

How to Marry a Beast
The Marriage Broker, Book One

By

Viola Morne

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CHAPTER ONE

London, 1812

A country Gentleman in comfortable circumstances seeks a young Lady of good Breeding, Health and Appearance, with a view to Matrimony. Qualified Applicants should present themselves at No. 15, Russell Square, on Tuesday next at ten a.m. for the purpose of an Interview.

Freya Carr circled the advertisement with the stub of a pencil. It was the most promising one so far. She'd like to live in the country, away from the noise and reek of London. If only she didn't have to choose her new husband from the newspaper. Freya sighed, and pinched her nose.

But beggars couldn't be choosers, and Freya was perilously close to being the former. Her little room, tucked under the attics in a down-at-the-heels corner of Soho, was frigid on this cold March morning. Coal was dear, and she'd chosen to sling a blanket over her shoulders, rather than put another precious piece on her meager fire.

Freya picked up the newspaper again.

A Gentleman wishes to form an Attachment with some agreeable and affectionate young Woman, who can dispense with the Marriage Ceremony. As this Gentleman will afford her Comfort and Happiness, in return...

Why buy the cow, when you can get the milk for free? Freya kept on reading.

A noble Frenchman, of title, connected with highest families in France, but without means, wishes to marry lady or widow of property...

Well, Freya didn't have property, and she definitely didn't need a penniless husband, no matter how noble he was.

A Widower, with a handsome Family comprised of ten Children, seeks a young and energetic Lady to marry, who will provide him with Comfort and act as Mother to his Progeny. The Gentleman in question is willing to provide his new Help Meet with Children of her own...

Not if she was starving in the street.

A familiar set of footsteps clattered on the stairs outside the garret.

"Come in, Hestia."

Her older sister stuck her head around the door. Her bright brown gaze beneath the fur hood increased her resemblance to a friendly squirrel. "Have you time for a chat, dearest?"

"Always, love."

Hestia bustled inside, cheerful as ever. She carried a basket over one arm, from which wafted the mouth-watering aroma of fresh-baked bread.

“Darling, you shouldn’t have,” Freya scolded her gently. “I know you can’t spare it. You have enough to bear, without another mouth to feed.”

While Freya was away on the continent, her parents had continued to produce offspring at an alarming rate, which finally left her mother an invalid. The small house the family currently occupied was filled to bursting with six of her brothers and sisters, the other two having married and moved into lodgings nearby.

Her eldest sister, Hestia, ran the household while her father, a scholar who occasionally found work as a tutor, retired to his study amid heaps of books, and let his household struggle on without him. Hestia worked wonders keeping the children fed and clothed, nursing her mother, and keeping the household accounts.

Hestia pressed her hand affectionately. “Freya, you are family, and it’s a rare treat to have you close enough to visit. You were always hankering after the next adventure. No wonder life as an army wife suited you so well.”

Freya blinked away the sudden tears that blurred her vision. Her sister’s words brought back the cheerful bustle of the army encampments, the thrill of traveling to new places and meeting new people. And her darling Kit. How she missed him still, his eyes sparkling with excitement as he embarked on some new exploit.

Hestia’s voice softened. “I’m sorry, Freya. That was thoughtless of me. I know you must miss Kit.”

“Every day, but that part of my life is over.”

When Freya had returned home, with only a small pension, she realized she couldn’t become another burden for her sister to bear. Freya had tried to help out, though her domestic accomplishments were more suited to an army camp than a London household. Freya’s lack of conventional skills was another hurdle to overcome. Not many employers were looking for a young woman who could drive a wagon, ride a donkey over a perilous mountain trail, or elude a troop of French soldiers.

Then one day, while poring over the help wanted notices, Freya’s attention had wandered over to the personal columns. To her astonishment, she read through a great number of advertisements posted by men looking for wives. She had been a wife; what she needed was a home. Freya started hunting for a husband.

Hestia snatched the paper from Freya. “What on earth are you staring at with such concentration?” She scanned the circled advertisement. Her jaw dropped. “Freya! What are you thinking of? You’re seeking a husband in the newspaper!”

Freya flushed, and grabbed back the paper. “I have to do something to support myself. I don’t have any other training.”

Hestia grimaced. “But marriage?”

