

“Top-tier wit, spice, and swoons!”

—Evie Dunmore

*Don't Want
You Like
a Best Friend*



EMMA R. ALBAN

*Don't Want
You Like
a Best Friend*

A Novel

EMMA R. ALBAN



An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

*For my parents,
thank you, for everything*

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Read on for an excerpt from You're the Problem, It's You

About the Author

Copyright

About the Publisher

Prologue

April 1857

Beth

Beth wishes Mother could just leave well enough alone. The alcohol stings against her back and she shudders as Mother blows on the spot at the bottom of her left shoulder. Beth really doesn't think one blemish would be the death of her. They're lucky she didn't break out in hives in front of the queen; one pimple can't make that much difference now.

Beth stares at her reflection in her bedroom mirror as Mother adjusts her shift. Her makeup's been done, dull brown hair coiled and wrapped artfully high on the back of her head, with careful pieces left framing her face. She looks no less a painted peacock than she did this afternoon, only now she's exhausted, and hungry, and they haven't even wrestled her into her hoop yet.

"You look wonderful," Mother says, wrapping her arms about Beth's shoulders and leaning down so their faces are level.

"*You* look wonderful," Beth corrects.

Viscountess Cordelia Demeroven always looks perfect. High, sharp cheekbones, dark piercing brown eyes, bountiful hair swept back in an elegant chignon—she's beautiful, and graceful, and (now that she's out of her mourning colors) cheerful. She's a constant social delight. Beth would rather sink straight into the floor than muster up that energy.

“You’ll be the talk of the ball,” Mother insists, gingerly nudging Beth’s head with her own. “The queen thought you beautiful, and I’ve already arranged a number of morning calls for us. All you have to do is smile.”

Beth glowers at her mother, who simply laughs and reaches around to tickle her. Beth shrieks and jumps away. Mother snickers. Twenty years and she’s never managed to curb that reflex, and Mother still revels in it any chance she gets.

“See,” Mother says, pointing at Beth’s suddenly flushed cheeks and reluctant laugh. “Beautiful. Now, let’s finish getting you ready.”

Beth sighs, but dutifully lets Mother help her into her corset, adjusting the modest padding. Beth has a naturally trim waist, but even the tightest stays can’t give her a bosom. Mother, by contrast, has ample curves beneath the lavender lace across her chest—modest, but coquettish.

She looks stunning in her purple skirts and Beth wishes for the thousandth time that she was more like her mother than her late father. They’ve divested themselves of everything else of his, but Beth’s figure isn’t something she can lock away in a trunk, out of sight, out of mind. Her round face, flat chest, and skinny frame are all his side of the family.

Beth steps into the hoop cage and helps Mother gather it to settle on her small waist. Together they adjust the hoops and then gingerly slip a petticoat over the curved steel and taping. Beth marvels at the lightness of her skirt and smiles as Mother winks. It beats the seven petticoats she would have worn last year, had she been presented as planned.

Beth steps to the side to allow Mother to slip around her and pick up the skirt from her bed. Her hoops knock the vanity chair, and it scrapes loudly against the wooden floor. Beth groans and Mother laughs.

“You’ll adjust,” she promises.

“Right. I’ll knock them all over,” Beth says, going for playful, though she can tell by Mother’s frown that she’s come off more petulant and anxious.

“You’ll have fun. You might even meet someone special tonight.”

Beth narrows her eyes. “I thought I was to go into this with a sensible head for a good match.”

“There’s nothing that says a good match can’t be a love match,” Mother says firmly.

“Only that I’ve just the four months to fall madly in love or we’re dying in a hovel,” Beth counters. Mother’s frown deepens and her eyes turn downcast. “I’m sorry. I’m tired. Let’s do the dress.”

Mother steps in front of Beth, blocking her view of the mirror so Beth’s left looking at her quietly devastated face. She really didn’t mean to bring this up, tonight. She shouldn’t beat a dead horse.

