

HEATHER
BOYD
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The TROUBLE
with LOVE

—◆—
Distinguished Rogues



Excerpt

PRAISE FOR THE TROUBLE WITH LOVE

The Trouble With Love blends fanciful with emotional and begets exceptional. If nothing else, Whitney and Acton prove that life has a sense of humor and sometimes the heart is the last to know, what the head has already discovered.

~ Isha Coleman, I LOVE ROMANCE.

Ms. Boyd has created two characters that cause the rest of their world to fade with their vibrancy and willingness to be passionate about life.

~ Dianne, TOME TENDER.

...it's the slow building type of romance with a sexual chemistry just waiting to boil over. *The Trouble with Love* is a great addition to this series and sees one more distinguished rogue find his own HEA.

~ JG Baldos, DELUGED WITH BOOKS CAFÉ

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BOOK 4: AN ACCIDENTAL AFFAIR (MERRICK AND ARABELLA)

BOOK 5: KEEPSAKE (KIT AND MIRANDA)

BOOK 6: AN IMPROPER PROPOSAL (MARTIN AND IRIS)

BOOK 7: REASON TO WED (RICHARD AND ESME)

BOOK 8: THE TROUBLE WITH LOVE (EVERETT AND WHITNEY)

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

THE TROUBLE WITH LOVE

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Prologue

London
March, 1814

Making merry didn't come easily for Everett Dean. The Earl of Acton did his duty, even if the weight of responsibility threatened to choke him at times. He sipped champagne slowly, casting an admiring glance over the lovely ladies who glided past his spot in the avenue of tall birch trees as if he'd not a care in the world.

Those who'd come to enjoy the Fairmont Bachelors Ball on the grounds of the expansive Fairmont estate were having a marvelous time without his participation. He could probably ask any one of the ladies to dance with him, but he did not want to give rise to unreasonable expectations beyond this one night.

Tomorrow it would be whispered that he was finally surveying the marriage mart and that could not be avoided. Those rumors would be true, if a little late. Everett had already chosen his bride, so he was uncertain why he'd felt a keen need to come to this unholy revel alone.

When he'd left his home, he'd originally had no intention of directing his driver to this spectacle but here he was, watching other people enjoy themselves. His hosts were not considered good ton. Lord and Lady Fairmont were more than a little eccentric in their habits, and in the company they kept. Within the manor behind him had been gathered mystics and fortune-tellers, determined to predict his future in exchange for coin. He'd pressed through their number

without partaking or being taken for a fool. Acton did not need a fortune-teller to determine what his future path would bring. His future was already determined.

He would take a bride within the next month and that was that.

Miss Alice Quartermane was a fine choice for him. She was not in attendance tonight; she was not out in society yet, and her parents would certainly have shielded her gentle soul from boisterous depravity such as this. He had negotiated the marriage contract with her father last year while riding to hounds at a friend's estate, and he was looking forward to meeting Alice tomorrow in quieter surroundings at last.

Everett accepted another glass of champagne from a passing waiter and looked along the avenue of trees. He would not dance tonight out of respect for Alice, and would dissuade any damsel who might encourage him. Pretty women were in general a distraction from the serious business of being the head of a well-known and respected family. That was why he'd chosen the innocent Miss Alice Quartermane to be his wife. Her father knew his interests. They both agreed that Alice would be the perfect woman to become mistress of Warstone Manor, and his countess. It was the best possible arrangement for all concerned.

A flash of long bright red hair weaving through the trees ahead caught his eye. There were others following her, men and women making the most of the moonlit evening to dance gaily.

Everett was drawn toward them too, and smiling widely.

He'd lost his innocence to a redhead in Leeds at fifteen, been caught rutting with a russet-haired maid at eighteen, and after one final indignity—falling head over heels for a married countess—he wisely chose to keep his amours confined to fair-headed damsels ever since.

Miss Alice Quartermane was reputed to be blessed with very fair hair.

The redheaded woman was garbed as a gypsy—a prosperous lady, judging by the silk caressing her curves and the gold glittering on every finger under the torchlights as she weaved between the tree trunks. Her thumbs sparkled with gold bands too but her face was veiled, so all he could see were a pair of laughing, merry eyes.

But he felt her exuberant laughter as if she was stroking her jeweled fingers over his skin. She broke from the trees onto the clipped lawn and Everett followed. She lifted her skirts a little as she danced with careless abandon, revealing slender ankles and bare feet gliding upon the neatly trimmed lawns.