“Haven’t you ever wanted to marry, Hestia? To have a husband and family of your own?”

Her sister wrinkled her nose. “Heavens, no! After seeing Mama suffer through ten children, three miscarriages, and a still birth, I would never want to go through that. I’m very

happy caring for our own family.”

She truly was, Freya realized. Hestia enjoyed coaxing Mama and gently bullying Papa, while skillfully handling the household reins.

“I’m sorry you don’t approve, but I have to try something.”

Hestia pursed her lips for a moment before she relented. “Very well, Freya, just be careful. Now, what are you going to wear for your interview?”

Number 15, Russell Square was a tall, narrow house near the British Museum. A maidservant showed Freya into a small room lined with empty chairs. She felt a surge of hope. Perhaps there hadn’t been many other applicants. Freya waited for a quarter of an hour until the maid came back to fetch her. They climbed the stairs to the first floor, where the maid knocked at a closed door off the landing.

“Mrs. Carr to see you, Mrs. Pringle.”

Freya was ushered into a well-appointed room with large windows overlooking the street below.

The woman behind the desk rose to offer her hand.

“Thank you for coming, Mrs. Carr. My name is Minerva Pringle, and this is Oliver, my associate.”

A tall dark man turned from the window to nod at her. Freya started. She hadn’t even seen him. Oliver’s long black hair was tied at the nape of his neck, framing a striking countenance. He looked...dangerous.

“Please be seated.”

Freya forced a nervous smile, and sat down on the plain wooden chair indicated. She smoothed her gloves over her fingers. The tip of one finger poked through a hole in the fabric.

Mrs. Pringle was a red-haired Amazon in a blue silk dress. She resumed her chair, and donned a pair of spectacles before rifling through a file of papers on the desk in front of her. Finally, she closed the file and peered at Freya over the top of her spectacles.

“Your given name is Freya? Rather unusual.”

“My father is a scholar. He was inspired by mythology when it came to naming his children. I have sisters called Hestia and Athena, and a brother named Apollo. My second cousin, who is my father’s godchild, he saddled with the name of Thor.”

“Good heavens. And is second cousin Thor a worthy namesake for the god of thunder?”

“Hardly, though he does have ginger hair. When last we met, Thor was a beanpole with stooped shoulders. He is an archaeologist.”

“How fascinating. What is his specialty?”

“Egyptian monuments, though at present he lacks a patron to sponsor his digs.”

Mrs. Pringle pulled a fresh sheet of paper towards her. She dipped her pen in an inkwell, and made a note. Then she removed her spectacles, and threw them down on the desk.

“You are obviously familiar with the advertisement that was placed in the *Times*, or you would not be here. Tell me, Mrs. Carr, what qualifications do you possess that would make you suitable for the position?”

Freya licked her dry lips. She glanced at Oliver who still stood by the window, listening to their conversation without comment. Evidently, the small talk was over. “Well, as a widow I am accustomed to the...vagaries of the state of matrimony, to be prepared to compromise, and to accommodate one’s partner, with a view to his happiness.”

Mrs. Pringle raised a single, well-shaped brow. “I am glad to hear it. However, as the ‘partner’ in this particular instance is peculiarly unsuited by both temperament and class to compromise and accommodation, I fear that your own grasp of these principles may be stretched beyond a reasonable capacity.”

Freya blinked. “Dear me, the gentleman in question sounds quite formidable.”

“He is.” Mrs. Pringle selected a sheet filled with tightly written script from the file. “The gentleman was wounded in the war. He lost an eye, and walks with a pronounced limp. Are you quite sure you are still interested in the position?”

She hesitated. “He is not violent, is he?”

Mrs. Pringle eyed her approvingly. “A sensible question. No, he remains a gentleman. But the severity of his injuries has left his temper rather...uncertain. He is in need of a wife, however, and has agreed to wed, if he feels you will suit. I should inform you that there have been other applicants. The purpose of this interview is to ascertain whom, if any of the young women I interview, will be the best match for the gentleman in question.”

Of course, there would be other applicants. Other women, with little means of support and no other opportunity to form an eligible connection.

“I have extensive experience with nursing the wounded. The gentleman’s injuries would not discomfit me.”

“What kind of experience?” Oliver asked her.

