

A WIFE FOR THE DUKE

LORDS OF VOLUPTAS - BOOK ONE



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

INTRODUCTION



*Voluptas: a Latin word meaning pleasure, delight,
satisfaction, enjoyment, gratification*

CHAPTER 1



BROADWELL CASTLE, GLOUCESTERSHIRE, 1806

*H*is Grace, Sebastian Clarence Percival Montgomery, the Duke of Broadwell, scowled and tossed the papers he had been perusing onto the mahogany desk in his library. "Absurd! Preposterous! This is a mere technicality which must be overruled. I do not believe that any judge would agree with such nonsense."

Mr. Brownlow, his solicitor and man of business since the duke had come into his inheritance at the age of twenty-two, almost two decades ago, gathered the discarded documents into a neat pile. "I am sorry to say, Your Grace, that although it is a technicality, the proviso of your grandfather's will is legally binding. On your fortieth birthday, you must be married, or the courts will be obliged to declare you unfit to hold your inheritance." He shot a quick glance at the duke's second cousin. Lord Theodore Raeburn, some dozen years younger than Lord Sebastian but bearing a remarkable resemblance in aristocratic demeanor and handsome appearance, was sprawled on a couch in front of the hearth place,

although he was following the conversation with a bright gleam in his eyes that conveyed both curiosity and amusement.

Mr. Brownlow cleared his throat nervously and rustled the pile of papers as he turned back to the duke, who had stalked across the room and was now staring out of the window at the smooth green lawns that stretched from the edge of the terrace down to a large lake. The solicitor spoke to the duke's stiff back. "All the property and the title itself will be passed on to the next-in-line."

The duke whipped around, a ferocious scowl darkening the noble lines of his face. Mr. Brownlow, trying not to flinch under the threat of the duke's displeasure, hastily added, "Of course, any property that you have accrued independently of the estates attached to the duchy will remain yours."

Ignoring the low chuckle from his cousin, Lord Sebastian stalked towards his desk.

The solicitor swallowed rapidly and smoothed the pages that were beginning to crumple in his hands. He placed them on the desk. He was a slight man, and the duke was an imposing figure, even when he was not annoyed. Now his six-foot-two-inch frame towered over Mr. Brownlow. The duke's dark brown eyes were as hard and inflexible as flint and he clenched his square jaw. "My grandfather added such a proviso to his will because of his own licentious behavior," he huffed. "He always preached about the dignity and respect of the Montgomery name, and yet he was profligate and dissolute." His voice could cut through granite as he declared, "It has taken me years to restore the Montgomery name and make the estates prosperous once more." He drew a long breath and closed his eyes for a moment. When he continued speaking, his voice was softer. "I was very happy with Selena and I have no intention of marrying again. There must be some way to overrule my grandfather's ridiculous codicil."

Mr. Brownlow swallowed rapidly and rubbed his hands together. The simmering rage that seethed through the duke was

quite unlike his renowned even-tempered control. He had never seen the duke quite as agitated, quite as angry as he was now.

The solicitor tried to mollify him, as if he were trying to calm a hungry tiger. "Your Grace, as a man, I fully sympathize with your plight. But as your solicitor, I must counsel you that there is no legal way in which to circumvent the wording of the will. In four months, you will celebrate your fortieth birthday. On that day, you must have a wife, or you will no longer be the Duke of Broadwell."

Lord Sebastian took a deep breath. The rage that roiled through him was unsettling and unfamiliar. He did not like being forced into situations. His hand slipped into his pocket, and he fingered a locket that nestled there. The reminder of Selena calmed him a little and he was able to think a little more rationally. With a shake of his head, he slid into the large chair behind his desk.

His innate good manners reasserted themselves, although his words showed how seldom he found it necessary to apologize for anything. "None of this is your fault, Brownlow. I did not mean to be so abrupt. What do you suggest?" With a deceptively calm voice, he clarified, "Are you going to recommend that I select a girl from the current offerings on the marriage mart and marry her before my birthday, simply so that I remain duke?"

Mr. Brownlow shot a nervous glance at Lord Theo, who had risen from his inert position on the couch. He was now sitting up, his elbows on his knees and his chin in his palm. He looked vastly entertained by his cousin's predicament.

Mr. Brownlow tried to ignore the young marquess. He watched the duke's face relax into more cordial lines and he, too, relaxed slightly. With a quick nod, he pulled a sheet of paper from the pile on the desk in front of him. "Your Grace, if there is no lady of your acquaintance whom you consider suitable at this time, then I would like to present you with a list of eligible candidates that I have taken the liberty to compile."