He drew closer, intrigued by the way she moved with unhindered sensuality. It was as if the darkness was her natural element, and she a flame in the midst of

the chaos around her. She did not seem to care, or notice, that she was making a spectacle of herself.

He wasn't the only person who admired this woman. She continued to draw a crowd of admirers, even among the fairer sex. People stared, smiled at her transparent energy, and made a game of trying to copy her movements with varying degrees of success.

Everett was utterly entranced, and found a spot to watch as the redhead suddenly grabbed a lady, swinging her into her wild dance. They laughed in giddy joy, and soon the entire crowd was swaying to a beat that Everett had never seen before at a ton event.

The energy was compelling, the sounds and movements drawing him ever closer to the mass of humanity. He found himself surrounded, touched by strangers as they spun about on their merry way.

The redhead paused in her mad flight right in front of him and looked him directly in the eye as she had no one else so far. He acknowledged her with a dip of his head, unsure of what else he should do. He had not meant to curb her dancing. He'd been enjoying watching her sensual movements too much to desire that, but he was glad she had stopped.

He did not recognize her in the half dark but wanted to know her.

She held out her hand to him, fingers wriggling in invitation. The gems winked and he stepped forward.

Redheads were his weakness, but he suddenly didn't care one whit for caution or restraint or propriety. He took her bare fingers in his firmly. Her skin was soft and warm within his grasp and he didn't want to let go.

She tugged, and he followed her away from the crowds and into the house where it was quieter.

Their fingers still entwined, the lady led him toward a drinks table without a word, hips gently swaying ahead of him. She requested punch from a footman as she lowered her gauze veil.

"Dancing is thirsty work," she apologized in a husky tone between sips of her drink. "Why did you not join in and dance with us?"

He requested another beverage for the lady when she finished the first, trying to better see her face in the candlelight. She looked young, and very, very pretty to his eye. "How do you know I didn't dance?"

Her pretty green eyes glowed with delight. "Because I was watching you watching everyone else at play since you arrived in the garden. You are too serious, sir. Did you not read your invitation? Guests were supposed to leave their cares at the door."

"Life cannot be all fun and games."

"I don't see why not," she insisted. "As long as you hold reasonable expectations, it does not have to be full of misery. A little fun never hurt anyone."

"Is that so?"

The lady, having quenched her thirst, reset her veil over her face. "Indeed. Come with me."

She caught his hand again and pulled him along in her wake and into a deserted long gallery. Holding his hand firmly, she studied the paintings of their hosts' ancestors. "Look at this. You can tell just by looking at them that living life to the fullest extent was their goal. Don't you want a similar happiness for your own life?"

Everett gave the paintings a second longer glance, noting the couple closest to him were surrounded by hens and other farmyard fowl. "It is widely acknowledged that the Fairmont family possess a great number of eccentrics."

"I like eccentrics," she told him. "In fact, I have become one already. I will never do what is expected of me by society no matter how many long noses, and disapproving looks, bear down upon me."

His lips twitched in amusement. The woman had no idea of the trouble that attitude would cause her one day. "Already a rebel to propriety at your tender age."

"I am older than I appear to you, sir," she said, twirling a strand of red hair around one slender, bejeweled finger. "In my family, our looks change very slowly."

"Lucky you," he murmured. There was already streaks of gray in his hair at the temples and the odd strand at his crown. He felt time rushing past him—particularly so when he collected rents and saw how many men of his age had children old enough to work their farmland. But this woman had her whole life ahead of her. "Your hair has very distinct coloring."

"I'm wearing a wig," she confessed with a soft laugh.

It shocked him that she might really not be as she appeared tonight. He stretched out his hand and gathered a lock of her hair between his fingers. She felt real enough to him. "It's a very convincing wig."

Her brows were penciled, darkened with kohl, but he thought he detected a little bit of ginger underneath.

He lost his grip on her hair as the lady brushed her hair back over her shoulder. "Has anyone every told you that you are a very pretty fellow?"

Everett coughed in shock at the bold question. "Not to my face," he said, feeling his cheeks heat with embarrassment.

"But you are," she insisted. Her lips curved into a broad smile and she brushed her fingers across his cheek. She turned his face this way and

that, studying him. “You have a face deserving serious consideration.”

