

HIS VIRGIN WIDOW

RAKES OF MAYFAIR BOOK ONE

MELINDA BARRON

BLUSHING BOOKS

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London

Fall 1885

“**T**here she is, Charlotte Hudson, a widow *and* a virgin.” The large woman held a fan in front of her face and tittered. I thought I was going to slap her. If she was going to talk about me, the least she could do was make sure I didn’t hear her.

“Rumor has it she killed her husband on their wedding day.” The other woman sitting next to her was small and mousy looking. My mourning had been over for four days and I had made sure to attend Lord Essex’s party because I knew half the ton would attend. And I’d made sure to wear something that would catch everyone’s attention.

My red satin dress was low cut and very frilly. Let the old hens gossip. All I wanted was to be in something besides black.

The first woman spoke again. “Look at that dress. Husband

hunting again, I would say. And barely out of mourning. Barnard left her money, quite a bit of it I hear. But I'm sure she wants more. Perhaps she should choose an old husband who is about to die. Then she could have his house and blunt and wouldn't have to worry about living with her first husband's father anymore. She'll just need to be sure she makes it to the marriage bed before she kills off this one."

I turned and stared at her, recognizing Lady Chesterfield. "You're right, milady, I'm looking again. But I want someone young, not someone old. Do you have someone in mind? Perhaps your son. I hear he's looking for a young virgin. Should I offer myself?" My voice was high and several people in the vicinity turned to stare.

Several of the gentlemen laughed boldly and the woman I was addressing gave me an evil stare. "You little hussy, you don't deserve to be here. And you stay away from my son!"

I returned the stare. "Perhaps I don't, but Lord Essex invited me just the same. Perhaps I should ask him to seat me next to your son at dinner. His name is Tarleton, correct? I wonder, though, if he would know what to do with a virgin. Several stories I have heard indicate otherwise."

Lady Chesterfield stood, her bulk quivering with indignation. "I shall have you removed at once you insolent little tramp. Murderess, that is what you are!" She pointed her finger at me and the laughing that had taken place at my comments about Tarleton Tupin, the future Lord Chesterfield, died down.

"I find it hard to see how I can be a virgin and a tramp at the same time," I said, glaring at her. I started to add more to the statement, but I felt a hand on my elbow, squeezing gently and looked up to see Lord Essex staring at me. Our host had mischief in his eyes as he shook his head at me, indicating I should stay quiet.

"Ladies, ladies," he said softly. A crowd had gathered to see

what would happen next. "It is early in the evening. I believe that if we are to have a disagreement it should come after dinner. Lady Chesterfield, as much as I enjoy your company I would also request that you refrain from calling my guests murderers. It makes me most unhappy."

Lady Chesterfield turned her glare from me and smiled up at Lord Essex's handsome face. "Do forgive me, milord. I lost my temper."

She turned and glared at me again.

"I think, Lady Chesterfield, that the person who deserves an apology here is Mrs. Hudson," Lord Essex's voice was like melted chocolate. "After all, she is the one who had been branded a murderess with no evidence to support the idea."

Lady Chesterfield looked as if she would gag on the words, but she uttered an apology, which I accepted. Then her friend took her by the arm and led her away. The crowd was dispersing. I knew they were talking about the incident and that by morning it would be in every gossip sheet in London. After all, my husband *had* died on our wedding day, after falling from the rooftop of his father's home. And I had been seen on the roof, talking to Bernard before he died. His father was now my guardian, as I had no other relatives.

I looked up at Lord Essex. He was a very handsome man, about thirty-five years of age, muscular with dark hair and eyes. My friend Layla said he was the very essence of the phrase 'tall, dark and handsome'. Seeing him now, I realized she was right.

"Forgive me, milord," I whispered softly. "I will gather my wrap and take my leave. Perhaps you could tell my friend Layla, Lady Thomas, where I have gone?"

Lord Essex's face broke into a large grin. "On the contrary, Mrs. Hudson, this little incident will liven up what has been a rather dull affair. You will not leave. You will stay. And you will enjoy

yourself at dinner and at the dancing afterwards. If you do not save me a dance I will be most unhappy.”

He took my hand and kissed it gently, smiling at me as he did so. And then he was gone. I watched him walk up to two of his well-known friends, Lord Beaton and Lord Cannonberry. They put their heads together and began talking animatedly. Layla appeared at my shoulder, laughing as she tried to get my attention.

“My goodness, I can’t believe you have caused such a fuss on your first night back in society.” She followed my eyes to the trio of Lords standing in the center of the room. “Isn’t he handsome? I think you should set your cap for him. He obviously fancies you, inviting you to his ball, knowing the exact day that your mourning was over. That means he’s kept track of the time. Perhaps he wants the virgin widow in his bed.”

