

HIS PARTY GUEST

RAKES OF MAYFAIR BOOK FIVE



MELINDA BARRON

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



OCTOBER 1889

“*Y*ou know, the only house parties that hold my interest are ones held by The Club.” Andrew Tarton, Lord Beaton, stretched his long legs and stared at his friends. So many things had changed in the past few years. It used to be they were all single, enjoying the pleasures of their private organization, The Rakes of Mayfair, without having to worry about commitments.

Then his friends started falling in love, one by one. All that was left of the single members of the Rakes were himself and Lord Barton, whom their friends referred to as the ‘B’ Lords. Even Amelia and Edward had married and become Lord and Lady Cannonberry, and were now expecting a child.

“It might be fun. Don’t discount the party until you’ve experienced it,” said Dalton, Lord Essex. “Charlotte tells me several lovely young widows will be in attendance. Perhaps you can find one to alleviate your boredom.” Dalton finished his deal and looked at his cards.

Andrew couldn't help but sigh in disgust. "I want to point out that you started the end of the Rakes when you married Charlotte. Besides, I've been with many widowed ladies, and none of them have interested me."

The men sitting around the table all laughed. Lord Essex had his Charlotte; Lord Ellington had his Carin; and Lord Buxton had his Alice, and Fergus had his Gabby.

"It's not fair, really. There are hardly any more single female members of The Club."

"Then you need to find someone," Buxton said, as he placed a bet in the center of the table. "Find a young widow who needs a good fuck. I'm sure there is a comely woman to meet your needs."

"Not in the city of London," Beaton answered. "Maybe I should put an advertisement in Gabby's newspaper, or she could do a story on a poor, rich boy who wants to find a wife. I'm wanting to find someone who fits me as well as you found to fit all of you."

"The perfect reason, then, to go to the house party," Ellington said as he raised Buxton's bet. "Perhaps one of the lovely ladies attending will be adventurous in the boudoir."

"Fat chance of that," Beaton said. He shook his head in disgust at his cards and threw them face down on the table. "Ever since Shelia McCoy married and went back to Scotland I've been bored with every woman I've met."

"You should have made an offer for her when you had the chance," Barton said as he threw his cards down, indicating he was also out for this hand.

"She wouldn't have had me," Beaton replied. "We got along well enough, but not sufficiently for marriage. Who is hosting this party?"

"The Duke and Duchess of Stanhope," Essex said as he raised his bet. He gave Buxton and Ellington a stone-faced look, and the two men responded with the same. "Charlotte tells me that the duchess is now nine months recovered from having their first child and is anxious to get back into the swing of things. She has planned a

scavenger hunt, and lots of cards, food and dancing. The party starts early Friday morning and goes until late Monday morning.”

Beaton pursed his lips and nodded. “That might be entertaining, and it would be good to get out of town before winter sets in.”

“Charlotte will be happy to hear you’re going,” Essex said. He laid three queens on the table and grinned.

“Good news indeed,” Buxton said. He laughed as he laid down a full house, kings over tens. Essex frowned and they all turned to Ellington.

“Excellent, indeed,” Ellington said. He laid four aces down on the table, laughed and gathered the money toward him. “Hopefully you all will have better luck at the party than you have had tonight.”



BEATON SHOOK his head and looked at the assembled crowd. It was almost noon, and guests had begun arriving at the Stanhope party as early as eight. He himself had traveled with Dalton and Charlotte.

He smiled as he remembered Charlotte’s running list of the widows who would be attending the gathering. She’d gone through the pros and cons of each lady, from temperament to money.

“Really, your best hope is Lady Strauss. She’s been the mistress of several of society’s more fashionable men, most recently the late Duke of Melbourne. Since he’s died, I understand that she’s looking for a new bedmate.”

“Melbourne? Why did he need a mistress? I understand that he had a young and beautiful wife who was very much in love with him. What did he die of, anyway?”

“Consumption. And his wife was more than twenty years younger than him, and she saved him from ruin. They say his estates were falling down before her father offered her, and quite a sizable dowry, because she was so in love with him.”

“Hmm,” Beaton considered his choices and then shook his head.

"I think I'll just sit back and see what turns up. I think that Lady Strauss and I would bump heads too much. I've seen her at more than a few balls and she seems to offer her favors to any man who asks. I don't like that idea."

"I'm not saying you have to marry her," Charlotte said. "Just consider it. Maybe she would be amiable to a good romp."

"It might take the edge off you," Dalton said. "You've been a bear lately."

Beaton snorted. "Sod off, Dalton." But he had to admit his friend was probably right. He was not in the best of moods when he wasn't having sex. It had been so long since he'd taken a willing, sweet woman to his bed. He wanted to find a woman who would pique his interest, but he doubted that he would find her here.