“I hope you find someone you *want* to marry. That is what I want for you.”

Beth nods, biting her cheek as Mother takes her hands. “I know.”

“And I’m very sorry. I hope you know that too,” Mother insists, ducking her head to catch Beth’s eyes.

“I know,” Beth agrees.

It’s not her mother’s fault they’re in this situation. And she’s spent almost her entire settlement as it is for their dresses. Now it’s Beth’s responsibility to make sure her mother’s sacrifices pay off. They need somewhere to live come the end of the season, and if Beth fails to find a husband—

“Let’s get you into this beautiful gown, shall we?”

Beth nods, breaking eye contact. She raises her arms so Mother can lower the skirt their housekeeper, Miss Wilson, laid out before they shooed her away to rest for the evening. She watches as Mother adjusts the fabric until it sits comfortably over her hips and then helps slide her arms through the short capped sleeves of the bodice.

She does look nice, she supposes. The blue compliments her pale skin and dark hair. Her hair can’t hold a candle to Mother’s, but she always enjoys wearing a few of her mother’s family jewels studded into her braided bun. Makes her think of when she and Mother used to get dressed up and throw their own fake balls when she was small—just the two of them alone in the country in their ball gowns while Father stayed in London for the winter season.

Mother finishes up the buttons and does the top clasp, settling the vee across Beth’s shoulders. She pushes close and wraps her arms around Beth’s waist, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

“I promise tomorrow we’ll have hotcakes for breakfast and sleep until noon, all right?”

Beth smiles and leans back into her, gripping at her hands. “All right.”

* * *

Gwen

“You’re cheating!”

“*You’re* cheating!” Gwen insists, glaring at her father through her mesh hood, as she teeters on the edge of the stone wall around the garden pond.

“You didn’t riposte,” Father argues, foil still pointed at her, waiting.

“You attacked twice,” Gwen says. She backs along the uneven stones, one arm out for balance, the other hand still brandishing her foil. “And it doesn’t become a man to quibble.”

Father snorts and jumps up onto the wall in front of her, the two of them balanced precariously. They begin to trade attacks again. Gwen advances, but then retreats as Father bears down on her. She feints, trying to throw him off, but much as it rankles, he’s got moves she can’t hope to parry.

Instead, Gwen leaps suddenly from the wall, taking off toward the house at the opposite end of the garden, cackling. Father shouts behind her and gives chase. She twirls around, ready to return his next attack, when the foil is plucked from her hand.

“Hey!” she says, spinning to find their housekeeper, Mrs. Gilpe, frowning down at her.

“En garde!” Father yells, striking her in the back.

Gwen revolves, glaring as she pulls off her helmet. “Foul,” she declares.

“Not so,” Father counters, removing his own mask. “Mrs. Gilpe is but an obstacle. A true opponent would have kept up her guard.”

“You’re a filthy cheat,” Gwen huffs, crossing her arms. Father grins at her, boyishly smug.

“You’re both ridiculous,” Mrs. Gilpe says, her voice fond but firm. Gwen turns to take in her unimpressed glare. “Get inside. The carriage will be here in an hour.”

“One more round?” they exclaim together.

Mrs. Gilpe rolls her eyes, her narrow face still hard but her lips twitching. Father glances at Gwen and the two of them put on their best pouts. But nothing will sway Mrs. Gilpe today.

“If you want to attend the Halyard Ball drenched in sweat with matted hair, be my guest, but neither of you can really afford to start the season that poorly, can you?”

Gwen looks back at Father, who maintains his pout for a moment before his shoulders slump. “Cuttingly astute as ever, Mrs. Gilpe. All right, Gwennie, go up and let the girls turn you into a young lady again.”

Gwen withers under Mrs. Gilpe’s eager look. “Couldn’t we just—”

“Mrs. Gilpe’s right,” Father says, adopting what Gwen considers his “stern father face.” “Tonight is important. We can have a rematch tomorrow.”

