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NICOLA CORNICK
PREQUEL TO THE BRIDES OF FORTUNE
THE SECRETS of a COURTESAN

Nicola Cornick

The Secrets of a Courtesan

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All's fair in love and matrimony in Nicola Cornick's wildly romantic new series that introduces the ladies of Fortune's Folly–spirited heiresses who are more than a match for society's most dashing rogues! The epitome of privilege and power, the handsome Duke of Welburn sets all the ladies' hearts aflutter as he strides into the village of Fortune's Folly. For Eve Nightingale this fluttering is a mixture of wariness and wonder. Once his glittering society mistress–caught up in his glamorous world by day and tangled in his bedsheets by night–she is now no more than a penniless yet proud shopkeeper.It's a world Eve can't go back to–she has secrets to keep. But this determined duke seems very keen on unravelling them. . . .

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Prologue

April 1809

Letter from Lord Hawkesbury, Home Secretary, to Alasdair Rowarth, Duke of Welburn.

Rowarth,

I write to you in absolute confidence, requesting your assistance on a matter of national security. Mutual acquaintances tell me that you are an utterly sound fellow. I am sure this is the case because I knew your cousin at Eton. So, Rowarth, here is the situation. For some time now this department has been investigating the criminal activities of one Warren Sampson, a mill owner who has acquired land around the villages of Peacock's Oak and Fortune's Folly in the North Riding of Yorkshire. Sampson is suspected of encouraging civil unrest and sedition and it is imperative that we put and end to his influence. Imperative, I tell you. The man is a blackguard, an utter scoundrel. And now we may have found a way but it is a matter of considerable delicacy. It involves a certain Mrs. Eve Nightingale or, as you may remember her, Eva Night…

Pray, call on me at your earliest convenience so that I may acquaint you with your task.

Yours in haste,

Hawkesbury.

Chapter 1

Fortune's Folly, Yorkshire–May 1809

Eve Nightingale had never believed that her past would catch up with her. She had run too far and hidden herself too well to be found. And then she saw Alasdair Rowarth, Duke of Welburn, in Fortune's Folly Market Square one morning in spring and knew that everything that she had striven for was in danger.

Eve had been shopping, browsing amongst the market stalls, taking her time to chat to the sellers and enjoying the sunshine. The winter had been long and bitter with so much snow that for a time the village, so high in the Yorkshire dales and fells, had been cut off from the outside world. Now that spring had finally arrived it had brought an influx of visitors, for Fortune's Folly was a spa of some note, not as famous as the local town of Harrogate, but with health-giving mineral waters that were said to be far less disgusting to drink. And on this May morning the square was full of townsfolk and visitors taking the air, gossiping and strolling, perusing the goods in the shop windows, the ladies' parasols a forest of bright colors against the sun, the gentlemen elegant in jackets of blue and green superfine. There was a sense of brightness and hope in the air after such a long and gloomy winter.

Eve had just placed a quart of milk and a piece of creamy Wensleydale cheese in her marketing basket when she felt a strange prickle that raised the hairs on the back of her neck. It was the unmistakable sensation that she was being watched. She turned slowly and met the dark gaze of a gentleman who was standing on the opposite corner of the street.

It was his absolute stillness that attracted her attention first when everyone around him was moving. That, and the fact that he was looking directly at her with a gaze so focused and intent that she could not escape the force of their connection. His head was uncovered and in the spring sunshine his hair gleamed with the colors of fallen leaves, bronze and auburn and dark gold. His eyes looked watchful, conker brown beneath straight, dark brows. He was very tall with a hard, handsome face as unyielding as the local stone. It was given even more character by high, slanting cheekbones and a cleft chin that looked the essence of stubbornness.

Rowarth.

For a moment Eve was utterly unable to accept the evidence of her own eyes. Five years had passed; five very long, difficult, painful years, since she had seen the Duke of Welburn. When she had run from him, run from London, she had thought never to see him again. Yet here he was. He had found her. She, who had never wanted to be found.