In true house party fashion he was sure that widows would be inviting the eligible males into their beds at night, but most of them would be older women just looking for a one-time thing. He could, of course, take advantage of their willingness. But nights like that usually left him feeling empty. He would wait and see who turned up before he made any decisions.

The carriage rounded a corner and joined the line of conveyances in front of the Stanhope's huge manor home.

Charlotte craned her neck to see who was arriving. She gave her traveling companions a running commentary of who was alighting from the carriages. A huge intake of breath told the men that someone had arrived whom she had not expected.

"There she is, the Duchess of Melbourne. She's been out of mourning for seven months now and hasn't been seen anywhere. Now she turns up at the same party as Lady Strauss? Oh, this ought to prove interesting. The duchess made no bones about the fact that she hated her husband's mistress."

"Well, then, it seems like the weekend will have more than cards and croquet for entertainment," Beaton said. "Which one is she?"

"There, standing near the front door. She has black hair, and she's large, very tall. Almost as tall as you are."

Beaton's eyes rose with appreciation as he looked at the young duchess. He put her age at around thirty, just a few years younger than him. She had a healthy figure, and wasn't corseted in until she looked like a stick figure. Her breasts were round and high up, and her rounded bottom could provide hours of entertainment for them both.

"Very nice," Beaton said. "Perhaps things are looking up for the weekend."

Charlotte laughed. "Think again, Andrew. The duchess, they say, is a prude. Which is the reason why her husband went looking for Lady Strauss."



THE DUCHESS OF MELBOURNE, known to her few friends as Clarissa, smoothed down her skirt and sighed.

"Do you think this dress will do, Sally?"

Her maid nodded and smiled. "It's beautiful, Your Grace. It will do for both dinner and the dancing."

Clarissa sighed. Dancing. She didn't want to think about dancing. If she had her way she'd still be at her estates, reading and taking care of the household accounts. After her disastrous marriage she had no desire to ever have contact with a man again. She had a reason for attending this house party and she intended to get her business done as soon as possible and leave before she had to attend too many of the weekend's events.

She was sure that her first opportunity to put her plan into action would be at the scavenger hunt, which was scheduled to begin Saturday morning. While everyone was busy looking for the hidden trinkets she would sneak upstairs and do what needed to be done.

"Thank you for your help, Sally. Now, I think it's time to go down to dinner. I'm sure that the stir my arrival caused this afternoon will continue when I step into the parlor tonight. There must

be more than thirty people here. You would think that many attendees would mean I wouldn't garner such attention."



BUT SHE HAD. When she'd stepped inside the parlor, ladies had whispered behind their hands and men had stared open-mouthed. She was pretty, she knew that. Her long, black hair was curly and hard to hide. Her sapphire eyes were large and becoming. She was larger than most women but what did it matter, really? She didn't care that most men were shorter than her. She'd never lacked for suitors.

It was a shame that she'd fallen for Taylor's ploys. He was a Duke, for certain, and he'd been charming when he'd courted her. She'd fallen for him quickly. And the moment the vows had been said, her maidenhead was gone and her money was in his hands; he'd then informed her that the only reason that he would look at an 'Amazon' like her was for the money.

He'd tried four times a year to get her with child, and failed at each attempt. Clarissa thanked her stars for that. Although she would love to have a child she didn't want one brought into a loveless marriage.

Taylor's death had been a blessing. She'd been embarrassed when he'd traveled from bed to bed, testing the charms of numerous widows. When he'd finally settled in the bed of Lady Strauss she'd been furious. And he had laughed at her and told her he didn't care how she felt.

To save face she'd settled in their estates near the Scottish border and lived the life of a thrown-over wife, at the age of twenty-eight. Now that Taylor was gone she could live again, well, once this was all over she could. She was sure that his indiscretions were why everyone talked about her when she arrived today.

When it was over, when they found out why she was here, she would be branded a thief, ostracized by the ton and unable to show

her face in public again. But she didn't care. She was damned if Taylor would thumb his nose at her from beyond the grave. She planned to set things right.

She thanked Sally again, and made her way down the stairs. Most of the houseguests had already arrived and were visiting and drinking. When she stepped into the room, the talking turned into hushed murmurs. She held her head up and smiled.

"Your Grace," said her hostess. "It's wonderful to see you. Please, come in and make yourself at home."

The room filled with conversation again and Clarissa accepted a glass of champagne from a page and moved into the crowd, her gaze roaming the room. When she didn't find her target she frowned.

"Is the champagne sour?"

The deep male voice in her ear caused her to shiver. She turned to look into a pair of wide shoulders, and then looked up at the handsome man standing behind her. His dark hair brushed his collar, and his dark eyes flashed with humor. He was one of the few men whom she had to look up to. She stood five foot nine inches. This man was well over six foot.

"Why ever would you think that?"

"The frown on your face. It seemed as if something disagreed with you."

"And you are?"