Mr. Browning held the page up, but before he could pass it to Lord Sebastian, it was snatched from his fingers. Lord Theo had

moved swiftly and silently from the couch and was now leaning against the desk, the solicitor's neatly written list in his hand. His eyes gleamed with amusement and his mouth quirked up in the beginning of a smile.

Ignoring the duke's exasperated sigh, Lord Theo answered the solicitor, "Although the duke has not lived like a monk in the years since Selena succumbed to fever, there is no lady who has particularly taken his fancy." Dropping into the open chair in front of the desk and crossing his leg negligently across his knee, he expanded, "He has enjoyed such a variety of women that his reputation as a ladies' man is irrefutable."

The prissy solicitor winced at Theo's words, but Lord Sebastian just shook his head with a low chuckle and a slight shrug of his shoulder. "I like women. That doesn't mean I am eager to remarry." His voice was tinged with wistfulness. "Selena was very special. No one could ever replace her."

Theo ran his finger down the page he had taken from Mr. Brownlow, but he was looking at his cousin. The humor on his face was replaced by sincere concern. "Perhaps it is time for you to find a new wife, Duke." He grinned. "It's about time you stopped moping around like a debutante with an empty dance card."

The duke raised an eyebrow, reminding Theo of when Lord Sebastian had taken a hand in his upbringing. He had not seen such a withering look from his cousin in almost ten years, not since he had been a fresher at Oxford and had managed to lure the don's horse into the library and had been sent down for almost a semester.

Lord Sebastian leaned back in his chair, tapping his fingertips together. His acerbic tone did not reflect his usual sympathy for his young cousin's knack of lightening the mood no matter how dire the situation. "I am not sure why you should be so eager for me to remarry. It is quite possible that a wife of mine could conceive and bear me an heir, and then you would no longer have the prospect of inheriting all of this," he concluded with an expansive sweep of his

arm suggestive of the position and all the accruements attached to his title.

Theodore chuckled. "You know I am satisfied with my inheritance from my father. I have never hankered after your lands and titles." His handsome face settled into a more serious expression. "But I do think it is about time you found some joy again."

Mr. Brownlow was glaring at the list of names in Lord Theo's hand. The solicitor had loyally managed the duke's business affairs for many years, but he did not know about the society of the Lords of Voluptas which both Lord Sebastian and Theo belonged to. The marquess shot a glance at the glowering solicitor and worded his next point circumspectly. "Sebastian, you taught me how important it is to balance passion and pleasure, to find what is good in life through pursuing the greatest pleasure. I am now giving you back some of your own advice."

The duke quirked an eyebrow but said nothing. Lord Theo continued earnestly. "Seb, your love for Selena was an inspiration and the perfect example of what a good marriage should be like. But you are a man of deep passion and since Selena passed away, you have not really been happy. I do not believe Lady Selena would have wanted you to spend the rest of your life in deep mourning for her, finding only fleeting joy in the occasional woman. You would honor her memory by connecting with a new wife, a woman to love and cherish and who will bring joy and pleasure back into your life." He waved the list of names in front of his cousin's face. "You must admit, you have been something of a curmudgeon lately, and it will be more pleasant for all of us if you have a young bride to pleasure."

The duke tapped on the desk and a flash of irritation twisted his finely formed mouth. "Have you quite finished? You have very decided opinions about how I should conduct my life."

Theo shrugged his shoulders. "I learned from the best, cousin! You taught me well."

Sebastian crooked his eyebrow, but Theo detected a hint of

wistfulness as the duke said, "No one can ever replace Selena or be what she was to me." With a terse nod, he acquiesced to the inevitable. "If I must marry so I can fulfill this ridiculous clause in my grandfather's wretched will, then it does not matter which woman becomes my wife."

Theodore mimicked his cousin's raised eyebrow. "If any woman will do, then you might as well marry old Mrs. Whitby down in the village. She's put three husbands in the grave and I'm sure she'll be thrilled to spend her last few years up here in the castle." He rustled the page in his hand. "Or you could randomly point to one of the names on this list and send Mr. Brownlow to fetch her here." He shook his head. "You might as well find someone at least vaguely attractive and not unpleasant to live with."

Sebastian gave a refined snort and flicked his fingers impatiently, but Mr. Brownlow huffed indignantly. "There are some very good names on that list. I have been conscientious to select young ladies with breeding, elegance and substantial dowries."

