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LADY CLEMENTINE

a novel



MARIE
BENEDICT

New York Times Bestselling Author of
THE ONLY WOMAN IN THE ROOM

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MARIE BENEDICT

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I

CHAPTER ONE

September 12, 1908
London, England

I ALWAYS FEEL DIFFERENT. NO MATTER THE SPHERE I INHABIT, I always feel set apart. Even today. Especially today.

The weak, early September sun strains to break through the darkness of the cold morning. The pallid rays illuminate the cavernous bedroom assigned to me by my benefactress, Lady St. Helier. They hit the white satin dress hanging on the mannequin, reminding me that the gown waits for me.

As I finger the delicately embroidered, square-cut bodice, its sleek Venetian fabric finer than any I've ever worn, I am seized by a sensation fiercer than the usual isolation that often besets me. I crave connection.

I hunt for the clothes the maids unpacked from my trunk and placed into the dresser drawers and mirrored armoire when I arrived at 52 Portland Place a fortnight ago. But I find nothing other than the corset and undergarments meant to be worn under the white gown today. Only then do I realize that the maids must have packed my belongings back into my trunk for my journey afterward. The mere thought of afterward sends a shiver through me.

Tying my gray silk dressing gown tightly around my waist, I tiptoe down the grand staircase of Lady St. Helier's mansion. At first, I don't know precisely what I am seeking, but I have an epiphany when I spot a housemaid working in the parlor. She's kneeling before the fireplace grate.

The sound of my footfalls startles the poor girl, and she jumps. "Morning, Miss Hozier. May I help you with anythin'?" she says, wiping her blackened fingers on the cloth dangling from her apron.

I hesitate. Will I endanger the girl if I enlist her help? Surely Lady St. Helier will forgive any protocol breach I cause today.

"As a matter of fact, I could use your assistance. If it is not too much trouble, that is." The apology is heavy in my voice.

After I explain my predicament to the girl, whose age must match my own, she races away down the back hallway toward the kitchen. At first, I think she may have misunderstood my request or thought me mad. But I follow her, and when she scurries across the rough wooden kitchen floor toward the servants' staircase, I understand.

Winching at the loud clatter of her work boots stomping up the stairway and down the hallway of the attic where the servants' bedrooms are, I wait. I silently pray that her racket does not rouse the rest of the staff. I fear that if they appear for their morning chores and find me in the kitchen, one of them will alert Lady St. Helier. When the girl returns with a bundle in hand—without any additional servants in tow—I sigh in relief.

"What is your name?" I ask, reaching for the bundle.

"Mary, miss," she answers with a minuscule curtsy.

"I shall be forever in your debt, Mary."

"It's my pleasure, Miss Hozier." She gives me a conspiratorial smile, and I realize that she is enjoying her part in this unorthodox plan. It may be the only deviation in the sameness of her days.

As I pivot and walk back toward the grand staircase, Mary whispers, "Why don't you change in the pantry, miss? Less chance of being found out than if you head back up them stairs. I'll make sure your clothes are returned to your bedroom before anyone notices them."

The girl is right. Every step I take up that creaky grand staircase is one step closer to waking the lady of the house and her servants. Taking her advice, I enter the jar-lined pantry and close the door only partially

to ensure some light will reach the enclosed space. I let my dressing gown and robe slide down and puddle on the floor, and I unwrap the bundle. Pulling out a surprisingly sweet floral dress, I shimmy into its floor-grazing cotton and then lace up the black boots Mary thoughtfully included.

"Fits you right well, Miss Hozier," the girl says when I step back into the kitchen. As she hands me her coat off the peg on the wall, she says, "Godspeed to you."

I hurry out the servants' door at the rear of the house and make my way down an alleyway that runs behind the row of luxurious Georgian homes lining Portland Place. I pass by kitchen windows beginning to glow with lamps lit by servants readying the house for their masters. A bustling world lies behind the mansions of Lady St. Helier and her friends, but because I always enter through the front doors, I've never witnessed the province at the back.

The alley lets out onto Weymouth Street, where a motorbus stops. It's heading west to Kensington, and I know the route fairly well as I've taken it the other direction toward Lady St. Helier's on several occasions. Mary's wool coat is too thin for the brisk morning, and as I wait for the bus, I wrap it tightly around me in the vain hope of extracting a bit more warmth from its meager fibers.

The unadorned hat that Mary leant me bears only a small brim, and consequently, the working girl disguise does nothing to mask my face. When I step onto the bus, the driver recognizes me from the photographs that have run in the newspapers in recent days. He stares at me but says nothing at first. Finally, he sputters, "Surely you're in the wrong place, Miss"—he drops his voice to a whisper, realizing that he shouldn't reveal my identity—"Hozier."

