

## The Earl's Accountant

### Chapter 1

"La, Delilah, did you see Lady Aubrey's hair?" a woman's voice rang.

"It is singed so badly I thought it was a clump of hair powder!" another woman said, and they laughed together. Their feathered headpieces balanced precariously above their foreheads.

Ava sighed, she was a terrible lady's maid, and she was about to lose her position. Though she was not lady's maid anymore, her poor skills had led her kindly mistress Lady Aubrey have her as a companion position instead. She was too old to have started as a lady's maid at seventeen-years old anyway. In the two years she had been with Lady Aubrey, she had not improved her skills either. She glanced around at the full ballroom, its inhabitants heaving as people moved around the dance floor.

"Goodness, these balls are so dreary," a man drawled behind her as he sucked on his pipe. Ava stepped further into the corner and narrowly missed a young lord who stumbled out from a room. He chortled as he waved to the person inside and walked away. A feminine laugh echoed from the room behind him.

Ava quickly closed the door and hoped no one saw him. She did not want any rumours to dampen the reputation of Lady Aubrey's last ball. Smoke curled around Ava and she coughed. She detested Lord Haversham's pipe, he smoked it everywhere and had burned several holes in her mistress's sofas.

Lord Haversham's partner agreed, "Yes, it does little to lift the tedium of the season."

Ava would have been offended on Lady Aubrey's behalf; except that this was a mantra repeated by ball goers almost every night. The ton enjoyed *eunnu*. Ava was convinced that no one who spent that much time primping and priming could truly detest these evenings. She did detest these evenings, however.

An elderly gentleman brushed against Ava and looked up to meet her eyes, he frowned and tried to recognise her, but moved on quickly when his wife tugged his arm. Lord Danes had met her on several occasions and still feigned surprise each time.

"I have never seen a woman so tall. I swear she looks like a gargoyle looking down from upon a church rooftop."

"My dear, I believe that is Lady Aubrey's lady's maid."

"Lady's maid! How unusual." His bushy eyebrows reached a full inch above his monocle.

"And to not even bother to wear a spot of colour to her own mistress's farewell ball too," Lady Danes agreed and looked directly at Ava's brown gown. Lady Aubrey had tried to force Ava to wear a bright pink dress with frills wrapped all around it, but Ava distracted her mistress by asking if she wanted to wear the blue or pink slippers this evening.

"Cecil?" the woman attempted to whisper but stared at Ava's gown as she did so.

"Yes, my sweet?" he said around a mouth full of cake.

"Do you think she could possibly be Lord Aubrey's... *illegitimate*?" Ava resisted rolling her eyes, her origin was nothing so remotely as interesting.

Her husband wheezed around the cake in his mouth. "Lady Aubrey is an odd sort of duck" he chortled.

"She is the sweetest woman!" her wife gushed.

"The most charming you could ever find," her husband agreed.

"The poor lady, how could she manage her estate all alone without her dear Rupert? I could not imagine living if you died." Ava wondered what it would be like to still love your husband after so many years, or even what it would be like to love someone. The man caressed his wife's hand with his.

"My dear, that will not be for a long time yet." They moved away, finding more ways to describe Lady Aubrey's kind, patient, and decidedly eccentric nature.

Ava tried to see Lady Aubrey through the haze of candles burning around the room. Lady Aubrey holding court at the edge of the room. A throng of young and old people surrounded her, each vying for her attention and to make her laugh. The thing was, Lady Aubrey always laughed. She chortled and giggled even when there was nothing to laugh about. Ava smiled just a little whenever Lady Aubrey said she laughed enough for them both. Ava could not help smiling when she said things like that.

The young men stared at her mistress as she spoke, looking slightly dazed. Lady Aubrey often spoke so enthusiastically, that people sometimes had trouble keeping abreast with what she said. She said things so cheerily and with such vigour, people found themselves agreeing, even if they had no idea what they were agreeing with. Ava looked at the young men laughing at something Lady Aubrey had said. She had the uncanny ability to make people feel as if they were the most important person in the room, that their opinions were the most interesting, their jokes the wittiest. Ava sighed. Lady Aubrey was the opposite of Ava.

"Yes, Lady Aubrey is to go live with her niece next month," an elderly woman said to a young lady as they walked by. The young lady looked only just out in society and was so nervous she dropped her reticule when someone brushed against her. Ava moved to collect it for her and gave a look of sympathy to the young woman. She moved quickly back to her corner. "How a woman of her age has kept this estate on her own for so many years is almost scandalous!" Ava pursed her lips, Lady Aubrey had kept the estate quite well, even before Ava's help. "But my, she has the energy of a bull."