“Or you could admit you’re a cheating cheater and we could match again now.”

“The carriage will be here in an hour,” Father says in a credible imitation of Mrs. Gilpe, who tuts.

“Like it matters if we’re on time,” Gwen says.

“Regardless of your feelings on the matter, we must still attempt to make this season count, no matter how onerous.”

Gwen narrows her eyes at his tone. “Are you going to be a gentleman, then? Stand with all the fathers and ignore the debutantes this time?”

“I have never gone after a debutante,” Father says quickly.

“No, no, just the opera singer, the dancer, the other opera singer, the widow Loughton, the widow Chastley—”

“The Dowager Pinches,” Mrs. Gilpe puts in.

Gwen gasps. “You didn’t!”

Father goes red, turning a glare on their housekeeper. He starts backing toward the house. “That was years ago. She wasn’t the dowager then,” he says, his voice cracking.

“Lord Havenfort’s right,” Mrs. Gilpe says mildly. “The late earl’s mother hadn’t yet passed.”

“Father!” Gwen squeaks, hurrying after him. The Dowager Pinches is almost seventy.

“We waltzed a few times,” Father defends, putting up his hands before slipping through the door to the solarium.

“Sure you did,” Mrs. Gilpe says under her breath, holding the door for Gwen. “Come along.”

“Father,” Gwen protests, hovering just outside.

“It’s time,” he says, dropping his indignance. He hangs up his helmet and turns to her with a raised eyebrow.

Gwen reluctantly steps inside, tempted to keep arguing. She thinks she could wear him down, given enough time. They both hate balls, and the Halyards even more. The season is wretched, and neither is happy to be back at the London house for four months of tea parties and discomfort.

“I’ll behave if you will,” Father bargains.

Gwen tosses her helmet at him. She highly doubts that. “You get to drink and gamble. Hardly a fair trade.”

“You’re gambling,” Father says, catching the helmet. “Think of every dance as a bet. Be charming and poised and the educated young lady I’ve raised you to be, and the payout could be enormous.”

Gwen groans. “That’s horrible.”

Mrs. Gilpe tugs the door shut and nudges Gwen forward. Maybe he’ll buy Gwen another pony if she keeps stalling. She did get her own landau last year as a consolation prize for ending the season without a match, again. Better yet, he could buy her a racing horse this year when she comes back husbandless. Surely after four seasons she deserves a racing horse. They could bet on it together.

“All kidding aside, you’re a beautiful, accomplished young woman, and I’m proud of you,” Father insists, taking her hand to drag her toward the foyer.

Gwen bites back a grimace. She hates when he gets sincere like this. Makes it so much harder to argue with him. “Father,” she whines.

“Give it a real try this year, that’s all I ask,” he says. “You deserve a husband, and I know if you open yourself up to it, you can find one. Any man would be lucky to have you.”

They reach the bottom of the stairs and Gwen hesitates. “You’ll behave?”

Mrs. Gilpe steps up beside her, sighing impatiently.

“Cross my heart,” Father says, starting to smile as her defenses come down.

“Fine,” Gwen says, tugging off her gloves to whack them into Father’s chest. “Let’s get this over with,” she says to Mrs. Gilpe.

Father gives her a playful bow, and Mrs. Gilpe takes Gwen’s arm. Gwen huffs but lets Mrs. Gilpe guide her up the stairs, back to hoops and skirts and a frankly disgusting number of hairpins.

The Earl of Havenfort, Dashiell Fredric Bertram, may be the best catch of every season, dubious reputation and all, but the apple doesn’t seem to fall close to the tree. For all Father’s insistence that if she lets down her guard she’ll attract a good husband, Gwen’s not so sure. Beauty and poise and accomplishment she can fake, but deep down, she knows she’ll make a horrid wife. She’s sure they can smell it on her, like dogs do fear.

“Just remember, the Halyards have the crab puffs you like,” Mrs. Gilpe says as she marches Gwen down the second-floor hallway to her room.