I laughed and turned to look at Layla. She looked stunning this evening in a blue satin gown. She reached up and tucked back one of my dark curls and I shook my head. “He is rather handsome, but I think he is a bit out of my league. I mean really, I’m the daughter, and widow of a merchant, a well-known merchant whose family moves in society, but a merchant nonetheless. I don’t see Lord Essex inviting me to his bed.”

Layla smiled. She had landed a Lord during her second season and recently presented him with a son. “And would you go to his bed? Would you give yourself to the handsome Lord?”

“Of course not,” I whispered, shaking my head. “I will go to my wedding night a virgin.”

Layla laughed again. “I have news for you, Charlotte. You’ve already had your wedding night and you’re still a virgin. I think you should find a way to move out of the Hudson home and live on the money Barnard left you. Surely someone, perhaps Lord Essex, could help you do that. And then invite him to your bed. You won’t regret it.”

I was staring at Lord Essex as he talked to his two friends. All

three were very handsome. Lord Essex was as dark and handsome as his friends were blond and handsome. I stared at Lord Essex again. I wondered what it would be like to lie under him, or any man for that matter. His hands were large, and I thought about them caressing my breasts, slipping between my thighs. I wondered what a man looked like without his clothing on.

As if he could sense what I was thinking, Lord Essex turned and looked at me, smiling, a seductive twinkle in his eyes. We locked eyes for a moment and I felt my breath catch in my chest. Then he smiled and turned, nodding at Lord Cannonberry, who grinned. They left the room together.

Layla leaned in closer to me and whispered in my ear. "Do it, Charlotte, do it. Think about it. You're twenty-three years old and still a virgin. You've spent the last year in mourning. I'm sure that Lord Essex would gladly take you to his bed. The man obviously wants you. I'll cover for you during your trysts."

I shook my head at her and smiled. "I couldn't possibly, Layla. What would he want with a silly little virgin like me? I'm sure he has many willing women to warm his bed."

I tried to change the subject. "I hope they have me sitting near you during dinner. I don't think I can stand it if we're not. One can only be called a murderess so many times during a day."

We laughed and moved into the main room. Then Layla's husband came to claim her, smiling at me and kissing me on the cheek, and I was alone again. The guests were staring at me, turning their backs and talking low. I had that effect on people. My father, Joshua Martin, was partners with Raymond Hudson, my late husband's father. They had matched us to keep the business in the family. My father had died two months before Barnard and I had married.

After Barnard died, I'd done the only thing I knew to do. I moved in with Raymond Hudson and his wife, Sarah. The whispers of murder had started two days after Barnard's death. Several

people said they'd seen me on the roof before Barnard had fallen. It was true, but he had been alive when I left. When the actual incident occurred, I'd been downstairs with Sarah, making sure the wedding dinner was ready to be served.

But the ton had ignored Sarah's denials, saying she would have protected me since I was married to her son. I had been branded a murderess. The authorities had not seen fit to charge me, but during my mourning period I had been shunned. No one except Layla showed up for tea, when someone met me out shopping they'd turned their backs. Even Sarah and Raymond had begun to distance themselves from me, even though I lived in their home.

When the invitation to Lord Essex's ball had arrived, I'd been shocked. I couldn't believe he was inviting me to what was one of the biggest events of the season. Sarah told me I couldn't attend, because of my mourning. I'd pointed out to her that my mourning period would be over four days before the ball. Then I'd ordered a red dress that was so low cut my breasts were barely covered and taken the family carriage, while Sarah and Raymond had declined to attend.

I stood near a group of women and thought about joining their conversation. Two were friends of mine from school, Rachel Adams, now a mother of three, and Amanda Williams, a new bride. Both turned their backs on me without saying a word.

I looked around for the refreshment table, thinking a drink of lemonade would improve my mood. I moved to the table where a handsome young man about my age handed me a cup. Before I could find out his name his mother came and snatched him away, sending me a look that could have melted ice.

I sipped my lemonade and made my way around the room. No one had made an attempt to talk with me. I stood alone for a few moments and then decided that maybe Sarah was right. I shouldn't have come. I'd caused a ruckus, and Layla was busy with her husband and his friends.

I looked around for Lord Essex, planning on giving him my regrets and taking my leave. I couldn't find him. I sat down my cup and left the room. The house was enormous, and I wondered where he might be. He had stood up for me, but I was sure Layla was wrong. He was only being polite to his guest. He didn't have designs on me.

I moved down the hallway and looked at the paintings on the wall. Scenes of fox hunting and landscapes. I didn't recognize any of the artists, but the paintings were well done.