"I am precisely where I mean to be, sir," I answer in a tone that I hope is kind yet firm. His eyes never leave my face as he takes the fare Mary had given me from her savings—which I plan to replace multifold—but he doesn't say another word.

I keep my gaze lowered to shield my face from the curious onlookers who have been alerted to the oddness of my presence by the driver's reaction. I hop off the bus the moment it nears Abingdon Villas, and I feel lighter the closer I come to the cream-colored stucco house bearing the number 51. By the time I reach up to lift the heavy brass knocker, the tightness in my chest begins to loosen, and I breathe with ease. No one answers the door immediately, but I am not surprised. Here, no bevy of servants lies in wait in the kitchen, ever ready to answer the knock of a front door or the ring of a master's bell. Here, one servant does the work of many, and the household inhabitants do the rest.

I wait, and after several long minutes, my patience is rewarded with an open door. The face of my beloved sister Nellie, still creased with sleep, appears. She rushes in for an embrace before the shock of seeing me registers and she freezes.

"What on earth are you doing here, Clementine? And in *those* clothes?" she asks. Her expression is quizzical. "Today is your wedding day."

CHAPTER TWO

September 12, 1908
London, England

THE COMFORTING SMELL OF STEEPING TEA RISES TO MY NOSTRILS, and I allow the steam to warm my face and hands. Nellie has not pressed me to answer her question, not yet. I know she will soon insist on an explanation for my unexpected visit, but for now, I indulge in the temporary quiet of the parlor. These silent moments alone with my sister, here at home, may be enough to carry me through the day.

“You are not thinking of calling off the wedding, Clemmie?” Nellie interrupts the silence with a tremulous whisper. Neither of us wishes to waken a single member of the sleeping household—least of all Mother.

“No, no, Nellie,” I whisper back, reaching for her hand. My knuckles brush across the table where my sister and I used to spend hours doing needlework for our cousin Lena Whyte’s dressmaking business, a necessity to help with household expenses.

Relief softens her features. I hadn’t realized how fearful the very idea that I might cancel *this* wedding made her. It had been cruel of me not to justify my appearance from the beginning. “Nothing like that, dearest. I simply needed the familiarity of home for a moment. To calm my nerves, as it were.”

“Nerves over what? The wedding ceremony itself? Or the man you are marrying?” Nellie, my little sister and the twin to my only brother, surprises me with her astuteness. For too long, I’d considered her

youthful and inexperienced, not at all the confidante that my indomitable elder sister Kitty would have been had she lived beyond sixteen, had my beautiful, fearless sister not succumbed to typhoid. I should not have underestimated Nellie.

Her question awakens a memory of the first time I met my intended. It was an evening at Lady St. Helier's mansion, the very place from which I'd just fled. I had initially resisted my benefactress's invitation to dinner on that cool March night. My suitable gowns were in need of mending, and I had no clean white gloves, I'd lamented to Mother. In truth, my long afternoon tutoring French had exhausted me, but I didn't dare speak plainly, as Mother loathed any reminder that we girls needed to contribute to the household upkeep. She preferred to believe her title and aristocratic heritage would magically provide funds for housing, food, and servants, a strange contradiction with her decidedly bohemian views on the malleability of the marital vow and her clear focus on her extramarital relationships and little else, certainly not us children. She would brook no excuse to turn down an invitation by my generous, wealthy patroness, who was Mother's aunt and adored helping the young make their way into proper society. So Mother loaned me her own gloves and Nellie's simple white satin princess dress, and off I dutifully went, if a bit past schedule.

But late as I was, the dinner guest to my right still had not materialized by the time the staff served the second of five courses. I'd begun to despair of any conversation other than the boring weather reports recounted by the elderly gentleman to my left when the dining room door swung open with a slam. Before the butler could announce the tardy guest, a round-faced man with a sheepish half grin marched in, offering his apologies to Lady St. Helier before settling into the ornately carved chair next to me. As the chair's feet scraped loudly against the wooden floor, drowning out the butler's announcement of his name, my attention was drawn to the man. His cheeks had the softness of boyhood, but on his forehead, I saw the deep grooves of adult worries.

Who was this gentleman? He looked familiar, although I could not place his face. Had I met him at another social occasion? There had been so many.

"Miss, I regret any inconvenience my delinquency caused you. An empty seat at a formal dinner is no easy matter. Please excuse me," he said, meeting my gaze with unsettling directness.