“I was married to a soldier for eight years. I followed the drum, from England to Portugal and Spain. There is not much that would shock me.”

Mrs. Pringle drummed her fingers on the desk. “I see. That is helpful, of course. Tell me, Mrs. Carr, why did you decide to answer my advertisement?”

Freya spread her hands. “I have no employable skills, my own family is in need, and I have no means to support myself. My husband’s pension is very small, and I share it with his widowed mother. That is my situation.”

Mrs. Pringle nodded. “Your frankness is appreciated.” She stood, and offered a manicured hand. “Thank you for coming in, Mrs. Carr. I will write you shortly to inform you of my decision. You realize that is but the first stage of the process. The successful candidate will travel to the home of the prospective bridegroom for a trial visit of several weeks, before a final decision is made.”

That was sensible. No matter how good a match might appear on paper, a meeting in person was vital. Imagine promising to marry someone you hated on sight, or that you found

repulsive. Damp hands, now that was something she could not abide. She was not desperate enough for that.

“Mrs. Pringle, may I ask your interest in the matter? Is the prospective groom a connection of yours?”

“Not at all. In fact, I’ve never met him. My occupation is to match respectable men and women who are seeking marriage partners with an appropriate spouse. I am, in fact, a marriage broker.”

Freya wished Mrs. Pringle and Oliver a good morning, and left the office. Her mind churned with conflicting thoughts as she walked home through the busy streets. Her potential husband sounded like quite a challenge, though Freya had never shrunk from one. Still, there were other applicants. The chances of Freya being chosen were probably not high, given her plain appearance and shabby clothes. It was probably a ridiculous notion anyway. A marriage broker, for heaven’s sake. Somewhere Kit must be laughing at her.

Russell Square, London

Six weeks later

Minerva Pringle bent over her desk, scribbling a memo to place in Mrs. Carr’s file. The widow was due to leave for Cornwall on the morrow, and Minerva wanted to remind herself to write to her client at the first opportunity.

If Lord Treloar was up to his ears in smuggling and treason, then Mrs. Carr would be in an ideal position to garner that information. Minerva would have to be subtle though—perhaps a question about the scenic qualities of the coastline, or any gossip about unusual activities in the area.

If Mrs. Carr knew why Minerva had sent her there, she would probably alert Lord Treloar without meaning to, and then the whole affair would be for naught. She chewed on the end of her pen. No, it was best that Mrs. Carr be left in ignorance. If things came to a head, she and Oliver could travel down themselves. She glanced up. Oliver stood looking out the window at the busy street below. There was a set to his shoulders that she recognized.

“Oliver? What is it?”

He turned from the window. “I am thinking of Mrs. Carr. Are you quite sure she will be safe with Lord Treloar?”

“Mrs. Carr has, in the past, shown herself to be both brave and resourceful. My informants were very clear on those points. My own interview revealed a woman of character with a good brain. I don’t perceive the difficulty.”

Oliver stared at her, his beautiful dark eyes without expression, although Minerva saw the minute signs of tension in his face. “They call him the Beast.”

Minerva waved a hand. “Ignorance and superstition. People see Lord Treloar’s scars, and

judge him based on his appearance.”

“He is also rumored to be quite disagreeable in his manner.”

“Mrs. Carr spent eight years traveling around Europe with the British army. I’m sure she can cope very well with the viscount.”

Oliver turned back to the window. “I hope you’re right.” He was silent for a moment. “What of Lord Treloar’s sexual proclivities? Will Mrs. Carr be able to cope with those as well?”

Minerva picked up the file, and extracted a letter. “Perhaps better than you might imagine. I received an account, albeit second-hand, on how Mrs. Carr was spanked in front of a group of officers by her husband’s commander. The incident was hushed up, of course. Yet Mrs. Carr remained with the army afterward. Lieutenant Carr seems not to have objected. In fact, he was among the group of officers present when her chastisement occurred. Interesting.”

Oliver shrugged, as if Mrs. Carr’s sexual tastes were none of his business. It was her safety that concerned him. Minerva’s account must have reassured him, because he dropped the subject. He wasn’t happy, though. Oliver always got this way when he had been too long in the city.

“Why don’t we go away for a few days? To the country, perhaps?”