"Grandmama?" the young lady stared at Ava and Ava cast her gaze away.

"My dear, stand up straight, your shoulders are far too small, you look like a triangle I swear. What husband would like a triangle for a wife?"

"Grandmama, this is my first ball, no one knows me here," she sulked.

"My dear, you must try! Lady Aubrey was kind enough to invite us even after what your father did... We are in great debt to her for her concern for our plight."

The daughter only nodded, probably having heard this said many times before. "Grandmama, who is that?" the young woman pointed at Ava.

"Who my dove?" The grandmother fussed over her daughter's dress. "Oh, she is Lady Aubrey's ward of sorts."

"Why does she look so serious? Surely you should at least pretend to be happy at a ball Mama."

"Yes, my sweet, even when you are miserable, you must always appear pleasant."

The young woman batted her grandmother's hands from her hair. "I have not seen her speak to anyone all night! Should you not speak to people at a ball?"

"Yes, my dear, you must always speak to as many people as possible at a ball."

"Should I go and speak to her?"

"No! Goodness what a notion, she is just... Well, she is not someone important, whoever she is. Come, I see Mrs. and Miss Norton." She hurried her granddaughter away, just as the young lady looked as if she were going to call out to Ava. Ava let out a sigh of relief. What could she have said to the women anyway? Perhaps she could have pointed out she was not a ward, she was not really a lady's maid, nor a true companion either. That most likely, was not considered witty banter.

The music swelled and a burst of cheer came from Lady Aubrey's corner. She happily swung her short legs under her seat, her pink slippers swung back and forth. She waved to the young lady who spoke near to Ava just minutes before. Lady Aubrey hopped up and immediately brought the young woman in to the group and introduced her to a host of eligible young men. Ava smiled, the young woman looked overwhelmed when a young man took her hand and brought her to dance. Yes, Lady Aubrey was very kind to people's plights. She had taken great concern for Ava's.

"The daughter of an earl!" a nasally voice said.

"No! And her daughter sent into service?"

"I heard her husband ruined their estate and left after dark with all he had left to sell just to pay for a hovel to live in with his wife!" A loud gasp followed. Ava looked around and saw the two elderly women who had spoken wave their fans. The heat of the ballroom had grown but Ava did not want to move to the balcony, there would be too many people there.

"The earl's daughter was so distraught that she never spoke again and sent her daughter to live with Lady Aubrey!"

"I could not live with such disgrace. La what happened to her husband?"

"She could not leave him; she had forsaken her family to marry him! Her father was the Earl of Norfolk I believe, a nasty man, but what to do you expect when your daughter runs away and marries *down*."

"Her daughter lives with Lady Aubrey you say. I have never seen her." Ava sighed, it really must be a dreadfully boring night if the ton had run out of gossip and were talking of her instead.

"Yes, for two years now as her lady's maid! That sad tall thing, doleful eyes, never smiles, dreadfully quiet. I do not blame Lady Aubrey for hiding her away." Lady Aubrey tried just the opposite.

Ava saw Lady Aubrey craning her head and looking around, waving an empty glass. Ava picked up a fresh glass of ratafia and awkwardly made her way through the audience. She tried twice to grab the empty glass from Lady Aubrey's hand, but her mistress never stopped moving. Every limb was always in motion, she had so much energy all the time it exhausted Ava. Lady Aubrey used a great deal of her energy demanding people's attention. She grabbed their attention without their say in the matter. It was quite a talent Ava thought, to walk into a room full of strangers and to soon have half a dozen people agreeing to whatever you said within a quarter of an hour. Though Lady Aubrey had started to move slower these days and slept more. Ava finally convinced Lady Aubrey to retire to her niece's home. Her heart gave a sad little thump at the thought of Lady Aubrey leaving.

Lady Aubrey did not notice when Ava replaced her empty glass with the full one, nor when Ava moved away again. When she returned to her corner the two old women were still there.

"I heard her niece was so disgusted that Lady Aubrey wished to take her own lady's maid that she refused to even consider it!"

"I heard the husband tried to seduce her lady's maid and Lady Aubrey had to let the woman go!"

"Seduce her?" Her nose lifted and wrinkled. "Yes, I suppose she is sort of pretty. What wife would like a younger prettier woman living in her home? Men's attentions do wander so easily." The women tittered again.

Ava wondered how people thought of such notions. Sadly, the niece's home simply did not have enough room for her. She was more lady's companion now, her efforts of being a lady's maid were a decided failure. Though no other person would consider Ava an appropriate companion either. Ava was too quiet, not at ease with new people and did not know how to converse about the latest gossip or romance novel. Even when she did try to make conversation, Ava towered awkwardly over everyone. She was half a foot taller than most women she knew. Not even her looks could count as a saving grace, Ava was everything unfashionable; her hair was too dark and her eyes too grey, her taste in clothing unlikeable. She was just... Ava.