Unaccustomed as I was to such candor, my surprise precipitated a blunt response. "It is no inconvenience at all, sir. I arrived only moments before you, my work having delayed my own arrival." I immediately regretted my words, as girls of my class were not meant to have employment.

He looked startled. "You have a position?"

"Yes," I answered, a bit on the defensive. "I am an instructor of French." I didn't dare mention the income-generating needlework that Nellie and I also undertook.

His eyes shimmered with enthusiasm. "That...that is wondrous, miss. To know something of work and the world is invaluable."

Did he mean it? Or was this a bit of mockery? I didn't know how to respond, so I decided to thread the needle with an innocuous response.

"If you say so, sir."

"I do indeed. It is refreshing. And your regular immersion in French and its culture, ah...of that, I am jealous. I have always held a healthy appreciation for the cultural and political contributions France has made to Europe, particularly the fostering of personal liberty and the rights of man."

He seemed in earnest, and his views matched my own. I took a chance and responded in kind. "I agree wholeheartedly, sir. I even considered studying French, its culture, and its politics at university. In fact, my headmistress encouraged me to do so."

"Indeed?" Again, he seemed surprised, and I wondered if I'd been too honest about my youthful ambitions. I did not know this man or his views.

I softened my aspirations with gentle humor. "Yes. Although, in the end, I had to settle for a winter in Paris, where I attended lectures at the Sorbonne, visited art galleries, and dined with the artist Camille Pissarro."

"No small solace," he offered with a smile, his eyes lingering on mine. Did I imagine a glimmer of respect in his light-blue eyes? In the low candlelight, their color shifted from pale aquamarine to the color of the dawn sky.

We grew quiet for a moment, and it seemed as though the rest of the guests—an illustrious mix of political figures, journalists, and the odd American heiress—had reached a lull in their conversations as well. Or perhaps they had been listening quietly to us all along. I realized that I'd been so engrossed in discussion with my tablemate that I'd quite forgotten the other diners.

The gentleman stammered for a moment, and to avoid embarrassment, I returned to the chicken on my plate, now grown quite cold. I felt his eyes on me but didn't turn. Our exchange had been unusually personal for a first meeting, and I didn't know what to say next.

"Please forgive me, miss." His words were unexpected.

"For what, sir?"

"For my unforgivable lapse in manners."

"I do not know what you mean."

"A woman like yourself deserves every courtesy. I realize now that I have not offered even the bare minimum—an introduction beyond the butler's announcement. This is particularly inexcusable given that I arrived too late for the usual formalities. Will you allow me to introduce myself?"

I gave him a small nod, wondering what he meant by "a woman like yourself." What sort of woman did he think I was?

"My name is Winston Churchill."

Ah, I thought with a start. The familiarity of his appearance was explained. While I believed I'd met him in passing several years earlier, I knew his face not from that earlier social occasion but from the

newspapers. The gentleman sitting next to me was a prominent member of Parliament and rumored to soon become the next president of the Board of Trade, which would make him one of the most important members of the government. His rise through the leadership ranks had been riddled with controversy, as he'd changed parties from Conservative to Liberal a few years before, favoring free trade and a more active government with legislation protecting the welfare of its citizens. This led to constant coverage in the dailies, including a lengthy interview in the *Daily Chronicle* by the *Dracula* author, Bram Stoker, a few months ago.

If I recalled correctly, some years before, this Mr. Churchill had actually voted in favor of the female suffrage bill, an issue quite dear to me. During my school years at Berkhamsted School for Girls, my headmistress, Beatrice Harris, had instilled in me a taste for female independence. Her lectures on suffragism had fallen upon keen ears, because, having grown up with a mother who professed nonconformist beliefs but actually relied upon her aristocratic status and many liaisons for sustenance, I wanted to pursue a path of purpose and, if possible, independence. And now, sitting before me was one of the few politicians who had publicly backed an early effort for the women's vote. I suddenly felt quite nervous but exhilarated at the same time.

The rest of the table had grown quiet, but my dinner partner didn't seem to notice, because he cleared his throat loudly and continued. "I hope the mere name Winston Churchill doesn't scare you off. I'm quite the pariah these days in most households."

A fierce heat spread across my usually pale cheeks, not from his words but from my worry that my ignorance of his identity might have led me into some kind of gaffe. *Had I said anything inappropriate?* I wondered as I quickly reviewed our exchange. I did not think so. If Kitty had been in my place, she would have managed this interaction with aplomb and humor instead of with my awkward pauses and nerves.

I settled upon a response. "No, sir, not at all. I find your views quite in line with my own, and I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

“Not delighted enough to share your name, it seems.”

