



WHITAKER  
HOUSE

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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

## ENCHANTING NICHOLETTE

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# 1

## *The Bookshop*

“It was in looking up at him her aspect had caught its lustre—  
the light repeated in her eyes beamed first out of his.”

—Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*

*Saturday, June 3, 1893 • Boston, Massachusetts*

I suppose you have a new wardrobe ordered from Paris, *oui*?”  
I glanced at the girl sitting across from me in my carriage as we drove up the street toward Brittle Brattle Books, wondering, for the life of me, how I’d come to the point of being so terribly desperate for company.

My carriage companion, Sylvie Boutilier, was the youngest daughter of my father-in-law’s second wife, whom he’d married the previous summer. Because we were of a similar age, I ended up being the one who had the privilege of keeping her with me on almost a daily basis.

Not that she was annoying, just so very naive. And fanciful.

In truth, she was unlike me in every way.

She continued, regardless of my silence. “Has it been delivered yet?”

"Yes, it's been delivered." Though I couldn't fathom feeling the same wearing my normal, colorful gowns as I had before William had died. The big day was quickly approaching; the cards announcing my reentrance to society were all enveloped, stamped, and ready to send in the mail. Everything had been done weeks before, which gave me the feeling that my mourning period had been as difficult for my mother as it had been for me—though I had a feeling she quite enjoyed traveling through Europe for the last two years.

"I'm so pleased that you're back now, for it seems there aren't many young people my age in my stepfather's circle anymore. *Monsieur* Garrett Summercourt and his wife are *très merveilleux*, but they are married. And his brothers, *Monsieur* Alex and *Monsieur* Clyde...one is a snob and one is affianced." Sylvie touched my arm with her gloved fingertips. "At least I have you. We will help each other find husbands, *non?*"

I didn't answer. I wondered if Sylvie knew how my marriage had ended—too soon, my husband ripped away with one horrifically mistaken gunshot. I doubted it, but I couldn't bring myself to ask. My whole life had fallen apart two years ago, and I didn't know how to put it back together. Nor did I know how to request anyone's help in doing so.

Uncertainties constantly bombarded me, overwhelmed me on a daily basis. I was twenty-two, a widow of two years, my mourning almost complete, and I would soon be reentered into the only society I'd ever known—but as a new person.

Mrs. William Everstone, but without William.

He had loved me. Quite adamantly, in fact. So much so that it had been him who'd requested of my father that I marry him instead of his brother Nathan. There was so much more to it, but ultimately, it had been a favorable switch...that is, until the tragedy. Now Nathan was married to his beloved Amaryllis, and I was all alone again.

"You'll probably be married again, Nicholette, before I am," Sylvie added.

"I doubt that," I stated flatly. Although the idea of remarriage was something I'd contemplated for months already, I was certain my mother would faint at the mere thought. And really, who would I marry now? I'd grown up much in the last two lonely years, and I wasn't sure what I wanted anymore. Nor how to go about maneuvering the marriage market I had a feeling I would be thrown into soon enough.

"Your look is utterly *magnifique*. *Beaucoup plus belle* than I with my *cheveux roux*." She poked aggressively at the loosened strands of dark auburn hair slipping out from under her bonnet, as if her hair wasn't gorgeous. As if she wasn't gorgeous.

At times, I didn't even know what to say to her.

"The Summercourt brothers you just mentioned all have red hair," I attempted.

"Ah, *oui*, but they are men."

I didn't see her point, or the point of going on, so I let the subject end there. She went on to ask, "Do you know whom you would like to marry?"

"Um, no." I could feel the tension in my brow increase. I wanted so badly to frown, but I refrained. "How would I?"

"Surely if you've had your eye on someone, you could make them want to marry you. Isn't that how it's done?"

"Not in my experience."

No one I'd ever met had been able to turn my head enough to induce thoughts of going against my parents' wish for me to marry into the Everstone family. It was what I'd always known would happen...and I'd been quite agreeable to it.

And now what was I supposed to do? The thought of finagling my way through a sea of highly interested prospective suitors made me feel ill. I honestly didn't know what I would do if I met

someone who interested me. I had absolutely no practice in flirting. Only following directions.

I took another quick glance at Sylvie.

She was sixteen—six years younger than me—and she seemed to have such a natural allure, but in a rather likable way. She was so approachable and candid, two terms that would never describe me in a hundred years.

The carriage slowed to a smooth stop, and I looked outside to see the large golden lettering backed by dark green over the multi-paned storefront windows of Brittle Brattle Books.

Sylvie scooted toward the door, which was opened by the groom.