I took another right down a corridor and realized that the crowd had thinned. In the main hallway people had been mulling around me, trying to ignore me. Now, I was alone. I continued looking at the paintings. The doors were shut and dark underneath, except for one room at the end of the hall. A light was visible under the doorway.

I wondered if Lord Essex was in the room and that's why lamps had been lit inside. I knocked and received no answer. I knocked again and turned the handle. The door opened inward to reveal a library. It was warm and cozy, a large table with several chairs around it lined the far wall. Two of the other walls were lined with books. A warm, toasty blaze crackled in the fireplace. I stepped inside. I loved to read. It was a great passion of mine that my father had indulged. Several large wingback chairs were placed around the room. The Persian carpets looked expensive and gave the room an exotic feeling.

I stopped in the doorway. I could go inside and invade Lord Essex's privacy, or I could go back to the main room and be ignored, listening to people brand me a murderess. I stepped inside and closed the door.

There was a large mirror nestled in between the bookshelves on the far wall. I stared at my reflection. The dress I was wearing was beautiful, and the dressmaker had made it perfectly. It conformed to my curves. Sarah said I was too plump, but I disagreed. My breasts

were large and full, as were my hips. My corset held in my waist, as men liked. My dark hair was piled on top of my head, little ringlets coming down the sides. I knew I looked lovely. It was too bad no man wanted me because of the nasty rumors that were making the rounds.

I turned around and around, staring at my reflection. Perhaps I should do as Layla suggested. If I propositioned Lord Essex would he turn me down, laugh at a silly little girl who no longer wanted the burden of her maidenhead? Layla said the initial penetration was painful. I wondered how painful. I wondered what it would feel like. Layla had tried to describe it but failed.

“You feel very... well... very full.” The words hadn’t inspired me with a desire to have a man between my thighs, until now.

I went to the near wall and ran my fingers down the leather spines of the books. They were absolutely beautiful, and very expensive. I made my way around, admiring the books and running my hands along the cool wood of the beautifully polished table. I knew that Lord Essex was rich, but this room was beyond anything I had ever seen.

I took a few of the books off the shelves and sat down in the chair. Perhaps I wouldn’t leave, I thought. Perhaps I would just disappear for a while. Give everyone something to talk about. Make them think I was trysting with someone in the gardens. Add a bit of spice to the gossip. Leaving was too much like running away. I was never one to run away. Besides, I thought, enough gossip and Raymond might set me up in a house of my own. I liked that idea.

I opened one of the books and began to read. I didn’t recognize the author, but the book was an adventure story, of treasure lost and found. I was just finishing the first chapter when a noise at the doorway broke my attention span. Someone was coming in. I realized that I shouldn’t be here, that I shouldn’t have made myself at home in Lord Essex’s library.

I grabbed the book and ran to the back of the room, crouching behind one of the chairs. Just as I settled myself down the door opened fully and Lord Essex and Lord Beaton stepped inside. I tried to control my breathing. My palms were sweating. Lord Essex had defended me with Lady Chesterfield, but would he do so when he caught me in his private rooms?

They were talking but I couldn't hear exactly what they were saying. Moments later the door opened again. I peeked around the chair and saw Amelia Turnston, a young widow, enter just ahead of Lord Cannonberry.

Lord Cannonberry shut the door and Lord Essex's voice boomed out.

"You may kneel in the center of the rug, Amelia." I gasped, and then quickly covered my mouth, afraid my gasp had been heard. When no one came my way, I looked out again. Amelia Turnston was kneeling in the center of the room, her hands clasped behind her back, her head bowed.

The three Lords were standing around her in a semi-circle; all three had stern looks on their faces.

"You've broken the rules of The Club, Amelia," Lord Essex said. "Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

Amelia's voice was low. "No milords, I do not. Please forgive me for my indiscretion. Please punish me as you see fit."

I stared at the scene in front of me. The Club? What Club? And punish her? I knew I should stand and make myself known, let them know I was there. But I couldn't. All I could do was stare at Amelia as she knelt, her head bowed.

"Very well, Amelia," Lord Essex said, his voice stern. "Go and stand in front of the table."

He made his way toward a cupboard near the far wall where I was hiding. I wondered if he would see me. I crouched down lower, feeling the hard ends of my corset digging into my stomach.

The uncomfortable feeling caused me to gasp again and I thought I saw Lord Essex glance my way.

But he did not come over. Instead he smiled and then pulled out a drawer, taking out a long, thin strap of leather. I realized at that point what was happening. They were going to spank Amelia with the leather. I looked toward Amelia. She was bent over the table. Lord Beaton was pulling up her skirts to reveal her rear end. Lord Cannonberry was taking hold of her drawers and pulling them down. Her bum was now naked.