My cheeks flamed even hotter. “I am Miss Clementine Hozier.”

“It is *my* pleasure, Miss Hozier.”



I smile at the memory now. Before I can answer Nellie, her twin, Bill, bounds into the room. Bill is my younger brother and still schoolboy gangly despite his position as an officer in the Royal Navy. He is mid-bite into an enormous apple that promptly clambers to the floor when he sees me. “What in the devil are you doing here? Not skipping out on another commitment, I hope?”

Leaping to my feet, I jab his arm for the reference to my not one but two jilted fiancés—Sidney Cornwallis Peel, grandson of the former prime minister Sir Robert Peel, and Lionel Earle, men with lofty titles or positions and the promise of financial security but with whom I foresaw a life of staid decorum and scant hope of purpose. While I eschew the unconventional life led by my mother, I found that I could not commit to either of these fine gentlemen solely for the sake of propriety when I longed for a life of meaning and, dare I think it, emotion, even though decorousness was a powerful lure.

Nellie, Bill, and I burst into laughter, and I feel impossibly light. The heavy sense of isolation I felt in the long hours before dawn fades away, and in the presence of my siblings, the aisle-long march to my new life no longer seems an insurmountable journey. Until Mother walks into the room.

For the first time in memory, Mother is speechless. No judgmental lectures on her pet topics, no public redressing for perceived slights, no under-the-breath yet audible remarks about bourgeois acquaintances. And most incredibly, it is me—the least favored and often ignored of her children—who has rendered mute the outspoken Lady Blanche Hozier.

Nellie, the favorite, leaps in to defend me. “Clemmie is here only for tea and a quick visit, Mama.”

Mother rises up to her full height and finds her voice. In a shrill, mocking tone, she says, "A visit? At dawn? On the morning of her wedding?"

No one answers. Such questions are not meant to be answered.

With her blond hair in disheveled strands around her still-beautiful face, she stares at each of us in turn, making yet another criticism dressed up as a rhetorical question. "Can any of you think of anything *less* appropriate?"

I almost snort with laughter at our bohemian mother, never one to follow the strictures of society, church, or family, doubting the *appropriateness* of her children's behavior. She, whose own behavior has long flouted the traditions of marriage and child-rearing through multiple simultaneous affairs and long absences. And we, who cling to convention as a life raft in the sea of our mother's tempestuousness.

Glancing at Nellie and Bill, I recognize the cowed expressions beginning to form on their faces, and I remind myself what today means. For me, for our family. Instead of submitting to Mother's irritation and hoping a remorseful look will dissipate her foul humor, I assemble my own features into an air of amusement. Today, I will assume a powerful mantle, and this is my first effort at making plain that the balance has shifted.

"Surely you don't begrudge your daughter a brief trip across town to see her family on the morning of her wedding, Mama?" I ask with a smile. I'm trying to sound like Grandmother, also called Lady Blanche, who, as a Stanley of Alderley inhabiting Airlie Castle, embodies all the strong and assertive qualities the Stanley matriarchs are known for, including female education. Not that Mother follows suit in her own beliefs; she is unorthodox in every view except on the subject of female education. I cannot understand it, but I suppose it's that Mother's focus lies on her relationships with men, most of whom find female education distasteful.

Mother doesn't answer at first, unused to being challenged.

Finally, she speaks, in a forced and deliberate manner. "Of course not, Clementine. But I will arrange for a brougham to pick you up and take you back to prepare at Lady St. Helier's within the hour. After all, there will be over a thousand people watching you walk down the aisle."

CHAPTER THREE

September 12, 1908
London, England

AN HOUR PASSES ON THE MANTLEPIECE CLOCK, AND I AM STILL submitting to the ministrations of Lady St. Helier's personal maid. As she tends to my hair, coaxing its heavy chestnut strands into an elaborate pompadour, I examine my face in the mirror. My almond-shaped eyes and profile, often described by others as Roman or well-chiseled, whatever that means, appear the same as they do every day. Yet this day is unlike any other.

I watch the minutes tick by on the clock, almost incredulous that most women of my acquaintance spend a significant portion of their days in some version of this process. They waste hours while their maids assist them in changing from one outfit into another, from one coiffure to another, as they move from one social occasion to the next. Mother's peripatetic, often penurious, lifestyle meant that I'd performed all the maids' chores myself on those instances when I was invited to an event requiring intricate updos and formal attire, but more often than not, I wore a simple tie-and-shirt-collar blouson, a skirt, and a basic hairstyle. I know now that even if my future life as Mrs. Winston Churchill allows for an abundance of personal maids, I do not want my time spent in this frivolous manner.