“A few minutes, please, Lamont.” I reached for the handle, closing the door again. “Sylvie, I have a request to make of you, and I hope you won’t find it offensive—”

“Oh, I don’t think I would! You can ask me anything.”

My gaze lingered at the carriage door again, and I bit my lip. Perhaps it was too silly of a thing to ask. What would she think of me? But then she had assumed I would likely be remarried before she married at all. So of course she would want to help me...right? And it wasn’t as if I were asking her to help me secure a husband; I just wanted to feel more comfortable.

More prepared.

“What is it?” Sylvie asked, her eyes wide in anticipation.

What on earth did she think I was going to ask? Nothing too shocking, I hoped. She hardly knew me, after all. She wouldn’t have known that I was the least shocking person in all of Back Bay.

“About my getting married again someday...” I looked up to see her reaction to my words. She was smiling, almost giddily. “You see, I might need some help with that.”

“You want me to help? Whom do you want to marry? I can’t wait to meet him!”

"Um, no, I don't—I don't know him." I almost wanted to forget about my request...but then I thought about living with my parents for years and years and not ever again having the kind of connection that had begun between William and me. And who better was there to ask than Sylvie, whom I'd seen flirt quite effortlessly a number of times since I'd met her?

"I would like your help in knowing what I'm supposed to do regarding men."

"You are...oh, what's the word? Careful?"

"I've always been quite the opposite of encouraging."

"Hmm, perhaps I should study how you do," Sylvie said, with her finger to her lips.

"I'm afraid you will be sorely disappointed in my lack of skills."

"You aren't *superflu*, but that's not terrible." Sylvie scooted toward the door and reached for the handle. "*Zut alors!* What if he's inside this bookshop? What will you do?" She said this remark as she made her way out of the carriage and then waited for me to follow.

"What if who is inside?" I asked as I descended the small metal steps down to the sidewalk.

"Your *him*." She gasped happily, looping her arm with mine. Him.

The sudden thought thrilled me, probably more than it should have. I did want to marry again someday, to find someone who not only loved me, but understood me in ways that William never had.

Was that why I hadn't fallen in love with him? Perhaps I'd not had enough time. Perhaps falling in love was a long process. Maybe it took longer than the time I'd been given. And perhaps actually having a marriage beyond my tragic wedding day would have helped.

Sylvie squeezed my arm. "Don't be shy about wanting to marry again—that is lesson one. No one will blame you, believe me."

I didn't outwardly respond right away to Sylvie's first lesson as we walked down the sidewalk toward Brittle Brattle Books, but her words had a profound impact on my heart. Not that I was intent on finding a new husband that day, but I'd always been wary of showing an interest in men for fear that they would pursue me. Because I hadn't wanted them to. But now...how was I supposed to switch that part of my thinking around?

"I will try my best, Sylvie."

*God, I have no idea what I'm doing. Please help.*

As Sylvie opened the door deeply set in the windowed front, the bells hanging off the inside door handle clanged loudly, announcing our arrival. Before going in, I noticed a display of books inside the front window to our right. A copy of my sister-in-law's book, *The Little Fox*—the only one published so far—was situated with a number of other little books that also looked like they were written for children.

"Oh, I do hope they have more than one!" Sylvie gripped my arm tighter, and then pulled me through the open door.

"I'm sure they wouldn't put their only copy in the window display, Sylvie," I said as she guided me toward the cashier's counter, where a tall, slender gentleman stood sorting through a pile of books. When we drew near to him, he took a moment to look up, and then asked, "May I be of service, ladies?"

"We are looking for a copy—actually quite a few copies—of a book you have in your front window. The one called *The Little Fox* by Violet Hawthorne."

"We have a number of copies of that one. Written by one of our own, you know. The author lives right here in Boston. Married to one of those Everstone gents now, but I believe she was from Maine originally."

"Yes, we know," I stated. "Will you please point us in the direction of the books?"

"Should be right there near the far corner." He motioned toward the back of the large double-leveled room in which we were standing.

Shocked that he hadn't felt the need to actually find the books for us, I stood there for a moment longer, then turned to Sylvie. "I suppose they shouldn't be too difficult to find."

She was already on her way to the other end of the large room when the bells at the front door rang again, announcing another customer.

I glanced over my shoulder and noticed a fairly tall, well-built gentleman with sandy brown hair sticking out from the sides of his silk top hat held the door for an elegant, well-dressed young lady. He laughed softly, with a hint of a smile on his lips, as he said something to her.