For a moment it felt as though her heart had actually stopped before it slammed through her body again and began to race. He held her eyes with a fierce intensity that captured and trapped her. For a moment Eve felt stunned, imprisoned by his gaze. He had already started to move toward her and in that moment of blind panic and fear, all she knew was that she could not face him. Not now, not yet, perhaps never. Her feelings for him were still too raw even after five years. She had to run again.

But it was too late. Her shaking fingers slipped on the handle of the basket and it fell from her grasp, spilling the ham and cheese across the cobbles and sending the milk cascading into the gutter. An enterprising crow swooped down and snatched the ham away. Eve made a grab for the basket, her hands trembling as she tried to gather everything together again.

"Allow me."

Suddenly Rowarth was beside her, his hand on her elbow as he helped her to her feet, his touch searing her through the material of her sleeve. He picked up the slightly squashed cheese and handed it politely to her. Their fingers touched. Eve felt heat ripple through her awakening feelings she had thought long dead. Rowarth was summoning the dairyman and the butcher with authoritative gestures now to replace the items she had lost. Money changed hands. Eve heard the clink of coin and the men's mumbled thanks. She felt hot and dizzy, the sun beating down on her bonnet and dazzling her

eyes. She tried to steady her breathing. There was not the remotest chance of escaping a confrontation with Rowarth now. He still held her, lightly but with a touch that made her entire body thrum with awareness.

"Eve."

She looked up and met his eyes and again felt the shock like a physical blow.

"Rowarth." She was proud that her voice was so steady. "What an unexpected…surprise."

His lips curved into a smile that was sinfully wicked but not remotely reassuring. "Is there any other sort?" he murmured.

"There are nice surprises," Eve said.

"And then there is meeting me again." His smile deepened. "Which I imagine falls into a different category given the alacrity with which you ran away from me."

Pain twisted in Eve, bitter and sharp, not even slightly blunted with the passing of time. Yes, she had run from him. She had had no other choice in the world. And now, five years later, the mere sight of him could still affect her so profoundly that she felt faint and light-headed, her emotions stretched as taut as a wire.

But Rowarth's measured tones had nothing but coldness in them for her now. Whatever feelings she still had for him, so deeply held that she had never quite been able to banish them, were not shared. Mistresses came and went, after all. He had been everything to her and there had never been anyone else for her since, but she could hardly expect it to be the same for him.

The crowds had melted away, leaving them alone. People were still staring, though from a discreet distance. Women were staring. But then, Eve thought, women had always stared at Alasdair Rowarth. Women had always wanted him. He was handsome, he was rich and he was a duke. What more could one ask for?

"You must let me escort you home," Rowarth said. He was steering her across the market square and down Fortune Alley, one of the twisty little lanes that led away from the main thoroughfare. Already they had left the bustle of the main streets far behind.

"There is absolutely no need, I thank you," Eve said. "I am sure that you have more pressing business." It was impossible, she thought, that Rowarth had come to Fortune's Folly to seek her out. A part of her longed for it to be true; when she had first seen him she had hoped for one heart-soaring moment that he had come looking for her because he still cared for her. Yet even in that moment she had known deep down that it was a foolish thought. The cynic in her, little Eve Nightingale, who had grown up on the streets of London and struggled to survive, knew enough of life to see that as the fairy tale it was. Besides, if by some miracle Rowarth had sought her out, that could only bring more lies and more heartbreak. There was no going back.

No, this could be no more than a coincidence. Fate was laughing at her, bringing Rowarth to this little town, miles from anywhere, where she had thought herself safe. In a moment he would excuse himself and be gone from her life a second time and she would have to try and forget him all over again.

"There was a time when you found my company a great deal more attractive." Rowarth was making no secret of his amusement at her blatant attempt to dismiss him. "Though of course," his tone chilled, "your affections lasted only as long as it took you to find someone you preferred." He looked around at the dingy back streets with their rubbish in the gutters and the smell of rotting vegetables in the air. "What happened, Eve?" he said softly. "I hardly expected to find you here. Did your new lover leave you without a feather to fly?"

"That is none of your business, Rowarth." Eve tried to speak lightly, dismissively, but the words stuck in her throat. In the note she had left him she had told him she had found another protector. It had been the only way she could think of to make him hate her—to make certain that he would not follow her and demand the truth. It had been the only way to set him free.