A glint of sunlight reflects off the large ruby at the center of my engagement ring. I wiggle my fingers, making the light catch and dance

on the facets of the ruby and the diamonds that flank it, and recollect Winston's proposal. In the mirror, I see a smile curving on my lips at the memory.



By midsummer, the invitations to visit Winston at Blenheim Palace, one of England's largest houses and the only nonroyal home to have the designation of palace, began pouring in to our home in Abingdon Villas. Blenheim was owned by Winston's cousin and close friend, the Duke of Marlborough, who went by the name "Sunny" after one of his titles, the Earl of Sunderland, and Winston was spending part of the summer there. I demurred at first, not out of reluctance to see him but out of despair that I did not own the proper gowns required for such a grand occasion.

His invitations continued until I could not refuse without rebuffing the man to whom I'd grown unexpectedly attached. Letters and visits with Winston over the preceding four months had revealed him to be wonderful company, not at all the brusque pundit that the newspapers labelled him. In the long missives he penned to me during a trip undertaken with my mother to Germany to fetch Nellie back from a tuberculosis cure, he brimmed with the sort of enthusiasm and idealism that I, too, had about politics, history, and culture. In his company, I felt drawn into the thick of things, as if I was becoming an essential cog in the core of England.

I felt another kinship with him as well, a sense of aloneness in the world. We had both been raised by unconventional, unaffectionate mothers: mine, who'd entered into an unhappy union with Colonel Henry Hozier before engaging in perhaps happier affairs with several men who fathered her four children before their divorce, leaving the caretaking of us to servants; and his, the exquisite American-born heiress Lady Randolph Churchill, née Jennie Jerome, whose number of affairs rivaled that of Mother and who'd left the raising of Winston and his younger brother to their beloved Nanny Everest. Our fathers,

if indeed my mother's former husband could be called my father, given his uncertain parentage and our very few encounters in the years after the divorce, played even lesser roles than our mothers; it seems that Lord Randolph, in particular, actively disliked his elder son and, during their limited time together, would spend it critiquing him. Winston and I had been left in an uncertain state about our place in society and in relationships. But, to our delight and surprise, that sensation disappeared when we were together.

My nervousness about visiting Blenheim grew as my train passed through the verdant countryside with its undulating hills and approached the palace, long rumored to be one of the most luxurious outside of those estates owned by the royal family. What would I face at the great house? Winston had given me no details about the weekend plans, other than to mention that his cousin would be present, although not his wife, Consuelo, as they were divorcing, as would his mother, Lady Randolph, who, Mother had reminded me, I had met briefly on several social occasions. I was excited to see Winston but uncertain about the rest of his party.

A brougham retrieved me from the station, and after we'd travelled a fair distance, the driver called back to me, "We'll be passin' through Ditchley Gate in a moment, miss."

Glancing out the window, an ornate wrought-iron gate, flanked by an enormous stone gateway, loomed before us. When a gatekeeper emerged from a lodge to open this imposing entryway, I glimpsed a long drive, bordered by rows of lime trees, traversing a vast plateau. *Surely*, I thought, *this must be the drive to the palace*. Yet as we set out, we continued over a bridge that crossed a meandering lake and passed several other large buildings, none of which seemed to be our destination. *When will we reach Blenheim Palace?* I wondered. My nerves were stretched near to snapping.

The driver called back again. "We'll be at the central gate in a jiffy, miss."

Ah, I thought, *thank goodness. We are very nearly there.* I straightened my skirt and patted my hair and hat to ensure that everything was in its place. The drive surface changed, and I welcomed the crunch of the wheels on the stones as a signal that we'd finally reached the palace. The brougham passed through a small archway carved into a limestone wall, and as the carriage lurched forward to a stop, I readied myself.

When I finally descended from the brougham, I stepped out onto a great court that faced the grandest house I'd ever encountered. A wide, pillared portico stood at the center, lined with statues and carvings of warlike figures, and two vast wings stretched out in my direction from either side. From nowhere, four servants appeared and rushed toward me, taking my bags and guiding me up the stairs to the imposing front doors of Blenheim.

I climbed the steep steps, my heart racing both from the effort and the anticipation, and the doors to the great hall magically opened as I approached. As soon as I stepped inside, I saw that Winston stood in a row of friends and family—or at least I presumed they were friends and family, as Lady Randolph stood comfortably among them—under the enormous archway at the far reaches of the seemingly endless hall, all waiting to greet me. The only family members missing were Winston's beloved brother, Jack, and his new wife, Lady Gwendoline Bertie, affectionately known as Goonie, who had recently married and were away on their honeymoon. What on earth did Winston have planned?

