

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER



CAROLYN FAULKNER



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

## CHAPTER 1



"Lady Fallon told me that one of his eyes is gone and he doesn't even bother to wear a patch. There's just a gaping, disgusting hole where his eye should be. And, even with just that good eye, he supposedly punched Lord Holland just for looking at him."

"I heard he's so disfigured, he's like a male Medusa—no sane female can stand to cast her eyes upon him. The last woman supposedly to see him—who wasn't related to him—was Carolyn Foster-Hamilton. She'd gotten engaged to him before the war. And when she saw what he looked like when she came to visit him after the war, she ran screaming from him, right back into her carriage and all the way back to Chesterwood."

"My brother said that he heard his servants face away from him rather than have to lay eyes on him. They say his cook quit the first time she saw him. This was a woman who had been in the house since before he was born—had hysterics and fainted dead away at the sight of him."

"There was a portrait of him at Arlington Brough from when he was younger and had just become the duke, and he was quite dashing. He's very tall and muscular, intimidatingly so. He's got the

usual Delaney intelligence, has a great wit when he wants to, and an obscenely large fortune. But if no one can stand to be in the same room with him, it's all for naught. Everyone was quite sure that the fifth Duke of Fontaine was going to be the last."

"Well, marrying whom you're told to marry is one thing, but sight unseen?" She heard a throaty chuckle. "But then, perhaps, in his case, that's a good thing—oh, hello, Rose, dear. It's so very good to see you."

She smiled, as if, on her way across the floor, she hadn't been regaled by stories about just how grotesque the man she was being married off to was. Obviously, even the clutch of women who were standing around her mother were talking about her impending marriage.

Apparently, she thought with a grimace, she only had the last few weeks of her maidenhood left before she was to be driven insane by the mere sight of the man to whom she would be tied for a lifetime, to whom she was expected to yield herself—including, and most especially, her body.

At that terrifying thought, Lady Rose Shelburne took a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter and gulped it down before saying, not quite quietly enough, "Well, Lady Champlain, I wouldn't think that, considering the bald, fat, lazy, profligate drunkard and degenerate gambler to whom you are married, you'd have much right to criticize anyone else's choice."

He wasn't exactly her choice, either, but she wasn't about to admit that out loud in front of Lady Lucille.

"Rose!" her mother looked shocked, although she really shouldn't have. It wasn't as if she couldn't be counted on to say socially unacceptable things since the moment she'd learned how to talk.

"Yes, Mother?" Rose asked, her tone outrageously innocent as she neatly traded her empty glass for a full one then proceeding to drain that in only two gulps. "I'm merely defending my soon-to-be husband. Shouldn't I be applauded for that—ow!"

How had her mother ended up being that strong? She was always so frail—or acted that way, anyway. But her hold on Rose's arm was anything but gentle as she began to drag her daughter away. "Please excuse us, Lucille. I need to speak to my daughter for a moment."

Rose found herself in the empty drawing room across the hall before she knew it, still clutching her empty glass and avoiding her mother's furious gaze.

"What are you doing? Are you out of your mind, insulting Lady Champlain? She's your godmother—she's one of my oldest friends!"

"She's an inveterate gossip. And make up your mind, Mother," Rose shot back. "You've been angry that I'm upset at having been sold to the highest bidder like some prized sow, telling me that I ought to be grateful, that I'm going to outrank everyone in the family and be rich as Croesus to boot. But as soon as I come to my *fiancé's*," she gave the word an unpleasant accent, "defense, you act as if I'd committed a crime."

She watched her mother try to get her temper under control, but Rose felt no such compunction. She was angry, and she didn't much care who she hurt in letting everyone around her know it.

When the older woman finally spoke, she sounded like she did when she was scolding a servant. "I realize that this match has not made you happy. There is no way that anyone within the sound of your shrill voice over the past few days could have missed that. But it's done, and the sooner you accept it, the better." Then Patience Fairview, nee Bowers, Lady Heaton of Uriah Hall, crossed to the door and held it open. "I expect you to find Lady Champlain and apologize to her. Then I want you to go up to your room before you ruin what was supposed to be a party in celebration of your engagement."

Rose snorted in an unladylike way that she knew annoyed her mother in the extreme. "Some engagement. I was never consulted in this decision. I've never set eyes on him, and for that matter, neither have you! And somehow, considering what I've heard about

what this man looks like, I doubt you'd even have the intestinal fortitude to!" Her mother flushed unbecomingly at that, and Rose knew that her barbs had hit their marks. "I have no interest in marrying him—as you well know—and even if I did, he's not here—at what is supposed to be *his* engagement party, too!"

