispered, once he was out of earshot. "Every inch the gentleman."

And I had to agree with her, but his civility and consideration meant nothing when it came time to punish me.