My heels clattered across the vast expanse of black and white marble tiles as I began to walk toward my hosts. I winced as the sound echoed under the sixty-foot, fresco-adorned ceiling and around the massive pillars supporting the round-topped archways lining the hall. Winston's broad smile never faltered, and my gaze locked upon his beaming face instead of the intimidating artwork and sculptures and ancient weaponry I passed, all part of Winston's family history.

He stepped up and placed a firm, calming hand on mine as he made the introductions to those I did not know, his cousin Sunny, his close

personal and political friend F. E. Smith and his wife, and a secretary from the Board of Trade among them. Then he insisted that I retire to my room to get ready for dinner, with two of his mother's maids in tow. My cheeks flushed as I realized that someone in his group must have recognized that I didn't have a maid of my own and rushed to address my gaffe.

As the maids unpacked my bags, I sauntered around the impossibly high-ceilinged bedroom suite complete with a japanned four-poster bed, astonished to find a fire roaring in the fireplace despite the warm August weather, an unnecessary indulgence. In mere moments, the maids descended upon me with brushes, combs, and pins ready to create a fashionable confection out of my simple chignon. Perhaps they concentrated their efforts on my hair when they realized precious little could be done about my limited wardrobe.

From the moment I crossed the threshold into the gold-adorned state dining room, past the long murals and tapestries celebrating the Marlborough military accomplishments and family portraits by such luminaries as Sir Joshua Reynolds, John Singer Sargent, and Thomas Gainsborough, I could not summon the poised, talkative young woman I'd been with Winston these past few months. I felt like a fraud in his world. I felt intimidated by the pervasive reminders of the Churchills' historical importance and the comfortable banter between Winston, his mother, and Sunny, and I allowed myself to retreat into the background. It was an old habit from the days when Kitty was still alive and I'd watch from the shadows as my beautiful sister held a room captive with her wit and charm.

As the women and men parted ways after the meal, Winston approached me. I worried that he'd express concern, even disappointment, about my quiet throughout the meal, but instead he begged my pardon. "My dear Clementine, can you forgive me for monopolizing the dinner conversation? I talked so much with Mother and Sunny, you could not have gotten a word in edgewise."

I tried to recall the exact nature of their extended discussion, as I'd been somewhat distracted by the furnishings and frescos of the dining room. The talk had focused on the impending meeting between King Edward and Kaiser Wilhelm about the increasing size of Germany's navy, and I hunted around for an appropriate comment. "Please, Winston, there is absolutely no need for apologies. I was intrigued by your remarks about naval expansion and Germany's efforts to rival England as a maritime force. I quite agree that our country must maintain its dominance and not allow Germany to challenge us."

A broad smile engulfed his full face. "That's one of the things I love about you, Clementine. Unlike most young women whose eyes would be glazing over at such talk, you listen, understand, and engage with the important issues of our day. Your intellect is very appealing. As is the nobility of your thoughts."

While I understood and appreciated that he'd just given me several compliments, my thoughts fixed upon one word. *Love*. Had he just said love? Neither of us had ever used that word before. I did not—could not—answer, except to nod and look at him through eyes downcast.

"I say," he said in his version of a whisper, which wasn't altogether quiet, "let's you and I take a walk through the Blenheim rose gardens tomorrow morning to see if you think they justify their reputation. I can also promise vistas of the lake."

"I'd like that," I answered.

"Wonderful," he said, reaching out to caress my hand gently. "Shall we say ten o'clock in the breakfast room?"

I nodded my assent, and we bid each other good evening. My steps felt light and my mood a bit giddy as I joined Lady Randolph and Mrs. Smith for dessert, hoping to rectify the lackluster impression I'd made on them earlier.

The next morning, ten o'clock came and went, and eleven was fast approaching without an appearance by Winston or anyone else, for that matter. Where on earth was he? Hadn't we agreed to tour the

rose gardens by this time? I had already partaken of the lavish food on offer, selecting poached eggs, late summer strawberries and cream, and strong tea, and was standing before the row of windows, peering out over Blenheim's manicured gardens, when someone finally entered the breakfast room.

Turning at the sound of footsteps, I expected to see a sheepish Winston. Instead, a shocked Sunny stood in the archway of the breakfast room, and his expression told me all I needed to know about Winston's whereabouts, as he'd already confessed to me his habit of working until the first light of dawn and then resting until late morning. Winston was still sleeping. I was furious at him for placing me in this awkward position. I started walking out of the room without a word, never mind that I stood before the Duke of Marlborough.