Gwen laughs, startled. “That’s true. Want me to bring you some?”

Mrs. Gilpe purses her lips, reluctant to agree as they come into Gwen’s room. Her lady’s maid, Mrs. Stelm, is already waiting with the hoops and corset and makeup all laid out.

“Please do,” Mrs. Stelm says. Mrs. Gilpe throws up her hands. “What, you don’t want any?” she asks, grinning at Mrs. Gilpe, green eyes bright with mirth.

“You’re all incorrigible,” Mrs. Gilpe says, spinning Gwen around to strip her out of her fencing uniform.

“We try,” Gwen says, winking at Mrs. Stelm, who giggles in return, ignoring Mrs. Gilpe’s frown.

Gwen listens to them bicker as they dress her, transforming her from the comfort of home into the puffed-up show bird of the opening night ball. And though the pink gown, stylishly braided blond updo, and dark lashes all complement her very well, Gwen’s not sure at all that her curves and status will be enough to attract a suitor.

They certainly never have before.

Chapter One

Beth

She tripped on her entrance down the stairs. They called her name, she and Mother entered, and Beth tripped. Mother caught her and she's been swearing on all she can think of for the past ten minutes that no one noticed, but she's lying. Mothers all around the room are looking her up and down, judging, deciding, crowing.

Beth's by far one of the shortest girls here, a neck injury waiting to happen to any of their tall, stately-looking sons. Now she's clumsy on top of it. Her first night out is already a disaster.

"Darling, I need to go speak with Juliet."

"You cannot leave me here alone," Beth hisses, holding fast when Mother goes to pull away.

"I have to make the rounds and arrange our appointments," Mother whispers back. Both of them pause to smile at some acquaintance Beth can't remember, but who she knows comes from more money than they ever had when her father was alive. "You'll be fine. Just . . . mingle."

"Mother," Beth protests even as she releases Mother's arm from her death grip. She left indents with her fingers.

"I promise, you'll make friends. Just smile, chin up, shoulders back, and have a glass of wine." Beth feels her mouth fall open and quickly shuts it lest anyone think her unseemly. "One," Mother stresses. "For the nerves."

"Though fainting might not be a bad option either," Beth mumbles.

Mother frowns but Beth can tell she'd rather laugh. "One."

"One," Beth promises, noting Lady Berthshire waving Mother over. "Go, or she's going to put an eye out."

Mother leans in to kiss Beth's cheek before stepping around her and off to gather with her society friends. Beth watches, surprisingly envious, as Mother is eagerly accepted into their little circle. None of them made an effort to come see them in mourning; they're fickle friends. But at least Mother *has* friends here.

Beth stares out at the enormous Halyard ballroom, full to bursting with debutantes, mothers, and the eligible young bachelors of London's society. The vaulted ceiling and white walls with Greek columns give the space an almost endless feeling. The cacophony of voices is dizzying, and they're barely into the booze yet. It's all swirls of pastel colors, feathers, tulle, and coattails. She can't even imagine how claustrophobic it will feel once the band starts and the three hundred assembled begin to dance.

How can there even be space to dance? she wonders as she begins making her way across the room, eyeing the refreshments on the far side. She needs a glass of wine to make it through this evening, perhaps two. She can hold her liquor, despite what her mother thinks. Miss Wilson's been slipping her whisky for most of the last two years—in supervised amounts, but still.

She knows she needs to plaster on a smile, listen to some dull conversation, and begin making her own connections. Hopefully to the young gentlemen, but anyone would do. If she can make friends with any of the girls expected to marry this season, she can at least catch the eye of their castoffs. She's under no illusion that she's a prime match. A suitable one, surely, but she has no fortune to offer.

She'll bring her dowry and perhaps the small country estate, if her cousin James will deign to let them keep it once he comes of age. If her uncle, currently managing their affairs until James can inherit, is any barometer, they won't get a speck of her father's holdings. Just like he wanted.