Rowarth squared his shoulders. “You mistake.” His voice, smooth and deep, cut across her thoughts. “It is my business. In fact I have no business here other than to see you, Eve.”

For a moment Eve’s foolish heart soared again at the thought he might, against the odds, care for her still. But there was something in his voice that warned her; in his tone and in the cool, appraising look that he gave her. And frighteningly he had read her thoughts and seen how vulnerable she was to him, for he smiled again with grim pleasure.

“Have no fear that I am about to importune you with impassioned declarations of love,” he said drily. “Nothing was further from my thoughts. This is business only.”

Eve felt a little sick at the contempt she could hear in his voice. “What possible business could you have with me after all this time?” she questioned, still striving to keep her voice light. “We have no more to say to one another.”

“We’ll talk of that in private.”

“No, we shall not.” Suddenly furious, she freed herself from his grip and spun around to face him. “We shall not do that just because you dictate it, Rowarth. You always were arrogant.”

Once they had laughed together about his innate confidence and the way in which people deferred to him because of his position. Eve remembered with a pang what it had been like when she had been his mistress, beside Rowarth on those occasions when they had visited the opera or the theater or a ball. There was a dizzy glamour that had been attached to his title and his status, a glittering, raffish fascination that had beguiled her. When they had lain together, tangled in her sheets in the rapturous aftermath of making love, she had teased him about his importance and his arrogance and the way that people fell over themselves to please him, and he had laughed and kissed her and they had made love again through the hot summer nights. She had loved the fact that behind the closed doors of her boudoir Rowarth was hers, and hers alone, that she was the only one who truly knew him.

Perhaps it had been an illusion, but for a brief time it had made her happy. She had thought that they had both been happy. From the start there had been an instant attraction between them, blazing into vivid life the very first night they had met at the Cyprian’s Ball. She, the newest of new courtesans, had been feted and courted as the gentlemen waited to see upon whom she would bestow her favor—and her innocence. Her price was high. And then Rowarth had arrived, cutting through the throng, and everyone else had faded away, pale imitations of men in comparison with his natural authority and overwhelming charm. She had been his from that first moment and miraculously, it seemed, he had been hers. She was not merely his mistress; they had shared everything. It had been so wonderful that for a short while even she, raised on the London streets, the illegitimate child of a seamstress and a sailor, abandoned as a baby and forced to fight for everything she had ever had in her life, had started to believe in happy endings. She had thought that there was more to their relationship than mere lust. She had felt that they had had an instant affinity.

Eve swallowed what felt like an enormous lump in her throat. Those days and nights had been full of color and excitement and joy, so far removed from her existence now that they had been another world, a fading memory but one that was so laced with pain that it could never quite die.

“And you were always the only one who dared oppose me.” There was an odd note in Rowarth’s voice now. For a moment it sounded almost like regret. “But in this, Eve, you cannot.”

“Watch me.” She was so cross now that she was prepared to argue with him in the street. She started to hurry away; he followed, effortlessly matching her step, not even remotely out of breath.

“With pleasure, as always.” He sounded as imperturbable as ever. “But it will make no odds.”

“You are as persistent as a stray dog.”

“A charming analogy. You always liked animals, as I recall.”

They had almost reached the pawnbroker’s shop that Eve now ran. It seemed that Rowarth knew exactly where she lived and what she now did to earn that living. A shiver of apprehension racked Eve as she wondered what else he knew and what he might do with that knowledge. His reappearance

in her life was not only shocking, it was dangerous as well. She had lived like a nun since coming to Yorkshire. She had buried her past as Rowarth's mistress and that was the way she was determined it would stay. Small towns were notorious for gossip and she was determined that nothing was going to ruin her reputation or her livelihood.

"We are at an impasse," she said coldly, on the doorstep. "I shall not invite you in."

"Then I will take you somewhere else where we may talk," Rowarth said, "and I doubt you will appreciate my methods in conveying you there. Your choice."

Eve looked at him. Would he really carry her kicking and screaming through the streets of Fortune's Folly? Very probably he would, and without disturbing the cut of his jacket in the process. He looked unyielding, implacable. And despite her anger she really did not want a scene in the street.