Both gentlemen looked at him and he blinked a few times as Theodore skimmed the list in his hands. His well-formed lips quirked upwards into an impish grin. "Indeed, these candidates are the very cream of the current offerings on the marriage mart. The Honorable Miss Honoria Langley, granddaughter of an earl; dowry, twenty-five thousand pounds." Theodore read the entry in an exaggeratedly pompous tone, then he lowered the page and added, "And so prim and prudish, she disapproves of anyone who does not meet her exacting standards of etiquette. I saw her give the cut direct to a debutante who laughed spontaneously at Mrs. Hardcastle's antics during a performance of *She Stoops to Conquer*." He looked up thoughtfully. "I believe it is not seemly for proper young ladies to do more than smile faintly at anything amusing."

He spotted another name on the list. "Ah! Lady Augusta Bradford. Daughter of an earl. Dowry, thirty-eight thousand pounds." He shook his head. "It would need to be that substantial to compen-

sate for the coldness of her character. She has earned her reputation as the ice-queen."

Mr. Brownlow bristled. "Every one of the ladies on that list would make an excellent duchess. Each is known for her impeccable conduct and is highly accomplished. Indeed, they have attracted the interest of some very eligible suitors. There is no nonsense about them. And as His Grace must marry, he will find someone on the list well-suited to his needs."

Theodore laughed. "Ah, indeed Sebastian must marry. But I always think a young lady is the better for having a little nonsense about her." He skimmed the list. "There must be better candidates than those." A frown creased his forehead as he continued to scan the list. "Many of these young ladies have been pressed on me by eager mamas desperate for their daughters to find a titled husband who hasn't thrown away his entire inheritance in the gambling dens. I was not tempted by any of them. There is something quite monotonous about the young ladies who are trained to be the perfect society wives." He glanced at his cousin, who was now leaning back in his chair, resting his fine face on his elegant hands. "Sebastian, how are you going to choose among so many unsuitable eligible brides?"

The duke shrugged his left shoulder in a dismissive move he had perfected over the years. "I had thought to select a name based on family connections and simply send Brownlow to offer for me. As I said, I am not seeking the kind of marriage I knew with Selena, only one that will make sure I do not lose all that I have worked for. Once we are married, the lady can do as she pleases and leave me to continue my life in my own way."

Theodore placed the page on the desk. "I think it would be much more fun to invite some of them here and see how they fit into life at Broadwell. And you can choose the most appealing at your leisure."

The duke leaned forward and picked up the page that Theo had dropped onto the desk. "That could work. As I have to marry, I

suppose I should at least see her before offering her my name." He skimmed the list dispassionately and then sat up straight, a thoughtful expression on his face as one name caught his eye. "Amelia Hartford?" He glanced up at the marquess and his solicitor. "I haven't heard of any Hartfords in London for a while. Who is she?"

"I've never heard of her." Theodore shrugged. "She obviously hasn't made much of an impression on society."

Mr. Brownlow puffed up a little. "Miss Hartford has not had a season or been presented in London, although she has already celebrated her twentieth birthday. She attends the provincial entertainments available in Lyttelton and, I believe, has drawn the interest of some local suitors. Her father, Sir Gilbert, passed away when she was little more than a babe, but he did leave her a reasonable dowry." He cleared his throat. "Miss Hartford has not been to London because her mother, Lady Adelina, has been occupied with raising a second family with her second husband, Sir Angus McNeil."

The duke laughed. "You mean Addie has been pregnant or confined almost continuously for the last ten years. She always did say she wanted a large family." The duke's voice dropped, as if he was speaking more to himself than to the two men sitting opposite him. "I wonder if Amelia is anything like her mother," he mused.

"You've never mentioned Lady Adelina. Is she one of your long-lost paramours?" Theo leaned forward, his curiosity piqued by his cousin's response to Amelia Hartford's name.

Sebastian raised his eyebrow. "Selena and I spent quite a bit of time with Adelina and her husband," the duke emphasized the word, "even though they were a few years older than we were."

Theo shrugged. "Age has never been a hindrance to love," he quipped, but subsided when Sebastian glared at him.

The duke continued, almost as if he was speaking only to himself. "I lost track of them over the years, especially after Gilbert died. She married Angus and they disappeared into the country-

side." He tapped Mr. Brownlow's list which was on the desk in front of him. "And now her daughter is of an age to be married. I think I would like to meet young Miss Hartford." He looked at Theo. "Your idea of a house party might work. It would be interesting to see how these young ladies behave in my home. And I think it would be worth my while to ensure that young Miss Amelia Hartford finds no reason not to accept my invitation. I think it might be necessary for me to pay a visit to Sir Angus on my way to London."