"Miss Hozier, I've been sent to invite you for a drive around the estate," Sunny called out, covering for his dear friend and cousin. "Winston has been unavoidably detained. Work, you know." My face must have registered my disbelief, but Sunny plowed ahead. "He was hoping you could meet him at one o'clock instead. He should be finished with his work by then, and it's a better time to view the roses in any event."

The gulf between how I wanted to react and how I should react widened. Although I felt humiliated, I was a guest of the esteemed man standing before me, and I cared deeply for the one still asleep. I decided to answer cordially but to make my expectations clear. "That would be lovely. But may I presume that I will see Winston in the great hall precisely at one?"

Sunny stared me directly in the eyes in a look that seemed like appreciation. With an emphatic nod, he said, "I can promise you that."

When I descended the grand marble staircase adjacent to the great hall at one minute past one o'clock, Winston was waiting, his face bearing that sheepish expression I'd anticipated hours before. As I approached him, I summoned up my full five feet seven inches, making

me the slightest bit taller than Winston. I wanted him to understand that I expected respect and consideration from him.

He clasped my hands in his, saying, "I feel I am always apologizing to you."

"Occasionally, you do so when there is no need," I answered, wanting him to understand with my emphasis on "occasionally" that this was *not* one of those times.

"Yet my behavior requires that I make amends," he half announced, half asked.

"Yes," I said, pausing to let him await my verdict. "But I forgive you."

His sigh of relief was audible. "Shall we venture out to the gardens?"

I smiled to indicate the incident was behind us, and we walked to the rear of the palace and exited through a nondescript door leading to a rolling hill. My hand in the crook of his arm, we stepped out into the golden light of the summer afternoon. As we strolled down its expanse toward a well-delineated path, Winston shared a bit about the creation of the Blenheim Palace and its grounds, which were given by Queen Anne to the First Duke of Marlborough in 1704 for leading the English victory over the French.

"Family lore has it that, at the request of the Fourth Duke of Marlborough, the landscape architect Capability Brown signed on to the job of fashioning the park at Blenheim in 1763, fully expecting the project to last only a couple of years. He stayed for ten."

"Capability? What a name."

"Poor chap. His actual name was Lancelot, although I can't figure why choosing to be called Capability was any better."

I laughed, a hearty outburst that Nellie and Bill often told me was a guffaw. Mother loathed my laugh and often cautioned me to stifle it in public. But Winston laughed along with me, and I sensed that he actually enjoyed my rather indelicate roar.

He continued. "By the time poor Capability had finished, he'd

planted thousands of trees, making a veritable forest that seems perfectly natural but is actually an artful contrivance. With clever use of dams, he also created the Great Lake that you can see to your right and the Grand Cascade, one of the most exquisite waterfalls I've ever seen. We must explore that another day."

"That would be marvelous. The grounds are breathtaking, Winston," I said with a squeeze of his arm. "And they are in remarkable shape given that they were created in the 1700s."

"Well," he said, clearing his throat. "You can credit Sunny with the restoration of the Blenheim grounds. They were in sorry shape until he got his hands upon them."

With Consuelo's money, I thought to myself. I'd heard rumors, of course, about the unravelling of Sunny's marriage to the American heiress Consuelo Vanderbilt, who'd married Sunny in 1895 at the insistence of her mother. Neither had particularly cared for the other, and by 1906, the demise of their bond was inevitable. But while the newspapers published catty reports about their separation, Sunny seemed an affable fellow to me, and Winston simply adored him.

We ambled down the path in comfortable silence. Winston pointed out an area of the lake where he'd caught his first fish with his beloved Nanny Everest helping him. Although Blenheim belonged to Sunny, not Winston, his attachment to the property was unmistakable. His personal history was intertwined with the estate. He had been born in the house, after all.

No house held such hold on me. From time to time, an aspect of one house or another might remind me of one of our London rentals or the townhouse in Dieppe we inhabited for nearly a year. But these were houses, not homes, temporary residences to be discarded when Mother wanted to sojourn. Or when a new relationship required a change of scenery.

A shock of fuchsia and crimson appeared as we rounded a bend in the path. I released my hand from Winston's arm and walked over to a

rosebush robust with full blooms. Leaning down to inhale the powerful, fragrant scent, I felt Winston's arm slide around my corseted waist, and I shivered with pleasure. He had never touched me anywhere but my hand and arm, unless we were dancing. And then, of course, it was in full view of society.

Standing, I turned to face him. His cheeks were flushed, more so than when we were walking. "Clem, Clem—" he stammered, a habit that surfaced when he was nervous.