"Very well," she said, even more frostily. "Since you force my hand."

She pushed open the door of her shop and stepped from the bright sunlight into the cool, dusty shade feeling a strange sense of relief at least to be on her own property. She placed her marketing basket on the counter with a little sigh. In the windows the sale items gleamed in the sun; jewelry sending a shower of sparkling rainbow colors across the display, bone china pawned by the wife of a brewer who was so fond of his own ale that he had spent too much time drinking and too little working, bed linen from a cottager out on the road to Skipton, all manner of goods brought in by people desperate to raise a bit of ready cash. There was also a very fine brace of pistols that Eve suspected belonged to a man who had turned his hand, unsuccessfully, to highway robbery, and a dinner service that a local banker had brought in when his bank had gone bust and he had wanted to avoid his possessions being confiscated by his creditors. All the goods told their own stories, Eve thought, of people struggling in what was a hard economic climate.

Joan, Eve's assistant, came scurrying out of the back room, wiping her hands on her apron as she heard the ring of the doorbell. She was an older woman, a former servant at Fortune's Hall, the local manor house and home to the squire, Sir Montague Fortune. She was the only person in whom Eve had confided her past and Eve valued her friendship highly.

"I did not realize you were back, madam—" Joan broke off as she saw Rowarth, and her sharp brown gaze swept over him, summing him up in one comprehensive glance. Her sandy eyebrows rose infinitesimally.

"This gentleman and I," Eve said carefully, "have business to discuss. Could you take over here please, Joan?"

"Business, is it?" Joan said tartly. "I thought you had finished with that sort of business, madam."

Eve smiled. She was accustomed to Joan's sharp tongue and knew it hid a protective heart. Joan had been turned off for refusing Sir Montague Fortune's advances and she had some hair-raising tales to tell of the goings-on at Fortune's Hall. She also had no very good opinion of men.

"Don't fret," Eve said. "I am done with it."

Ignoring Joan's snort of disbelief she ushered her visitor behind the counter and through the doorway into the room at the back. The pawnbroker's shop occupied two downstairs rooms in the stone-built terrace. Eve used one as the shop front and the other, a much larger room, as a combined office and a store for all the goods people brought in to pawn. Upstairs there was a tiny bedchamber and some even tinier living quarters. She and Joan clung to their financial independence by their fingertips. The premises were hardly sumptuous but the shop did at least provide an independent living and it had been a lifesaving opportunity for Eve when she had run from London—and from Rowarth—leaving everything behind, broken by a miscarriage, reeling from the news that she would never bear another child. She had left behind the beautiful little town house that Rowarth had given her in Birdcage Walk, where he had spent all his nights and most of his days with her, the clothes and the jewels, and had climbed on the first stagecoach from the Blue Boar Inn in High Holborn. She had told the driver she would go as far as her money could take her and had ended up in Fortune's

Folly, working as an assistant until she had accumulated sufficient savings to buy the shop, working her fingers to the bone, working, always working, as she tried to forget…

She pushed the memories away. Rowarth was standing in her office and looking around him with a lively interest. He looked elegant and polished, the epitome of wealth and privilege, utterly out of place in these shabby surroundings. Never had the differences between them felt so stark.

"So," she said, a little ungraciously, "I can give you two minutes, Rowarth, no more. Whatever your business is with me, I do not want to discuss it."

His gaze came back to rest on her, dark, brooding, and she repressed a little shiver.

"You will give me as long as I require," he said. He straightened. "My business with you is this. I am here on behalf of the Home Secretary. You are under suspicion of criminal activity. If you do not help us we will ruin you. We will expose your true identity and we will take from you everything that you possess." He smiled at her. "Now," he said gently, "will you talk to me?"

Chapter 2

She looked the same as she had done five years before. Alasdair Rowarth looked at his former mistress and amended his view slightly; she looked almost exactly the same except that there were shadows haunting those glorious lavender blue eyes now, suggesting a sadness that went soul deep. He did not feel any pity to see them; she had left him, walked out on him for another man, so whatever sorrow she had brought on herself was surely richly deserved.