It's so much less than almost any other lady in the room can offer. And on top of that Beth's short, clumsy, and unknown. Still, she's pretty enough, and Mother thinks she's delightful.

Beth wrinkles her nose, glancing up at the ceiling. She's really in a pitiful state if her mother is the only reference she can give for her charms. Father never thought much of her, and she barely got to know her uncle on his brief visit some ten years ago. She's never even met Cousin James.

Miss Wilson loves her. But who here would care about what their housekeeper has to say?

Beth takes a deep breath and forces herself to slow down, ambling rather than charging across the room, looking around for a friendly face. Debutantes and young gentlemen abound, but none of them seems the least bit approachable, and she's getting appraising looks from most of the

clusters of friends. An oddity, daughter of the late Viscount Demeroven, kept locked away in the country with her . . . *energetic* mother.

Beth searches for an opening, any opening, but only manages to catch the eye of a graying older gentleman who gazes back at her with distinct interest. Beth breaks eye contact, trying to squeeze by a gaggle of mothers, knocking into their hoops with muttered apologies. She was looking for friends, not a man her late father's age. A man who definitely shouldn't be seeking out a wife of just twenty, much less one like Beth, who rarely looks her age, even made up as she is.

But try as she might, there's no escape. She's penned in by the groups of unfriendly guests. Her damn hoopskirt makes slinking away thoroughly impossible. The gentleman approaches her with what she assumes is his most winning smile.

It's slightly sinister.

"Miss Demeroven, isn't it?" the gentleman says, holding out his hand.

Beth hesitates just for a moment, reluctant to touch him, but propriety wins out. She didn't spend the last two years cosseted away with Mother for nothing.

"Yes," she says, extending her hand and clenching her jaw as he raises it to his lips for an uncomfortably long kiss.

"I'm Lord Psoris, a friend of your father's. A shame he couldn't be here. I know how proud of you he would be," he says, his voice rough and loud as he slowly releases her hand.

She pulls it back to her stomach as quickly as is polite. Father thought the entire idea of coming out was wasteful—uneager to spend his investment money on her dresses and activities. He'd planned to marry her off to an old friend. Oh, God, is it possible Lord Psoris is that friend?

Father wouldn't have blinked an eye. Mother was Beth's age when he married her, and he was twenty years' her senior then. But Lord Psoris is easily forty years older than Beth now. And his leer is anything but chivalrous.

"My condolences," he continues when Beth realizes she hasn't managed to find words.

"Thank you," she forces out, glancing around for salvation, but there's none to find. She's stuck here. "Have you been in town for the winter?"

"I have, I have. Parliament and some festivities, though of course we all eagerly await the season getting underway." Beth nods, taking a small step back as he advances. "I would be honored to have your first dance."

Beth bumps into the gentleman behind her as Psoris bears down on her. She squeaks, stumbling and trying to keep her hoop from bellling outward.

The man behind her turns and reaches for her elbow. Horribly embarrassed, she looks up at the tall, blond gentleman, her cheeks on fire. He glances from her to Lord Psoris, frowning.

“My apologies,” she says meekly. What a little twit he must think her. “Felt a little faint.”

“Then we must absolutely get you a drink. Excuse me, gentlemen,” a young woman says, stepping out from behind the blond gentleman as if appearing from thin air.

The woman takes Beth’s arm and effortlessly maneuvers them around the blond gentleman and away from the affronted Lord Psoris. They’re yards away before Psoris can even splutter.

“He’s a cad,” the woman says, grinning at Beth, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief. Her hair is just as white blond as the tall gentleman’s was, and there’s a similar sharpness to their jaws and the broadness of their shoulders. “Father and I make rather a sport of saving young debs from his clutches. He caught you in his sights immediately, didn’t he?”

Beth wilts, leaning into her savior. “Entirely. And there are so many people, I couldn’t get away.”