I felt something odd, what seemed like an almost-memory. Whatever it was, it was something I'd never felt before, and it lit a fire in my chest and stole the breath from my lungs.

Which was ridiculous. How could so many strange sensations be the result of catching one glimpse of a man? And even if I was attracted by the outward appearance of this stranger, the chance that I'd ever see him again was highly unlikely.

I dared another glance. Had I met this man before? He seemed to be relatively familiar, perhaps from many years past. But I couldn't place him, no matter how I tried.

Tearing my gaze from the two of them before either he or the young lady with him caught me staring, I followed Sylvie to the back of the store. However, after a few steps, I couldn't help but look back, very subtly, over my shoulder. The two of them were now separated—she at the counter speaking to the bookseller, and he... where had he gone? I faced forward for a moment and then turned to look over my other shoulder. I found him standing against the bookcase along the wall parallel to where the cashier's counter was situated. He was holding open a periodical, but watching me.

His eyes locked with mine, and he had that same hint of a smile on his face I'd seen a few minutes before. His eyes were a dark, grayish-blue, and they stayed on me, awaiting my response, as if no one else in the room mattered.

Would I respond? What was the response needed? A smile back? A nod? I was too flustered to know, so I faced the back of the store again, suddenly heated and breathless.

My only intent now, as I made my way to the corner where Sylvie waited, was to pretend that he wasn't alive. No matter who he was, I shouldn't have let him see that I'd been looking for him after I'd already decided it was a bad idea to stare. What had I been thinking to linger, as if I couldn't get enough of the sight of a mere stranger? And while still wearing a half-mourning gown!

I found Sylvie staring earnestly at a bookshelf, her gaze traveling down one row of books, and then the next.

"I thought you did not know how to flirt," she said softly, her accent making her words sound almost like a purr.

"I don't even know him," I whispered with as much emphasis as I could allow.

"Maybe you should. Perhaps it is he who you were to meet in the bookshop today."

"Ladies and gentlemen aren't introduced in bookshops. And how would we know he is a gentleman? He could be anyone."

"Ah, but he could also be *him*."

"This is the silliest conversation I've ever had. Please stop. Let's look for the books you came in here for." I scanned the rows of books, wishing the man at the cashier's counter had felt the inclination to help us in the first place. Then nothing of the last five minutes would have happened, and I wouldn't have to pretend the gentleman on the other side of the room didn't exist.

Not that I'd likely forget him anytime soon.

"Here!" Sylvie finally announced. She held up only one copy of the long-sought-after book. "There is but one."

"Surely there are more than that. The bookseller said there were a number of them." I continued to search the shelves, my gaze roving back and forth over the spines of hundreds of books, hoping they were simply misplaced and we wouldn't have to go through the lengthy process of special ordering them with the help of the man at the front counter. I wanted to get the books and leave. Quickly.

Although I hadn't looked to the front end of the store since catching his eye, I felt the attractive stranger's gaze on me still. Was he standing near the periodicals? Or was he helping his companion look for the book she'd come in to find? Heat flushed my neck again, remembering how bold I'd been to so obviously look for him. And I felt as if I'd entertained him in my absurd endeavor to study him.

I didn't like the feelings the situation had created...the uncertainty of what was going on...the thrilling feeling that something *could* happen.

"I found them!" Sylvie exclaimed happily while she used one finger under her chin to subtly point to the shelves above the ones we'd been scanning. "But they are up there."

Sure enough, about a dozen copies of the tiny book rested on a shelf well beyond our reach. Beside us, a tall, narrow ladder hung from a track on the high ceiling.

Wanting only to leave the bookshop and Mr. Hinted Smile's presence as quickly as possible, I didn't think twice about not asking the man at the counter for help. It would take much too long, plus I'd risk walking past *him* and his companion.

Twisting my reticule to the other side of my wrist, I grabbed the small rungs of the ladder and started up the few short steps to reach the books. Sylvie wanted three more, and since they were very small, I was pretty sure I'd be able to grab them all in one swift move and make my way back down in short time. But that was not taking into account the heels of my boots.

As I slipped my fingers around a number of the books and went to maneuver them off the shelf, I lost my balance and wobbled. And then, because my heels were caught on the rungs, I fell back and quite literally, straight off the ladder.

I closed my eyes, my arms extended into the air above me, quite unladylike, and then waited for a drastic landing onto the hard, wooden floor below.

But instead, I found myself in a pair of strong arms.

Since my eyes were still closed, and I clutched the only book left in my hands—after losing the others—I prayed silently and fervently that the arms were those of the gangly bookseller....

But I knew better.

I knew exactly whose arms they were.