

Whitney, My Love Chapter 2

Chapter Two

THE NEWS THAT MARTIN STONE'S DAUGHTER WAS BEING PACKED off to France poste haste spread through the countryside like a fire through dry brush. In a sleepy rural area where the gentry were usually aloof and reserved, Whitney Stone had again provided everyone with a delicious morsel of excitement.

On the cobbled streets of the village and in households wealthy and poor, females of all ages gathered to savor this latest piece of gossip. With great relish and at greater length, they discussed every scandalous escapade of Whitney's scandal-ridden life, beginning with the toad she let loose in church one Sunday when she was eight years old, to the time this past summer when she fell out of a tree while spying on Paul Sevarin, seated beneath it with a young lady.

Only when those events had been recalled in detail, did they allow themselves to conjecture over Martin Stone's reason for finally sending her off to France.

In general, they felt that the outrageous child had probably pushed her poor, beleaguered father too far when she appeared in men's trousers. Because she had so many other shortcomings, there was some disagreement over exactly what had driven her father to take such sudden action, but if there was anything they all agreed upon, it was that Paul

Sevarin would be vastly relieved to have the girl out from under his feet.

During the next three days, Martin Stone's neighbors arrived at his house in droves, ostensibly to visit with Lady Gilbert and to bid Whitney goodbye. On the evening before their departure for France, Anne Gilbert was seated in the salon, enduring one of these social calls by three ladies and their daughters. Her smile was more formal than friendly as she listened with ill-concealed annoyance to these women who

professed to be well-wishers and yet took a morbid delight in recounting to her Whitney's many youthful transgressions. Under the pretense of friendly concern, they made it clear that, in their collective opinion, Whitney was going to disgrace herself in Paris, destroy Anne's sanity, and very likely ruin Edward's diplomatic career.

She stood when they were finally ready to leave, and bade them a curt goodbye; then she sank into a chair, her eyes bright with angry determination. By constantly criticizing his daughter in front of other people, Martin Stone had made his own child a target for village ridicule. All Anne really needed to do was whisk Whitney away from these narrow-minded, spiteful neighbors of hers and let her bloom in Paris, where the social atmosphere wasn't so stifling.

In the doorway of the salon, the butler cleared his throat. "Mr. Sevarin is here, my lady."

"Show him in, please," Anne said, carefully hiding her surprised pleasure that the object of Whitney's childish adoration had come to say goodbye to her. Anne's pleasure faded, however, when Mr. Sevarin walked into the salon accompanied by a stunningly lovely little blonde. Since everyone for fifteen miles seemed to know that Whitney worshiped him, Anne had no doubt that Paul Sevarin knew it too, and she thought it very callous of him to bring a young woman with him when he had come to say goodbye to a girl who adored him.

She watched him cross the room toward her, longing to find something about him to criticize, but there was nothing. Paul Sevarin was tall and handsome, with the easy charm of a wealthy, well-bred country gentleman. "Good evening, Mr.

Sevarin," she said with cool formality. "Whitney is in the garden."

As if he guessed the reason for her reserve, Paul's blue eyes lit with a smile as he returned her greeting. "I know that," he said, "but I was hoping you might visit with Elizabeth while I say goodbye to Whitney."

In spite of herself, Anne was mollified. "I would be delighted."

Whitney stared morosely at the shadowy rosebushes. Her aunt was in the salon, undoubtedly being regaled with more stories of her niece's past, and dire predictions for her future. Emily had left for London with her parents, and Paul.. . Paul hadn't even come to say goodbye. Not that she'd really expected him to; he was probably with his friends, toasting her departure.

As if she'd conjured him up, his deep, masculine voice sounded from the darkness behind her. "Hello, pretty girl."

Whitney lurched around. He was standing only inches away with one shoulder casually propped against a tree. In the moonlight his snowy shirt and neckcloth gleamed against the almost invisible darkness of his jacket. "I understand you're leaving us," he said quietly.

Mutely, Whitney nodded. She was trying to commit to memory the exact shade of his blond hair and every contour of his handsome, moonlit face. "Will you miss me?" she blurted.