She did not know where she would go after Lady Aubrey's departure. She knew she could not return to her cold familial home where the people were more frigid than the bricks and mortar. When she thought of her parents, she felt nothing. She felt nothing when she was forced to leave her childhood home for a small cottage, bestowed by a cousin, who agreed to allow them to still live on the ruined estate in return for the early entailment. She felt nothing when her mother told her she had found a position for her daughter as a lady's maid with an old friend at seventeen years old. Ava felt nothing when she realised that she had not heard any word from her family in the two years since she had arrived at the small village of Sherif Hutton in North Yorkshire.

Just then, Lady Aubrey danced past Ava and pulled her into a room. The music and people's laughter became muffled as Lady Aubrey shut the door and collapsed on to a sofa. Ava rushed over to pat Lady Aubrey's brow.

"La Ava what a night it has been! I have not laughed nor danced so much. I shall miss this place." Lady Aubrey breathed hard to catch her breath, she did that more these days Ava noticed. She pulled an ottoman for her mistress's feet to rest upon and reached to pour a glass of water. The fire flickered as she helped her mistress drink.

Lady Aubrey closed her eyes, and a light snore escaped her small bow shaped lips. She could have been mistaken for a life-sized doll surrounded in rows of frills and lace. She had rosy cheeks upon unblemished skin like porcelain with only faint wrinkles even in her age. She came awake with a jolt and started speaking again and Ava wondered if Lady Aubrey realised she had been asleep for some minutes.

"I have decided you are to apply to my accountant in Welburn for work."

"Pardon?"

"You are uncannily good with numbers my dear. You have done just marvellous work helping me these past years. You must just smile; make conversation and I have no doubt he will see that immediately see your worth and offer you employ on his doorstep. There now, we have found a situation for you after I leave." She beamed at Ava and Ava tried to remember how many cups Lady Aubrey had drank that night. "Now we must hurry and get ready for the musicale entertainment, it is to start soon. Most importantly, we must stop Caroline Bingley from trying to sing. . ."

Lady Aubrey shuddered dramatically, her expertly shaped curls moved frantically across her face. Ava's mind whirled with questions and objections until she realised, she did not have any other options. She would be without a home, without money and without a friend.

". . . A most indelicate voice and the worst debutant from such a well-bred family I have ever met. I suppose we cannot consider her a debutante anymore." *Who?* "I am simply not surprised she is not married." Ah, Lady Caroline. "Practically on the shelf! Lord that woman set her sights too high. If I were not so happy for Colonel Fitzwilliam for escaping such an odious woman, I would be furious at her dismissal of his proposal. That man is just too sweet and sees the good in everyone. He is better off in the army than with *that woman*." Lady Aubrey took a large gulp of water. "But I do adore her sister-in-law and simply could not refuse the invitation. Perhaps young Mary Rivers is here, did you see her? Now there is a sweeter woman you could ever meet, perhaps I can introduce her to the colonel." She looked down at Ava's gown and tutted, "Why did you not add the lace trim I gave you? You really should wear something more than those grey gowns Ava, I keep telling you, you can never wear too much colour and lace. . ."

Lady Aubrey continued without the need of a conversation partner. The woman could speak to a wall for half an hour and later declare it was the most wonderful conversation she had had all night. The suggestion that Ava was to find work with her accountant was so flippantly suggested that Ava wondered if her mistress had been considering it for some time instead. For all her mistress' flighty and boisterous affectations, Ava suspected that Lady Aubrey was far more calculating than people knew. Though she never had any children, she certainly acted the part of the meddlesome mama. Ava could easily imagine her mistress managing a large loud family and enjoying every moment. As a result, anyone and everyone had become surrogate son or daughter, suffering her mistress' managing and attentions. Lady Aubrey patted Ava's hand affectionately and bobbed out of the room. For a moment

Ava wished she had held onto her mistress's hand just a moment longer, knowing it would be one of the last times she ever would.

The following day, Ava was convinced that Lady Aubrey had forgot the whole affair with the accountant. To her surprise, her mistress told Ava to bring the estate's ledgers to be reviewed by her accountant five miles away. He was an unusual man who refused to attend his clients in their homes and instead, required they or their men of business to present themselves at his offices. Ava asked Lady Aubrey on more than one occasion why she should keep an accountant who was so difficult to work with. "Oh!" Lady Aubrey gushed. "He is simply the most brilliant accountant in all of Cumbria!"