"Lower your voice! You know that he has a lot of business concerns."

Her mother hated to admit that the man who would be her son-in-law was anything less than the perfect match, despite ample evidence that—at least physically—he left much to be desired.

But he was filthy rich, and he had already agreed to support their rapidly-leaning-toward-no-so-genteelly-impooverished family in the style they were already accustomed to but could no longer afford to pay for.

That was what mattered to her parents—not her, but rather what the man they had snagged for her could do for them. He would make certain that they were able to do the season, attend all the right balls, and meet only the best people. In fact, since their son-in-law was a duke and their daughter would soon be a duchess, they'd be meeting a class of people that were echelons above their current acquaintances.

The disbelieving, disappointed look her daughter was giving her did make Patience feel somewhat unsettled and as close to guilty as she had the limited capability to experience.

"And, well, yes, there is the matter of his...injuries, too, which were acquired honorably, in defense of king and country. I'm sure he just wanted you to be able to enjoy the party. That's why he sent his cousin—Lord Bowdoin—as his representative. He wanted you to be able to celebrate your upcoming marriage. I think it bodes well for you that the duke was considerate enough not to appear, himself. The man is obviously aware that his visage could be considered to be...disturbing to some, especially the ladies. He could have said he didn't want a party at all, but he was thinking of you."

Sarcasm dripped from Rose's lips. "I'm sure. Someone he's never met is most definitely the first thing in his thoughts, despite all of the important business he has. And then there's the idea that, even though, by your own words, his face could be considered 'disturbing', you're perfectly happy to sacrifice your daughter to him so that you and Papa won't have to pretend to be rich any longer."

Her mother's face tightened.

"Too true, Mother dear?" she needled. "Good. I hope you thoroughly enjoy the financial security you've bought with your innocent daughter's body."

"Rose!" She seemed much more concerned about her daughter's words than the uncomfortable truth behind them.

"But keep this in mind, not that I think you or Papa will really care; should there be children as a result of my marriage," Rose couldn't help but shudder at the thought, "which will be the only grandchildren you'll ever have, I will make it my life's work to make certain that you never, ever see them." With tears flooding into her eyes, Rose pushed past her mother, not really caring whether she knocked the woman down but mindful enough of not making any more of a scene than her farce of an engagement was already making, to take the back stairs up to her room.

Everyone was already talking about her—and her unfortunate fate—quite enough. She refused to add fuel to the twin fires of rumor and gossip that had inevitably engulfed the ballroom.

Torn between anger and tears, she threw her wrap down on her bed. Hell, and damnation, she didn't know why she'd even bothered to worry about what any of the guests thought. It wasn't as if she didn't know that she'd been the subject of hushed conversations in the society drawing rooms ever since the match was announced.

She'd certainly been subjected to enough pitying looks every time she ventured out while she went through the motions of planning a small—and wholly unexpected—wedding when she'd have been just as happy to plan her own funeral, instead.

Rose lay down on the bed, staring silently up at the canopy as

tears leaked slowly out of the corners of her eyes and into the elaborate hairstyle that Ruth had created for her only a few hours earlier. She could still hear the music playing, and sometimes voices drifted up to her, too.

She was missing her own engagement party. There would be no allowing him to spirit her around the room while she gazed adoringly up into his eyes and he held her as if she was both the most precious thing he'd ever known and someone he couldn't wait to ravish the moment he could get her alone. No moonlit walks in the garden, no fun slipping away from the chaperone, no fevered kisses in the dark, or even awkward, expectant teas with her parents—nothing that resembled any of the nebulous dreams she'd had about what it might be like to meet a man, fall in love, and get married.

"Oh, my lady, you're up here. I'm sorry; I didn't know. Did you ring and I didn't hear it?"

"No, I didn't ring," she choked out in the barest of whispers.

Already in the process of packing her mistress's things for the trip to Arlington Brough, Ruth immediately put the lingerie down on the top of the bureau as soon as she heard Rose's obvious distress.

"Come here, lass," she crooned, sitting boldly down on the bed with the ease of long acquaintance, pulling the young woman into her arms to rock her gently. "I know this isn't an easy time for you. But you mustn't become disheartened because of it."