Without warning, without even a shadow cast by darkening clouds, a crack of thunder sounded. We both looked up. A formidable black mass had formed to the north and was threatening to blanket the sky.

He grabbed my hand. "We best move quickly back to the house. These summer storms can be fierce."

Hand in hand, we started walking briskly toward Blenheim on the path we'd meandered down only moments before. What had Winston been about to say? He'd seemed on the brink of something momentous, judging from the flush of his cheeks and the stutter of my name. Was it possible that he'd planned on discussing his intention? *Surely it is too soon for a proposal*, I thought. We had only known each other for five months, a courtship of the written words of letters interspersed with several visits, always in the company of others and often interrupted by trips, mine to Germany and his to locations much farther afield, demanded by work.

The rain trickled down gently from the clouds at first and then became a torrent. We ran down the path until Winston tugged my hand and we veered toward a small structure. I realized that it was a little Greek temple, with four Ionic columns holding aloft a triangular pediment. There was a marble bench within, and Winston motioned for me to sit upon it.

"The Temple of Diana," he explained with a swooping hand gesture around the interior of the small structure, decorated with stone plaques depicting the goddess, as he sat down next to me. "Built as a

folly in the late eighteenth century for the Roman goddess of the moon, the hunt, and, and”—his stammer took hold briefly before he blurted out—“Chastity.”

Winston handed me a handkerchief, and we giggled as we wiped our faces dry. The rain pelted the temple’s roof, and we relaxed in the shelter of its walls. The temple afforded a fine view of the Great Lake through the trees, but rather than commenting, I stayed silent. I hoped Winston would return to his earlier, interrupted topic.

A spider crawled across the leaf-strewn temple floor, and I focused on its nonlinear path as a means of calming my nerves. Through my peripheral vision, I noted that Winston’s cheeks were flushed again, but I resolved to keep quiet and wait for him to speak first.

Finally, he cleared his throat. “Clementine.”

I glanced up from the floor and met his gaze. “Yes,” I said with a warm smile and encouraging nod.

“Since I was a young boy, I’ve had the unerring sense that my future and that of Great Britain were inextricably intertwined. That I would be called upon to rescue our nation in a time of tremendous turmoil.” His cheeks turned a deeper red. “You probably think I’m harboring some grandiose delusion and want to run for the hills.”

I hastened to reassure him, careful not to reveal my disappointment at what surely couldn’t be a prelude to a proposal. “Not at all, Winston. I admire your commitment to our country.” I barely allowed myself to think what a thrill it would be, if we ever did marry, to engage in this great endeavor with him. I deeply desired the purposefulness of a traditional, stable marriage to this man, so different from the emptiness of Mother’s bohemian life with its constant changes in locale, finances, and attention due to the vagaries of her ever-varying roster of relationships. Not to mention how meaningful life with Winston would be compared to the other gentlemen to whom I’d been engaged.

The red of his cheeks faded, returning to its usual fairness. “Oh, Clementine, I’m so relieved you understand. I hope you also understand

my need to have a strong, noble woman at my side,” he said with an expectant gaze at me.

He seemed to be awaiting a response, but I couldn’t fathom what to say. I’d guessed that he was building to some sort of proclamation; I’d even dared to hope he might propose. But declaring a need for a “strong, noble woman” was hardly tantamount to asking for one’s hand. Still, I didn’t want to discourage him should a proposal be hidden in there somewhere, so I gave him another encouraging nod and waited silently.

He cleared his throat again and began speaking. “I have grown very fond of you over these past months. More than that, much more. I dare say I’ve fallen quite in love you, Clementine.” He paused, then with eyes shimmering, asked, “Might you feel the same way?”

He had finally uttered the words I’d been longing to hear. I examined this man, over a decade my senior and an important, if controversial, member of Parliament, and saw the sensitive person who lay beneath the blunderbuss of his exterior, one who understood and shared my sense of being different. In that moment, I knew with utter certainty that I could make a life with him. It would not be an easy life—no, it would be one of striving and ambition—but it could be an important and purposeful one.

“I do, Winston,” I answered, sensing my own cheeks blush with a surge of emotion. Throughout my two prior failed engagements, I had never once professed my love for those gentlemen, as I’d never felt a surge of emotion for either one. What I felt for Winston was utterly different and much more powerful.

“Oh, Clementine, you cannot know how happy that makes me.” He enveloped my hands in his and took a deep breath. “I know our courtship has been brief, but I wonder if you’d do me the honor of becoming my wife. It will not be an ordinary marriage, but it will be a very great one.”

Without breaking his intense gaze, I answered without hesitation. “I will become your wife, Winston Churchill.”