"Forgive me, Your Grace. Andrew Tarton, Lord Beaton, at your service." He bowed and Clarissa fought down a grin.

"Oh yes, Baron Tarton's youngest son."

"Yes, always a Lord, never a Baron." He smiled when she laughed. "Shall I get you a new glass of champagne?"

"No, thank you, Lord Beaton. There is nothing wrong with my drink."

"Then why are you frowning?"

"I don't believe that's any of your affair."

"Just trying to be of service, you seemed so distressed."

"Perhaps it was because I failed to see anyone of interest about."

Beaton put his hand to his chest and swooned, and this time Clarissa let the grin spread.

"You wound me, Your Grace. I would hope if I had not made myself known to you, that you would have thought me of interest enough to come up and introduce yourself."

"A lady does not approach a man."

"Which is why I approached you."

A servant announced dinner, and Beaton offered his arm. Clarissa took it and smiled at him.

"You are a very handsome man, Andrew, if I may call you that." When he nodded she continued, "And, of course, you must call me Clarissa. But I should tell you outright that I am not interested in male companionship. My door will not be unlocked tonight."

"A shame," Andrew said. "Perhaps I can change your mind about that by tomorrow, or even this evening. I can be very persuasive."

"I don't doubt that, Andrew," she said. "But I am not here for that sort of—shall we call it entertainment."

"But it can be so—" he put his lips near her ear, "—entertaining. And I'm very good at entertaining."

Clarissa couldn't help but laugh. He was the first man who had paid her attention since before her marriage. "Are you the court jester?" she asked.

"I'm good at many things," he said. "That means I can promise you that an evening with me will leave you smiling."

"Do you not have a specific skill?" They had stopped just inside the dining hall. "Or are you a jester who excels at everything?"

"Everything," he whispered, his voice so seductively low that her nipples tightened. And then a different voice rang out, so near that Clarissa could have sworn it was right next to her—not it, her.

"Clarissa, dear, so nice to see you."

The words made Clarissa's back bristle. She turned to the woman standing near her. "You will address me as Your Grace, Belinda." That should make a point. Clarissa could call Lady Strauss

by her given name, but she would not allow Belinda to call her Clarissa. It was petty, she knew, but it proved a point. Or at least she hoped it did.

“Oh, pardon me,” Lady Strauss said. “Such a shame for you to be so—rude.”

Clarissa didn’t answer. She turned her gaze back to Andrew. But before she could say anything, Lady Strauss spoke again.

“Andrew, so wonderful to see you. I’ve forgotten how handsome you are.” Lady Strauss put her hand on Andrew’s arm. “I wonder how close our rooms are.”

She said it loud enough for the people filing into the dining room to hear. Several of them laughed, but Andrew didn’t. Clarissa felt her face heating. She wanted to say something, but she knew if she showed any little bit of jealousy their fellow party guests would find it highly amusing.

Instead, she stood there and acted like she didn’t give a rat’s behind who visited Lady Strauss’ bedroom.

“Perhaps I can get the duchess to make sure we’re seated next to each other at the dining table.”

“That’s a very kind thought, Lady Strauss, but I’m afraid I already asked the duchess to seat me next to Clarissa,” he said. “She and I have so much to talk about.”

Clarissa didn’t tell him he needed to use her title, something noticed, she was sure, by the assembled guests who were watching the first entertainment of the weekend.

For a moment, Clarissa thought Lady Strauss would explode; her face was red and her eyes were little slits from where she’d furrowed her brows. She looked around, as if she realized for the first time that people were watching them.

“How sweet of you to try and keep company with Her Grace,” Lady Strauss finally said. “She has so few friends.”

That much was true, but once again, Clarissa didn’t say anything.

“Spending time with Clarissa is not an act of charity,” he said. “I

look forward to engaging conversation and stimulating interaction.”

Clarissa swallowed the urge to tell him there would be no stimulation between them, but that would make Lady Strauss laugh, and right now she looked as if she'd swallowed a bucketful of slop.

“Of course,” she finally said. “If you will excuse me.” Lady Strauss left without saying another word to Clarissa.

When she was gone, Clarissa tightened her grip on Andrew's arm. “You're a wonderful person. Thank you for standing up for me.”

“I did nothing of the sort.” He took her free hand and lifted it to his lips. After he'd kissed it he whispered, “I am truly looking forward to spending time with you this weekend.”

Clarissa tried to pull her hand away, but he held it tight. “I appreciate the thought,” she said as he stared down the left side of the table. “But, unlike Lady Strauss, I don't leave my door unlocked at night. If that is your intention, you need to go and sit with her, I'm afraid.”

Although, Clarissa thought, spending time with him could fit into her plans. She mentally shook off that thought. She didn't want anyone to know her true reason for being here this weekend.

She hadn't quite figured out how to put things in action, though. Would Andrew be someone she could trust? Could she tell him about what happened, and how she wanted to make it right?