“Throwing the dog a bone, my dear?” he murmured.

Oliver knew her too well.

“Oliver, *Skennenko:wa ken?*” Minerva addressed her foster brother in the Mohawk language which was their childhood tongue.

“Do not fear, sister, I am well. London...palls on me at times.”

“I know, love. Come, let’s close up for today. We can be on the road in an hour.”

“An hour for you to get ready? That would be a miracle,” he teased her.

Minerva walked behind him, and rested her chin on his shoulder. “Someday we will go home again, I promise.”

Oliver was silent for a moment. “Do not promise what you cannot deliver.”

Minerva sighed and moved away. “I have a few more things to finish off before I leave. Will you ask Polly to pack a bag for me?”

Oliver moved from his post by the window, and slipped through the door like a shadow.

Minerva tapped her pen on the file sitting in front of her. Perhaps Oliver was right. Perhaps she should have been more...forthcoming with Mrs. Carr. Lord Treloar’s injuries were more extensive than she had revealed, and his temper was more uncertain. No, she had done the right thing. Mrs. Carr seemed to be a courageous and intelligent woman. If anyone could get through to Lord Treloar, it was the little widow. At the very least, she might shake him out of his depressed state. Perhaps they would even make a match of it. That part was beyond Minerva’s abilities. Now, if only she could solve her own problems with the same degree of competence.

Treloar House, Cornwall

Clouds chased across a sullen orange moon hanging low above the horizon. The coach rumbled over the rough road, the occasional lone tree looming out of the gathering dark like a sentinel. Freya leaned back in her seat and sighed. The landscape held all the ominous charm of the one of the more lurid Gothic novels that her sisters delighted in reading.

The coach had been late, and the driver taciturn, but despite the atmosphere of gloom and foreboding, Freya smiled to herself. Whatever the outcome of her voyage, at least she was doing *something* about her situation. Since her return to England, Freya had felt like an insect, trapped and struggling in a web of circumstance that held no possibility of escape.

This was her chance to seek a new fate, and find a new life. Kit would have wanted that for her. The memory of her husband made her smile waver. Kit would have urged her to take a risk.

The coach slowed before taking a wide turn onto a rutted road that rattled the vehicle even more. Freya set her teeth. She had traveled from Portugal to Spain on a donkey. She could stand a little more.

A set of stone pillars rose up in the darkness, as the coach slowed, and then stopped. Freya heard the coachman drop down from his box, and watched him stride towards one of the pillars. An ancient bell jangled discordantly. The gates creaked open, long bereft of proper lubrication. A murmur of voices, and the coachman climbed back to his seat. The coach lurched forward, and they passed through the gates. Another quarter of an hour passed before the coach finally stopped in front of an imposing stone residence. It was full dark now, and a single torch flared outside the house. Her door was wrenched open, and the coachman thrust in his hand to assist her.

Freya steeled herself and descended from the coach. A breath of air, soft as silk with a hint of the sea, brushed against her cheek. She took a deep breath, fragrant with the night and a lingering scent of flowers.

“This way, madam.”

The coachman beckoned from a wide set of steps that led to a double door. One half creaked open as she mounted the stairs. Freya squared her shoulders, and stepped over the threshold. She found herself in a large, ill-lit room. A winding staircase ran along one wall.

“Wait here.”

The coachman walked off into the gloom. Hardly an auspicious welcome. Freya clutched her reticule. Her body was tight with nervousness, and she forced herself to relax. She could make out several large paintings on the wall, landscapes perhaps, though it was difficult to tell in the darkness. A table to her right was littered with papers, a riding crop, several books, and a large iron key.

A faint glow heralded the arrival of a tall, spare woman, her hair scraped back under a cap. She held a single candle.

“We were expecting you, Mrs. Carr. My name is Mrs. Boscawen. I am the housekeeper. You must be tired. Allow me to show you to your room.”

“How do you do?”

Mrs. Boscawen nodded, and turned to mount the stairs. Freya trailed after her. The hall below was lost in darkness. Freya stumbled, and clutched at the hand rail.

“Mind how you go, Mrs. Carr. The stairs curve as they rise.” The housekeeper’s voice held a country burr, but no warmth.