“Lucky you backed into us. Lady Guinevere Bertram. Gwen,” she adds, squeezing Beth’s arm against her side.

“Miss Demeroven. Elizabeth—Beth.”

Gwen gives her an impressed look. “The prodigal daughter returns. You’ll be popular.”

“I’m not sure prodigal is really appropriate,” Beth says, shaking her head.

“Oh, but you could play the part wonderfully. You’ve got the skin and the hair—perfect looks for a mysterious, triumphant season entrance. Pastel suits you, but I think you’d be captivating in something red. The right attitude, some wine, we could make an intrigue of you yet. Who doesn’t love intrigue?”

Beth simply blinks up at her, allowing this strange, spirited woman to guide her around the room. Beth has no idea where they’re going, or how they’re not causing some sort of domino crash as they plough through people, but Gwen doesn’t seem to worry. She walks with her head held high, smiling and nodding to people with an ease and grace Beth couldn’t ever match.

“Here,” Gwen says as they finally reach the refreshments.

Beth takes a glass of sweet wine gratefully. It’s cool and mellow, with just the lightest taste of alcohol—though from the warmth at the back of her neck, there’s plenty of alcohol in it. Beth takes another sip, desperate to relax

even a little. Her run-in with Lord Psoris has put her on edge. Is this what it's like—overbearing men leaning over you when you can't get away?

"They get better," Gwen says, pulling Beth from her bleak perusal of the room. She takes Beth's elbow again and moves her toward the other side of the floor, away from where couples seem to be linking up for the first dance.

Beth can see Lord Psoris looking for her at the far end and curls closer to Gwen, who just laughs and nudges her. "You can always say no, you know."

"And risk insulting one of my father's oldest friends on the first night?" Beth says, her fingers worrying into her skirts. She wishes she'd brought a fan now, just for something to do with her hands.

"No one would begrudge you wanting to find someone closer to your age."

"I suppose," Beth says, glancing up at Gwen, who nods to their left.

Beth leans around her and notices a tall, gangly young man standing alone and looking as uncomfortable as she feels. "Him?"

Beth wrinkles her nose. "He's very thin, isn't he? And broody?"

Gwen purses her lips to keep from laughing. "Fair. All right, well, we should find you a good first dance. Come here."

She leads Beth over to the wall and together they sidle back until they're resting against it, out of the fray. Their skirts bump together and Beth feels her shoulders start to come down. She notices her mother across the room, still held in a circle of society mothers and looking bored to tears. Mother glances around and their eyes meet. Beth leans into Gwen to show she's managed to find at least one person to talk to, and Mother smiles, giving her a little nod before turning back to more gossip.

"What about him?" Gwen asks.

Beth follows her gaze to an enormous young man with wide shoulders, at least six feet tall. She turns to Gwen, incredulous.

"What?"

"How would that even work?" Beth asks, grinning as Gwen cackles.

A few heads turn and they both quiet down, snickering as they take sips of their wine. Gwen has a lovely laugh and such a bright, open face. Instantly captivating, really. Beth is surprised she's not on the floor already.

"He looks nice," Beth says, gesturing discreetly to a tall fellow with a trim beard and a prominent chin.

"Go say hello," Gwen says.

"For you," Beth corrects. "His height, your hair, you'd have lovely children." Gwen snorts. "What?"

"Well, his mother thinks I'm a menace, so that ship has sailed. And it's just as likely our children would be hairy as anything and tiny. His father's rather short, and my late mother had copious very dark hair."

“Hmm,” Beth offers, trying to parse it all. “You’ve met then?”

“Two seasons ago we went on a few outings. It didn’t end well,” Gwen says, shrugging.

“Two seasons ago?”

“This is my fourth,” Gwen says, meeting her eyes with a brash grin that’s cracking at the edges. “I think if I make it to next season without a husband, I get a medal.”

Beth allows herself to laugh along. Four seasons, she can’t even imagine. And without a mother too. How trying that must be. “Maybe they just give you some land and let you run free.”