"But the things they were saying about him—about Lord Delaney. His face, I-I don't know if I can do this!"

Ruth patted her hair. "You can, and you will. You're stronger than you know—stronger than you've been asked to be thus far in your life. But I know you, my lady. You will find a way to be happy. You might be a bit spoiled—how could you not be, seeing that you're an only child? But you're a good girl, too. You'll bloom wherever you're planted."

Rose clung to her maid as if she was the only solid thing in her world.



"And won't I be there, with you, to help you along?"

"Yes," she sniffed, sitting up a bit.

Ruth took those soft, small hands in her own work roughened ones. "And there's something else you need to remember when you're feeling sorry for yourself, lass. You're not the only one in the marriage. You must think of your husband, too. If you're lucky enough—as I was with Mr. Conner for those precious years—you'll gladly put his feelings well ahead of your own, knowing that he's doing the very same thing for you. I greatly hope that you and Lord Delaney will have that very special, precious kind of love." She stared down at their hands. "I can't get you anything grand or expensive as a present, as I would like to. But that would be my wish for you. Give the man a chance—don't condemn him out of hand, on account of your money grubbing parents, or based on vicious gossip. He could be a very nice man, and you don't know that he isn't."

"No, I just know that he's grotesque."

Ruth clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Now, that's not a very charitable thing to say. You know how folks like to exaggerate things like that just to shock everyone. And you're more than smart enough to know that how someone looks isn't a comment on what kind of person they are. There are plenty of very nice looking men downstairs that I am very glad are not going to have you to their wife. Something about judging books and covers comes to mind. Would you want him to judge you and find you lacking when you're coming into the hall, all sweaty, from the garden in an old, torn day dress or covered in mud head to toe because you fell off your horse and landed in a gully?"

"No," Rose sighed.

"No, you certainly would not. Just be yourself—how you are with me," she rectified immediately, because she certainly didn't want her lady to be the way she was with her parents—especially her mother. "You are kind and loving and empathetic."

"I'm smart, too."

Ruth frowned. "Well, we'll have to hope that he can overlook that flaw in you."

"Humph. It's not a flaw, Ruth."

"In a woman, yes, it is. There's no need for a woman to be smart. I don't even know why your parents bothered to educate you at all. What do you need with book learning? What good's it going to do you? A waste of perfectly good money, as far as I'm concerned."

It was a very old argument and one that Rose wasn't interested in indulging in at the moment. "Yes, Ruth." She patted her servant's back and moved a bit away from her. "I'd like to get out of this corset as soon as possible and climb under the covers."

"Surely, you're not retiring for the evening, my lady!" She sounded shocked.

"I most certainly am—at my mother's orders."

Ruth stood, taking care of the clothes she'd brought to pack before returning to her mistress to help her get undressed. "What did you do?"

It was much less a question than a statement, which caused Rose to frown deeply. "Who says I did anything?"

Some of the wrinkles on Ruth's face smoothed out as she raised her eyebrow. "You were breathing and angry—of course, you did something, even though I begged you not to before I sent you down earlier this evening."

"I don't want to talk about it."

Ruth knew her young mistress well enough to know when not to push her any further. "When I've tucked you in, would you like me to bring you up some tea and a nice slice of that delicious cake that Mrs. Henderson made for dinner tonight?"

Not that she'd been able to eat much since she'd heard the news of her impending nuptials, but she'd had a bite of that cake—in favor of anything else throughout the meal.

"Make it a very small one, please, but yes, thank you," she agreed, knowing it would make Ruth happier than it ought to, really. She

was always trying to feed her, especially now that she had less than no interest in food.

As always, Ruth knew what was best for her. After a couple bites of the delicious cake and a hot cup of tea with warmed cream and sugar, she managed to fall off to sleep as if her life wasn't going to end in less than two weeks.



THE FRINGES of the large ballroom were heavily populated by two distinct groups of women. There were the knots of eligible young ladies who were trying not to look desperate as they waited anxiously to be asked to dance—preferably by either one of the better-looking bachelors or at least a rich one—and the equally anxious, middle aged mothers of both the unattached ladies *and* men, visions of grandchildren toddling constantly through their minds or, at the very least, the family's replenished bank accounts.

"Lady Heaton." Antony bowed formally, kissing the back of the woman's hand. "I've been looking, but I haven't yet seen Rose. Do you have any idea where she is? I should very much like to talk to her, and I have a gift for her from her fiancé, who bade me give it to her on the night of the party."