No. She needed to do all of this on her own, or else word of it would get out and she would be even more embarrassed than when all of society knew her loathsome husband had taken Lady Strauss to his bed.

“Here we are,” Andrew said. He pulled out a chair and indicated she should sit down.

Once he was seated next to her she said, “Did you really arrange this?”

“I did,” he said. “I saw you when you arrived and I didn't want to spend time with anyone else this weekend.”

Clarissa took a drink from her wine glass. "As I said before, I appreciate the sentiment, but my door will be locked this evening."

"There's always tomorrow night," he said with a smile. "Plus, I have no desire to be with Lady Strauss."

"May I ask why not?" she took another sip. "She is very attractive."

"Clarissa, have you ever heard of a revolving door?"

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"It's a fairly new invention," he said. "I understand one has been installed in a building in Philadelphia, in the Colonies. The premise, from what I understand, allows for easy entry and access into a room. The door sort of twirls."

"I don't think I'm following your idea, Andrew."

"I'm sure that Lady Strauss will have one installed in her bedroom as soon as possible," he said.

Clarissa smothered a laugh as it finally dawned on her what he was saying. "You are evil." She turned and winked at him. "I rather like that."

"Then perhaps you will open your door to me tonight," he said.

"I'm sorry, no."

"Perhaps I can find a way to change your mind," he said. "I understand we are dancing later. I will enjoy holding you in my arms."

A silent thrill ran through her, and Clarissa prayed her face didn't betray her emotions. He didn't look triumphant, so she hoped it didn't.

"You're very charismatic, Andrew," she said. "Something tells me you leave the ladies of London reaching for their fans when you flirt with them."

"You're not reaching for one," he said. "Perhaps I'm not as good at seduction as I think. I will have to find a way to get beyond the wall you've built around yourself."

"It's high enough that you won't be able to scale it," she said.

"Then I shall knock a door through it," he said.

“Knock?” Clarissa took a sip from her wine. “That sounds violent.”

“If it works that is what I will do,” he said. “Don’t think that I will give up so easily.”

“I shall enjoy the chase, Andrew,” Clarissa said. She truly meant it, but she had only one goal for this weekend. She would work here, while the men she hired would, hopefully, be working their magic in London.

Clarissa made small talk with Andrew while the meal was served. They ate and from time to time she turned to talk to the man on her other side, Lord Jack Palmer, who was so boring she thought she would fall asleep in her food. He enjoyed talking about horses and money, and the more he chatted the more she wanted to turn her attention back to Andrew, who was talking to the woman on his other side, who was a friend of his named Charlotte, Lady Essex.

Before Clarissa could turn her attention back to Andrew, though, their hostess called for their attention.

“I’m honored that you’re all my guests this weekend,” the duchess said. “Before the dancing begins I would like to talk about tomorrow. I have taken the liberty of pairing my guests together for the scavenger hunt.” She continued to talk about the items they would search for.

Clarissa turned her attention to Belinda, who was flirting outrageously with The Duke of Stanhope. As if she knew someone was looking at her, Belinda glanced up and locked her gaze on Clarissa. She smirked, and Clarissa glared at her.

Belinda threw back her head and laughed, and Clarissa grasped her napkin in her lap.

“Don’t,” Andrew said. “The more you react the more she wins.”

Clarissa didn’t say anything.

“She will become angry if you don’t respond, and she will embarrass herself.”

“I hope so,” Clarissa said. She didn’t want to add that she had

other plans for her late husband's mistress, ones that would, hopefully, do more than embarrass her.

"Tomorrow will be great fun," the duchess said from the front of the room. "I have worked hard to put together wonderful things for you to find."

The duchess continued to talk about the more than one hundred items of interest that were hidden in the house, all of them wrapped in white paper and tied with red ribbons.

"The only hint I'll give is that everything is hidden downstairs and in the gardens. Nothing is hidden in any of the rooms. Husbands and wives are paired together, and single ladies are paired with the single man who was seated to their right during dinner. I ask that no more than two couples pair together to hunt. The person who finds the most trinkets will win the grand prize on Sunday."

The assembled guests laughed and discussed the prizes. Clarissa smiled as Andrew took her arm.

"I do believe we're partners, Clarissa."

"So we are," she said. "And a more worthy partner I could not ask for."

His smile was disarming, and it took Clarissa a moment to remind herself that she was here for a specific purpose, not to find a man to take to her bed.

"May I suggest we pair with my friends in the hunt? With their help we can find anything. Lord and Lady Essex are here now, and several more are supposed to be here tomorrow."

"It sounds like a marvelous plan." She just wished she could use them for her other activities while she was here. As the music drifted from the ballroom, Clarissa knew the dancing was about to begin. She would enjoy herself as much as she could, even though she had other things on her mind.