“Wouldn’t that be something,” Gwen says. “Big plot of land, nothing to do but read and eat.”

“Draw,” Beth says.

“Paint. Swim.”

“Oh, do you get a lake, or is that only if you make it to six?” Beth asks.

Gwen nudges her with her hip—at least, Beth assumes so from the way her skirts move. “If I make it to seven, I think maybe I get my own castle.”

“Oh, well, you should hold out for that, then,” Beth says. “Queen of your own castle surely beats a marriage to him.” She gestures with her empty glass toward a scrawny young man with a patchy beard who’s asking an equally awkward young lady to dance.

“That’s Albie’s younger brother, Bobby. Didn’t think he’d be out this year,” Gwen says with a frown. “Shame, he’s a nice kid. Another few years, he’d probably be a catch.”

“Albie?”

“Mr. Mason, my mother’s elder nephew. If I spot him, I’ll introduce you. Nice chap. Obnoxious most of the time, but a good lad.”

“Lady Gwen!”

Beth turns, following Gwen’s gaze. A young lady in a striking yellow gown hurries up to them, dragging over another young woman in blue. Both of them hold empty glasses of champagne, their cheeks pink.

“We’ve been looking for you for ages,” the woman in yellow says, a pout on her round face. She looks Gwen over. “You don’t have them!”

“Didn’t have time,” Gwen says with an apologetic shrug. She doesn’t look very sorry for whatever’s missing, Beth thinks, though both women look rather put out. “This is the Honorable Elizabeth Demeroven. Miss Demeroven, this is Lady Meredith and Lady Annabeth.”

“A pleasure,” Beth says, dipping in a curtsy.

Lady Meredith and Lady Annabeth curtsy with pleasant smiles before looking back at Gwen expectantly.

“Who’s winning?” Gwen asks.

“We don’t have the cards,” Lady Meredith says indignantly.

“So?”

The women exchange a look before Lady Meredith grins. “I’ve spotted five heirs and two spares.”

“I’ve only got three, but I swear it would have been four if I could have remembered the gray skinny one’s name,” Lady Annabeth says.

“Oh, Lord Frightan?”

“Lord Frightan!” the girls exclaim.

“That’s four for me then. Tied with Eloise. We’re about to sneak out to the gardens and meet up with the gents, do you want to join us?” Lady Annabeth asks.

Beth tightens her shoulders, preparing to lose her new acquaintance. How can she possibly compete with these glamorous ladies?

“I’m going to give Miss Demeroven the lay of the land tonight, but I’ll catch the next game,” Gwen says easily. Lady Meredith opens her mouth. “It’s no real challenge if you have all the names on the cards, is it?” Lady Meredith and Lady Annabeth frown. “Father almost grounded me last year.”

“Only because you followed him around to get all the heirs,” Lady Annabeth says.

Gwen shrugs playfully. “Let me know who wins.”

Lady Meredith rolls her eyes and Lady Annabeth winks before they curtsy and head for the back of the hall, presumably on their way to the gardens.

“You don’t need to stay,” Beth says perfunctorily, though she’s rather sure if Gwen abandons her now she might hide in the washroom for the rest of the night.

“Honestly, if Father catches me playing Spot-the-Scion again, he really might confiscate my pin money.”

“Spot-the—”

“Have to have fun at these things somehow,” Gwen says with a shrug. “I usually make cards, but I couldn’t be bothered this year.”

“Cards?”

“To pin to the back of the dance cards. I usually put together a list. First one to spot them all gets bragging rights for the season. A little awkward if you end up dancing with one of the scions, but still,” she says, eyes twinkling.

Beth considers her new, slightly eccentric friend. She has annual party games to play with numerous friends. Presumably some of them must be male, of marriageable age, and available. And yet here she is, four seasons deep, and clearly no interest in being on the floor. But surely a woman as stunning and charismatic as Gwen must have options.