"I'm sorry, Lord Bowdoin—"

"Please, my lady, call me Antony," he said, eyes twinkling with an excess of charm. "After all, we're shortly to become related, if only by marriage."

Lady Heaton actually blushed. "Why, thank you, Antony. And you must call me Patience."

"I would be delighted to."

"As to my daughter, I'm afraid she was taken ill, although I dare say that it was more of an attack of nerves than anything else."

Antony frowned. "I noticed that she was very quiet at dinner and didn't eat very much."

Patience was quite impressed that he'd noticed either of those

things. She could eat a wagon full of nettles or not eat for several years and her husband would never have paid attention to either of those behaviors, much less remarked upon them in any way. "Yes, she's adjusting, if more slowly than one might prefer, to the idea of the marriage. It is happening unusually quickly." She fluttered a fan over her bosom, looking worried. "I do hope that people won't think there's anything untoward at the cause of such a rush."

They both knew that she and her husband were the ones who had insisted that the marriage be that rushed. Lord Delaney was in favor of there being a long courtship, hoping that, in time, he might be able to coax his intended into falling in love with parts of him other than his looks, before, possibly, eventually, revealing himself to her.

But the couple had mounting debts and, indeed, were in danger of losing Uriah Hall and ending up penniless if an infusion of cash wasn't rapidly forthcoming.

And Lord Delaney was that infusion. He'd already agreed to it and more, and in a fashion which suggested that he might well already have tender feelings toward their daughter, which they fully intended to extort and exploit for as long as they could.

Neither Patience nor her husband, Clarence, were in the least concerned with finding out how it was that the duke had discovered their daughter, even though he hadn't attended many balls before he incurred his unfortunate war wounds and hadn't been to any since he'd returned from battle. His reputation as a reclusive ogre had long since been sealed.

Unfortunately, a Victoria Cross didn't cover the horrendous scars incurred by single-handedly saving a large portion of the men under his command in the heat of battle.

And Lord and Lady Heaton couldn't pretend to care about any of it—not their daughter, not their war hero future son-in-law—nothing.

Nor were they at all worried about how their daughter would react to their decision to marry her off, entirely to their own

advantage. They'd really never seen her as much more than a pest and a drain on their finances neither of them really wanted since she was born, so they were quite determined that they were going to eke some kind of advantage from her existence for themselves. So, once she became of marriageable age, they would match her with whomever made the best financial offer for her.

It was just a nice bonus that the one who had was a duke, to boot.

Antony could see how—despite her supposed concern about how bad the hastily arranged marriage might seem to others—the odious woman who was standing in front of him was nearly drooling at the idea of all of the money Sebastian was going to give them.

He'd counseled his cousin against it, having investigated the couple as soon as Seb had expressed an interest in their daughter. Not that there was much poking around necessary. It wasn't as if anyone in society didn't know that they were having money problems.

And that was in direct contrast to his own hopes for the man he considered to be much more than just a cousin and his active part in trying to find him a wife.

It had taken him a long time to get the older man to agree to look for a wife, but he had been only too eager to try to find him a suitable match. Because of his unsightliness—which, when he had decided to bravely reinsert himself into society was met with a revulsion on people's faces, especially women, that he was rapidly disabused of the notion—Sebastian had forced himself to live his life away from others. It was a life in which he didn't have to deal with the gawking and the awkward questions, or worse than that, people hurrying themselves—and their children, whom Seb used to love to be around—away from him, as if his ugliness was catching or something.

As soon as he'd secured Seb's consent, Antony deliberately began to accept the offers and invitations to balls and charity

events that he usually rejected out of hand, using them as opportunities to render quick sketches of various ladies he thought his cousin—to whom he was so close that Seb might as well have been a brother—might be interested in.

At first, he had looked over the group of small portraits he'd drawn up, along with some small comments about their personalities and perceived level of intelligence, rather reluctantly and then growled, "They're all too pretty. No pretty young lady is going to accept me as a husband. Look at the widows, man, instead of the ingénues! They tend to be more desperate and are likely to take whomever they can get."

"That's ridiculous! If you won't consider that you have anything to offer but your looks—even though you do—"

Sebastian scoffed loudly at the suggestion as he took a swallow of his brandy.

"—then I'm afraid that you're overlooking how incredibly attractive your money often is to the fairer sex. Or, rather, to her parents."

That got him a genuine laugh, which was such a rarity he felt as if he'd just won a medal.