They reached the main corridor on the second floor and turned left. Midway down the hall, Mrs. Boscawen opened a door, and passed within. Freya followed her, waiting until the housekeeper had lit a branch of candles on the mantelpiece.

The room was charming, blue-papered walls with striped bed-hangings and curtains. The bed was neatly turned down. Mrs. Boscawen bent to light a fire in the grate.

“Do you require assistance with unpacking, madam?”

Freya didn’t have enough clothes for that. “Thank you, no.”

The housekeeper nodded. “You must be hungry, after traveling all that way. I’ll send up a tray.” She hesitated by the door for a moment. “The master is away until tomorrow. I will let him know that you have arrived. Good night, madam.” The door closed quietly behind her.

After traveling for hours, Freya longed for a good walk, to stretch out her cramped muscles. Evidently that was not forthcoming. She had been relegated to a tray in her room.

A knock on the door heralded the arrival of her luggage. Freya pulled off her gloves, and removed her bonnet. She unbuttoned her pelisse, and hung it up with the remainder of her slender wardrobe in the large cupboard. By the time she finished putting away the rest of her belongings, a maid arrived with her supper. The maid was shy to the point of speechlessness, bobbing her head at Freya’s thanks as she placed the tray on a desk beneath the windows before scuttling away. The curtains had not been drawn, and a fitful moon illuminated what looked like a garden below. Beyond it, Freya saw a glint of what must be the sea.

A savory scent drew her to the tray. Finally, a hint of welcome. She found a thick bowl of creamy soup, a small loaf of bread, with a pat of butter, a breast of roasted chicken with potatoes and carrots, a pot of tea, and a dish of stewed apples. Freya fell on it hungrily. She hadn’t eaten so well in years.

The fire burned cheerily, and with a full stomach, Freya washed up and changed into her night rail. Day was done. She could face tomorrow, whatever it held. She must. Freya blew out the candles, and settled into the comfortable bed. As she dropped off to sleep, Freya wondered if her bridegroom would like her.

She had imagined their first meeting so many times during the long trip from London. He would be older, perhaps a little worn from his injuries, but she would coax him back to health. She pictured a mature gentleman, his hair touched with gray. He would be kind and sensible, though he wouldn’t stand any nonsense. And he would take care of her, while allowing her the independence she was used to. He would...yes, of course, he would be a paragon and the moon was made of green cheese, she scolded herself for letting her imagination run away with her.

All her questions would be answered on the morrow. Freya thumped her pillow and closed her eyes. Tomorrow.

Jago Blyth, Viscount Treloar, limped across the headland, a stiff salt breeze stirring his hair. Damn. His prospective bride was due to arrive tonight. Perhaps that was what caused his head to ache so. He massaged his thigh to ease the cramped muscle. He'd stay in the tower tonight. The pain made him cry out in his sleep, and sometimes he wandered in the night, still dreaming. He would lock himself in, for his own safety and the happiness of his household. Boscawen would let him out in the morning. He could wait until tomorrow to meet the woman he might decide to marry.

She would be sweet, Jago decided, with cool hands and demure manners. She would drive away his demons while submitting to his lusts—in a lady-like way, of course. She would run the household like clockwork, and things would be the way they were when his mother was alive. The house would be full of flowers and calm. His wife would defer to his superior judgment in all things. He pictured her staring at him with eyes wide, astounded by the breadth of his intelligence and experience.

She would be slender and beautiful, of course, with long legs and a large bosom. Blue eyes? Naturally, and flaxen curls falling down her back when she fell to her knees and took his cock deep inside her throat...no, that wasn't right. She would be a lady. No more cock-sucking for him. He let that hope slide away with a touch of regret. No, she would lie on their bed, her white arms beckoning. Jago would sink into her lovely body, and all his anguish and resentment would be extinguished in the warmth of her embrace.

A squall had kicked up, and the cold, moist air in his face shook away his dreams. Jago walked toward the tower, where a light flickered in one window. Enough of these imaginings and childish longings. Whatever the future held with his prospective bride, he would find out on the morrow. He pulled off his coat, and rolled himself in a blanket on the pallet beside the fire flickering on the hearth. But as he fell asleep, he thought he heard a soft voice, murmuring in his ear.

“Good night, my love,” he whispered, already caught up in his dreams. The pain receded, and Jago slept.