The bitterness and resentment twisted within him and he ruthlessly subdued it. She was nothing to him now. He was here to prove it. But he remembered that it was Eve's clear and candid gaze that had first enslaved him from the moment he had stepped into the ballroom at Albermarle Street, persuaded against his better judgment by his friend Miles Vickery to attend the Cyprian's Ball. He had been bored and restless that evening, he remembered, searching as he always was for something elusive, something he could not even name, grasping after that mysterious entity that would fulfill him and provide a desperately needed balance to the lonely duty that was his life. Rowarth had come into his dukedom young; so many people depended upon him, it seemed that his days were never any more than a round of obligation and responsibility. He had searched for someone to share that weight of duty with him, looked for a wife at Almacks and in the long round of the London Season, and had been bored rigid by the witless pattern card debutantes he had met.

And then he had attended the Cyprian's Ball and there she had been, Eva Night, bright, dazzling, so very alive, and in some way strangely untouchable even as she was effectively selling her virginity to the highest bidder. He had been entranced. He was rich enough—so he had bought her. And yet from the first he had thought that there was more to the transaction than that. It had not been solely his money for her body. She had given him life and light and warmth, wrapping him around with her generosity of spirit, her very presence lightening the load of the responsibilities he carried. In return he had shared everything with her. Not simply his money but his concerns and his cares, his deepest, darkest fears and his hopes for the future. Even though he was a mature man of one and thirty he had fallen for her like a love-struck youth. He had wanted to marry her. It had been perfect. Or so he had thought until she had left him, run away, denting his pride, making him an utter laughingstock—the foolish duke who had wanted to marry his venal mistress—and breaking a heart that until he had met her he had cynically believed could never be touched.

He had been a fool. That much was clear. The thing that angered him most was that he had loved her and believed his feelings were returned when in fact she had merely been using him for money and advancement. He had been wealthy enough but nowhere near as rich as some of the peers who sought Eve's favor now that she was the toast of the demimonde. It had been madness to think that he could hold her if another man offered more. When he had been a mere ten years old he had seen his mother do precisely the same thing, betray his father, running off abroad to be with her wealthy lover. There had been the most appalling crim con divorce case that had dragged through the House of Lords and made his father look like a naive, impotent fool. And Rowarth, who savagely told himself that he should have known better, had almost made the same mistake as his luckless father. He knew he should be grateful that he had not committed the ultimate folly of marrying Eve as he had wanted to.

After Eve's defection he had gone abroad for several years—he had business concerns in India that had occupied him most successfully until the pleas of his estate managers had brought him back to England to face those responsibilities he had neglected. He had believed that he had put aside thoughts of Eva Night until he had come back to London and found himself searching for her face in a crowd or listening for news of her. He had learned that no one had heard of her since she had run away from him. It had been the on dit at the time but Eve was now long gone, her star extinguished, the brief time when they had been the glittering couple of the demimonde all but forgotten. Rowarth

had tried to forget it, too, but every so often the memory of Eve would stab him like a wound that had not completely healed.

Then Lord Hawkesbury's letter had arrived out of the blue, asking for his help. Yes, he would go to Yorkshire and confront his beautiful, treacherous former mistress. Yes, he would ascertain if she were a member of a dangerous criminal fraternity, as Hawkesbury's intelligence suggested. And in doing so he would prove once and for all that he was free of the hold she had once exerted over him.

Criminal she might be. Beautifully, wantonly seductive she most certainly was. Eve's face still had the vivid animation that Rowarth remembered: her creamy complexion was still dusted with amber freckles, her hair was still a fiery red, and the quick, expressive movements of her body were as ridiculously, dangerously appealing to him as ever. Not even her fearsomely respectable worsted gown and dark blue spencer could hide the lush curves of a figure he had known intimately and already ached to explore again in exquisite detail, unable to subdue the desires of his body even while he deplored her and the hold she still had over him.

He had not expected to want her.