He'd said the same thing about the second set of them, growling, "Didn't you listen to a word I said?"

"Of course not," Antony returned immediately with a cheeky grin, "since I know you're so often wrong."

He decided then to turn the tables on his irascible cousin a bit.

The next event he'd attended was Lady Trevant's Spring Ball. He'd deliberately found the less attractive of the younger women and had drawn a generous handful of them—always careful not to let his subjects notice that that was what he was doing.

But just then, a woman arrived who shone like a gem against a field of faded pastel flowers. She was dressed in a rich purple gown, which set off the alexandrite of her simple but sumptuous necklace and the same understatedly elegant, droplet gems hung from her ears. Even her hair carried out the theme as it sparkled with small,

coordinated gemstone pins and what looked to be an exquisitely set, small alexandrite tiara.

Although his eyes were drawn to her, and Antony hastened to sketch her as quickly as possible before she disappeared into the crowd, he wondered if he need do so. Often such beauties were nice to look at—for a while—but there was either no substance behind the visual presentation, or worse, they were insufferable shrews, so full of themselves that they couldn't think of anyone else.

That most certainly wouldn't do for his cousin.

And even when Seb hadn't been injured, he had to have someone he could talk to about more than the weather and riding.

Putting his small pad and pencils away, he sidled deliberately up to one of the women he knew, taking her arm and dancing her out onto the floor, receiving a playful rap on his shoulder with her fan for having done so.

"It's not your dance, Antony! George Lawson is the next on my card!" She scowled up at him.

Antony just gave his friend Antoinette a knowing smile. "You're welcome."

Of course, she laughed at that, as he'd known she would.

"Actually, I cut in because I have a question for you."

"Oh? Well, I have one for you, too—what are you doing here? You've been at three of the last four balls I've been at, when you've always said you were too much of a libertine to come to these things. Are you finally going to allow yourself to be caught?"

"Not even with an elephant gun or a Burmese tiger trap," he allowed. "Both of which I'm sure the overbearing mothers on the sidelines possess—and more—with which to trap the elusive, unsuspecting bachelor for their equally overbearing and overeager daughters."

That was just the answer she was expecting. "Well then? What are you doing here, besides making George angry at you?"

"I'm not going to tell you. I'm on an errand of mercy, and that's

all I'm going to say on the subject. Now for my question, who was that exquisite little woman who stole everyone's breath when she entered a few minutes ago? The one in purple?"

"Oh, that's Rose Fairview, daughter of Lord Heaton. Surely, you know them?"

His classically handsome face pinched in thought. "I can't quite place them."

"Well, her mother looks like everyone else's mother, and her father is just like everyone else's, too—loves shooting and eating. But Lady Heaton's true loves are jewels and clothes, and Lord Heaton's is gaming of any kind—cards, horses, anything. And as a result, the rumor is that they're in dire straits."

He still looked puzzled. "Like you said, I've been going to these to-dos lately, and I know that if I'd seen her before, I'd remember it, but I haven't."

"Financial difficulties will do that to a girl. They really can't afford to send her to all of the balls and soirees she's invited to any longer."

"Yet she's still that popular?"

Antoinette seemed to ponder that question for a moment. "Yes, I believe so. Come to think of it, it's a very rare occurrence, but I don't believe I've ever heard anyone say anything bad about her."

That sounded promising!

"Oh—wait—yes. I have heard complaints about her, but not from any of the women. If I recall correctly, all of the unhappy people were men who thought she was showing them up."

"How so?"

"You know. She's one of those girls who thoroughly annoys her mother by refusing to hide her intelligence and act dumb just because the imbecile she's dancing with has ten thousand a year."

"Ahh. I understand. Do you know her, yourself?"

The music ended, and he escorted her to the side of the ballroom.

"You know how these things work. We came out around the



same time, so I've been going to the same parties and dinners as she has. She's an acquaintance but not a friend, not that I would have any objections, I suppose, as long as she wasn't too intellectual and boring."

Antony kissed her hand. "You have done a wonderful service this evening, of which you are likely to remain unaware. Regardless, please accept my heartfelt thanks, Lady Boxwood."

Her gaze was sly and calculating. "Was it enough of a service for you to take me to dinner at Rules next week?"

He bowed, tone low and suggestive, "Of course, my dear. It's only fitting that you be most *amply* rewarded for your service."