"Of course I will," he chuckled. "Things are going to be very dull without you, young lady."

"Yes, I imagine so," Whitney whispered, dropping her eyes. "With me gone, who else win fall out of trees to ruin your picnic, or break your teg, or . . ."

Paul interrupted her string of self-recriminations. "No one."

Whitney lifted her candid gaze to his. "Will you wait for me?"

"I will be here when you return, if that's what you mean," he replied evasively.

"But you know it isn't!" Whitney persisted in desperation. "What I mean is, could you possibly not marry anyone else until I-" Whitney trailed off in embarrassment. Why, she wondered, did she always go on this way with him? Why couldn't she be cool and flirtatious as the older girls were?

"Whitney," Paul was saying firmly, "you will go away and forget my name. Some day, you'll wonder why you ever asked me to wait for you."

"I'm already wondering that," she admitted miserably.

Sighing with irritation and compassion, Paul gently touched her chin, forcing her to look at him. "I'll be here," he said with a reluctant grin, "waiting impatiently to see how you've grown up."

Mesmerized, Whitney gazed up into his recklessly handsome, smiling face-and then she committed the final, the ultimate, mistake: Impulsively, she leaned up on her toes, flung her arms around him, and planted an urgent kiss just to the side of Paul's mouth. Swearing under his breath, he pulled her arms down and forcibly moved her away. Tears of self-loathing filled Whitney's eyes. "I'm so sorry, Paul. I-I never should have done that."

"No," he agreed, "you shouldn't have." He reached into his pocket, angrily pulled out a small box, and slapped it unceremoniously into her hand. "I brought you a farewell gift."

Whitney's spirits soared dizzily. "You did?" Her fingers shook as she snapped the lid up and gazed in rapturous wonder at the small cameo pendant dangling from a slender gold chain. "Oh, Paul," she whispered, her eyes shining, "it's the most beautiful, most splendid-I shall treasure it forever."

"It's a memento," he said carefully. "Nothing more."

Whitney scarcely heard him as she reverently touched the pendant. "Did you choose it for me yourself?"

Paul frowned in indecision. He'd gone to the village this morning to choose a tastefully expensive little trinket for Elizabeth. While he was there, the proprietor had laughingly remarked that with Miss Stone leaving for France, Paul must be in a mood to celebrate his freedom. As a matter of fact, Paul was. So, on an impulse, he asked the proprietor to choose something suitable for a fifteen-year-old. Until Whitney opened the box a moment ago, Paul had no idea what was in it. But what was the point of telling Whitney that? With luck, her aunt and uncle would be able to find some unsuspecting Frenchman who would marry her- preferably a docile man who wouldn't complain when Whitney ran roughshod over him. Out of reflex, Paul started to reach for her, to urge her to make the most of her opportunities in France. Instead he kept his hands at his sides. "I chose it myself-as a gift from one friend to another," he said finally.

"But I don't want to be just your friend," Whitney burst out, then she caught herself. "Being your friend will be fine . . . for now," she sighed.

"In that case," he said, his expression turning humorous, "I suppose it would be perfectly proper for two friends to exchange a farewell kiss."

With a dazzling smile of joyous amazement, Whitney squeezed her eyes closed and puckered her lips, but his mouth only brushed her cheek. When she opened her eyes, he was striding from the garden.

"Paul Sevarin," she whispered with great determination. "I shall change completely in France, and when I come home, you are going to marry me."

As the packet they had boarded at Portsmouth pitched and rocked across the choppy Channel, Whitney stood at the rail, her gaze fastened on the receding English coastline. The wind caught at the wide rim of her bonnet, tugging it free to dangle from its ribbons, whipping her hair against her cheek. She stared at her homeland, conjuring a vision of how it would be when she again crossed this Channel. Of course, news of her return would be announced in the papers: "Miss Whitney Stone," they would proclaim, "lately the belle of Paris, returns this week to her native England." A faint smile touched Whitney's lips ... The belle of Paris . . .

She pushed her unruly hair off her face, stuffing it into the crown of her childish bonnet, and resolutely turned her back on England.

The Channel seemed to smooth out as she marched across the deck to stare in the direction of France. And her future.

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