He had thought those feelings dead and gone. They should have been—they should have been annihilated, destroyed by her betrayal. He was furious that they were not. Yet he was forced to acknowledge that when he had first seen Eve in the Market Square he had felt all the old emotions of desire and lust and longing as strong as they had ever been and searing in their intensity. He had been told himself then that the memories, the hold she had had over his senses, would never be permitted to cloud his judgment. That resolution had lasted all of five seconds. He had seen her and he had wanted her with a hunger all the more acute for the years of denial.

But his business with Eve was precisely that—business. He was here on Hawkesbury's behalf to ascertain her connection to Warren Sampson and to use her, coldly, ruthlessly, to get to Sampson so that the man could finally be arrested. That was his goal, no more, no less.

"I strongly suggest," he said, "that you do as I ask."

For a moment Eve stared at him, those glorious lavender eyes wide and blank and he wondered if she had even heard him. Then an expression of fury came across her face.

"You bastard!" she said, picking up a very fine silver hairbrush from the desk in front of her and throwing it at his head. "How dare you come here and threaten to take away from me everything that I have worked so hard for?"

Rowarth caught the hairbrush absentmindedly in one hand before it made contact. He had always been good at cricket. Eve was looking absolutely furious, her piquant face flushed and her breathing quick and light. But it was more than anger he could see in her face. It was desperation. There was so much passion and rage in her voice that for a moment the principal emotion he felt was admiration that she was as strong as a tigress in defending the things that mattered to her. Memory stirred again; when she had been his mistress he had given her money and had been puzzled when she appeared to have spent it all on nothing. When pressed it had turned out that she had given it all away to feed and clothe urchins living on the streets. Rowarth had protested at her generosity and Eve had turned on him, saying that he was spoiled and privileged and could not understand—all true, of course, for how could an Eton- and Oxford-educated duke ever understand what it was like to struggle to survive? Most dukes would not even care. They had argued passionately and then made love even more passionately and she had lain in his arms and at last confided the truth in him.

"I did not know my parents," she had said, her head against his shoulder, her hand resting over his heart, "and I was cold and hungry and afraid more times than I care to remember." There had been a faraway look in her eyes, as though she were seeing far beyond the walls of her bedchamber. "If I can spare even one child from suffering as I did then that has to be for the good."

Rowarth had felt humbled, made to look beyond the comfort that had shielded him since his youth to another more painful existence. He knew that Eve had chosen to become a courtesan only because she had seen it as a way out of such stark poverty.

"I was pretty," she had once said lightly, "so I used it to escape." But he knew those words hid a wealth of bitterness.

"It is only the rich who can afford moral scruples," she had once flashed at him when he had commented on the hanging of a youth for the theft of a loaf of bread and he knew that she had felt the same way about the choice she had made in selling herself.

Or he had thought he had known her until she had betrayed him.

But that was in the past and nothing to the purpose now.

He put the silver hairbrush on the desk. He suspected it was part of a quantity of stolen goods that Hawkesbury had said Warren Sampson was almost certainly laundering via Eve's pawnbroking business. Which brought him back to the matter in hand.

"You are working with Warren Sampson to pass on stolen goods," he said. "He runs a housebreaking gang that robs property across the county and then his accomplices bring the items here and you sell them, making him a double profit."

She stared at him contemptuously. "That is utter rubbish." She turned away from him with an angry swish of skirts and took a couple of paces away across the room. She could not get any farther away from him because the office was so small and he could sense the anger in her, still simmering like a pot coming back to the boil.

"I barely know the man," she snapped. "And what I do know I dislike intensely. It is both insulting and plain wrong to suggest some criminal conspiracy between us."

Hawkesbury had suggested that Eve might be Warren Sampson's mistress, a cozy arrangement if they were in bed and business together. And Rowarth was not simply going to accept her word that it was not so. Just the thought of her tumbling between the sheets with Sampson made him hot with rage and thwarted desire. Madness, when he had sworn he did not care and did not want to want her.

"Shall we sit," he suggested evenly, "and discuss this calmly?"

She gave him another look of searing disdain. "If we must. If it will hasten your departure."

He bit back a reluctant smile. Never had a woman seemed so anxious to be rid of him. But then, Eve had always been different.

"I shall want to see your accounts in due course," he said. "I need to trace every one of your transactions."

"How tedious for you," Eve murmured.

"I suppose that they are in order?"

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