He moved away in such a graceful and fluid manner that all of the females' eyes tracked him like a lioness tracks a gazelle groan just slightly under their breath at what might have been, or, if they were very lucky, what might still be.



THEY WERE in his study again, enjoying some of his excellent whiskey this time.

"What have you brought me?" Sebastian asked as Antony spread out his wares before his cousin. Seb leaned forward in his chair, drink and cigar in one hand, as he used his right hand—the most scarred and unsightly of the two, but he was right handed, and he found jettisoning old habits unnecessarily challenging—to touch each one of them.

The younger man had arranged the small portraits in what he hoped looked like a random manner but definitely was not. He'd ruminated over how to present them—in a way that would best highlight the Fairview girl—for days after the ball before he'd been able to get back to Arlington Brough to show his cousin.

Finally, he'd decided just to place her in the middle of the small display and let her shine on her own. The wounded Sebastian wasn't any less quick than he had been—if anything, he was even

more discerning nowadays—and Antony had a good feeling that she would easily rise to the top of the pack, especially considering that he'd deliberately done exactly as Seb had asked this time. The rest of the women surrounding her were passably pretty, but they were definitely older and the luster of youth had dimmed somewhat.

The contrast between them and Lady Rose was quite striking.

Antony remained quiet, sitting back and letting Sebastian look at the pictures but watching him closely at the same time. Because he was a meticulous type of man, he picked up and examined each one minutely, carefully reading the notes and impressions Antony had put on the back before going on to the next.

There were three others—all equally unremarkable—before he picked up her portrait, but Antony had noticed that even while he he'd been looking at the others, his gaze had been drawn downward to her. But as he held her likeness in his hands, his eyes ate her up. There were no wandering eyes in this case at all!

Antony had to admit he felt more than a modicum of pride that he'd been able to help his cousin find a bride, taking a considerable gulp of his whiskey as Seb made his way through the last of them at his usual plodding pace.

"Could you get in touch with this one on my behalf, please?" he asked, putting the picture down in front of Antony, who barely bothered to look at it, although it was a good thing he did.

Lady Jane Mathers.

Antony nearly spewed his drink right into the other man's face.

"*That one?*" he choked out.

"Yes," Seb stated firmly. Then his eyes narrowed. "What's wrong with her?"

Still sputtering, he answered, "Nothing, that I know of, it's just she is not who I thought you'd choose," he finished lamely.

Sebastian was no fool. He knew that, nudging Rose's picture with his least ravaged finger. "You wanted me to pick her, didn't you?"

Damn his easy blush! "Yes, well, I did have an opportunity to meet Lady Rose, and of all of the young women I've met during this unusual little quest I've been on, I liked her best." He cleared his throat a little nervously, then continued. "When I danced with her, she actually asked me questions, too, and didn't just talk about herself. She smiles a lot, and she's smart and she's just—"

"Then why don't you marry her yourself if you like her so much?" Seb took a puff of his cigar.

"Because I'm still young and enjoying my life. I don't want to get married yet."

He hadn't heard Sebastian guffaw like that in a dog's age.

"Well, you know what I mean. Besides, I'm not looking for me; I'm looking for you, and you're who I saw her with."

Seb's jaw clenched. "Like all the others before this time, she's much too young and pretty."

"And, as I've said before, I can't see why that is a hindrance."

His drinking companion's eyebrow rose. "Oh, you can't?"

"Stop painting everyone with such a broad brush. And don't you dare bring up Carolyn Foster-Hamilton, either. She was a twit before the war. And even if she wasn't, you never gave her a chance to come to grips with what happened to you. You deliberately sprung yourself on her—of course, she ran off!"

"You'll never convince me that was the wrong thing to do."

"I know. But you shouldn't choose Jane if Rose is who you want. It wouldn't be right."

Sebastian sighed. "That's why I don't want to choose someone pretty. I might want her, but she's never going to want me."

Antony's jaw set stubbornly. "She will if you give her the chance to."

"Ever the optimist. But then you came through the war without so much as a paper cut. When are you going to get your head out of the stars, man, and face facts?"

The younger man stood. "Can you look at me and tell me honestly that you're as attracted to Jane as you are Rose?"

Seb assiduously avoided Antony's eyes.

"I thought not. I'll contact her parents and see if they might go for the arrangement we thought of."

"That's yet another potential obstacle—"

"One thing at a time, old man. Keep a good thought."

He clapped Seb on the shoulder.

"How can I when all I can do is pity any of these girls if they end up with me for a husband?"