Lord Essex walked up behind her. "Hands above your head, Amelia."

I was on my knees now, still hidden behind the chair, but I had a perfect view. Amelia raised her arms above her head, her hands flat on the table. I was in shock, I knew I should cry out, stop this before it went any further. But I was glued to the spot. I wanted to see what was going to happen next.

Amelia's soft voice was barely audible. "Please forgive me, milords. I'm sorry for my indiscretion. I pray you, show me my place."

The leather made a swishing noise as it sailed through the air and landed on Amelia's bare bum. She moaned softly. "Thank you, milord for showing me my place. May I have more correction, please?"

The leather landed again and again and again. Each time I heard it sail through the air my breath caught in my throat, as if the leather would land on my bum. After each swat Amelia thanked Lord Essex and asked for 'more correction'. After a few minutes, Lord Essex handed the leather to Lord Cannonberry, who continued the spanking. After a few more minutes, he handed the strap to Lord Beaton, who took his place. I could hear the tears in Amelia's voice. She was thanking them and then begging for more correction in the same breath, her crying very noticeable.

I wanted to jump up and yell for them to stop. I wanted to scream and run from the room, telling every person in the drawing room that a woman was being whipped in the library. But I didn't. I knelt and watched. The sounds of the leather and of Amelia's moans were causing my belly to clinch. They were also causing a queer feeling in my quim. It quivered with each moan. I stared at Lord Essex. He was standing off to the side, watching his friends whip the young widow. I wondered what it felt like, what Amelia was feeling.

When Lord Beaton finished the spanking, the room was silent except for Amelia's soft sobs. I could hear myself breathing heavily. I was fascinated. She seemed to love what they were doing to her but why, I wondered, were they whipping her? What gave them the right? Why did she permit it?

There was silence and I saw Lord Beaton hand the strap to Lord Essex. He took it and lightly began to caress Amelia's rear, which had bright splashes of red spread across it.

"What is the first rule of The Club, Amelia?" Lord Beaton asked, his voice stern.

"Milords are in charge," she whispered. "Their word is law."

"And why were you punished today?" Lord Cannonberry's voice held the same sternness.

"For breaking the rules," Amelia said. "I disobeyed an order from Lord Beaton today."

"And what order was that?" Lord Essex asked.

"Lord Beaton ordered me to his home for a spanking today, and I couldn't make the appointment." Her voice was soft. "Please milords, forgive me. Don't make me leave the Club. I couldn't get away from my family. I didn't mean to miss the appointment. Please forgive me. It won't happen again."

I watched as the three of them exchanged glances. Lord Essex nodded. "Very well Amelia, we will give you one more chance. You will receive ten more strokes from each of us now. Then you will

come to Lord Beaton's home at precisely two tomorrow. Do not be late. Do not miss the appointment. You will take whatever punishment Lord Beaton gives you. Do I make myself clear?"

Amelia sniffled. "Yes, milord, I will do as you say."

I listened as the swats were delivered, one right after the other. Amelia's moans were growing louder.

"Please, milords, please, I need release." Her voice was loud, her tone pleading.

"Release is for good little girls," Lord Beaton said. "Perhaps I will allow it tomorrow, but not tonight."

The swats ended, and Lord Essex's voice rang out. "You are to make yourself available to any member of The Club when they ask Amelia, is that clear?"

"Yes, Lord Essex, it's very clear. Thank you for the correction, milords."

"Very well," Lord Cannonberry said. "We'll see if you've learned your lesson tomorrow. You may stand now."

I watched as she stood, her legs wobbly. Lord Cannonberry supported her on one side, Lord Beaton on the other. Both reached up and gently pushed hair away from her face. Lord Essex moved in behind her and talked softly in her ear. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but she was sighing with pleasure, showing that she enjoyed whatever it was he'd whispered.

Essex then took the leather strap and stepped back. I slipped back down behind the chair. Cannonberry and Beaton were helping Amelia straighten her skirts and fix her hair. The four of them stood in the center of the room and talked for a few moments.

I heard the door open and shut. I leaned my head against the back of the chair, trying to catch my breath. I had not been discovered, amazingly enough. I started to rise when I heard footsteps coming across the room. Lord Essex had the leather strap in his

hands. He crossed the room and sat down in the chair I was hiding behind.

“You may come out now, Mrs. Hudson,” he said sternly. I stood up and he turned around to face me.

“My, my, my, what a naughty little girl you are,” he said, laughter in his voice. “Whatever am I going to do with you?”