Her fingers were so firm and warm against his skin that he was astonished to feel himself become aroused just by her touch. “I would like to see more of your face, too.”

The woman ignored his words as she traced each of his eyebrows, the shape of his nose, and again caressed his jawline, rasping her fingers against the grain of his new beard growth.

Her attention dropped to his lips, and he discovered he’d captured one between his teeth.

“Can I have you?” she asked.

He was flattered. A dalliance with the redhead wasn’t wise, given his plans for tomorrow, but with her fingers still caressing his skin, his reasons for resistance began to erode. What could it hurt, this one last night to taste temptation before he became a properly devoted husband? “For tonight, but no more than that.”

Her fingers slipped around his face to trace the edge of his ear. “But I could spend many days and nights studying this face.” Her lips parted slightly.

She could not have more than this one night to know him, so he grabbed her hips firmly and tugged her close. “Only tonight.”

She stood inches under his height of six feet three, slender but utterly feminine in silk. Her body was so soft and warm as she pressed against him. She burrowed her nose against his neck and inhaled as her arms slipped under his coat. Her hungry moan shocked him because it matched the way he was feeling.

Everett had some idea of the layout of the Fairmont estate, so he propelled the woman into a nearby chamber before anyone came along to interrupt them and closed the door.

“What is your name?”

“My friends call me Trouble,” she whispered. “Undress for me.”

It bothered him only a moment that she did not ask for his name before he removed his coat and kicked off his shoes. “Not completely.”

She drew back, her eyes narrowing on his lower half. “Then please remove the clothing that is in the way of what I want to see.”

It was hard to miss her meaning when her attention dropped to the region of his hips and the erection he should be hiding. He wasn’t usually so easily aroused, but he put his hands to the waistband of his breeches and slipped the buttons free. He pushed his shirt up and lowered his smallclothes to reveal his cock. “Is this what you want?”

She purred, coming closer before she wrapped her fingers around him.

Everett hissed at the sensation of her hand on him. He couldn't help but thrust his hips forward as she proved her experience without a doubt or hint of shyness.

"Remove your veil," he whispered.

"Why is it that you are alone?" she whispered back without complying.

He covered her hand and slowed down her strokes, trying to see past the veil to learn more of her identity. "I'm not alone now."

Everett lifted the veil a little and leaned forward to deliver a kiss to her cheek, but the woman jerked back, her fingers catching on his clothing momentarily.

The woman clucked her tongue and resettled the rings on her fingers. "Kissing is for romantics."

"Most women enjoy kisses."

"I'm not most women," she promised him.

"I see that." Cautious of scaring her off again, he brought her hand back to his cock and closed her fingers around him. "So you are not romantic *at all*?"

"I am the furthest thing from it as a woman my age can be." She resumed stroking him firmly. "I am practical. I give and take my pleasures where I can, without any hesitation or regret, sir. I have no need for a husband or protector, but I do desire being with pretty men from time to time. You interest me tonight, and I want you."

"I'm flattered."

She clenched the top of his cock and held still. "Stolen moments of pleasure bring meaning to my life. A quick dalliance can satisfy far better than a drawn-out love affair can, and with far less trouble. Do you agree to my terms?"

She squeezed him a little harder, and he groaned when her hand slid down his length again and clenched him at the base. "Yes."

He let the veiled woman have her way, quite frankly because he was utterly under her spell. He'd never known a woman to speak so boldly of pleasure on first making his acquaintance. He'd never inspired such passion before, and her focus on him went to his head.

She stroked him almost to the brink of completion then stopped. "Take off your breaches and the rest of your clothes. They are in the way of what I want now."

Feeling a little desperate for her to continue, Everett stepped back, stripped off his waistcoat and shirt, and everything else he was wearing until he stood nude in the room. He let everything fall to the parquet floor but heard a button or such bounce away. He couldn't care where it landed right now. He wasn't one

for unguarded romps, but this woman, Trouble, had him twisted around her dainty bejeweled fingers. “Satisfied, madam?”

“That’s better. Now I can determine that all of you deserves to be worshiped. The real you is exquisite, rather than the carefully constructed society gentleman keeping himself apart from happiness.” She took a pace toward him, her glance admiring and decidedly hungry. She unwound the fringed shawl she’d tied about her waist and dropped it onto his clothing. “This moment is when lovers are the most raw, most vulnerable. I must have you.”

“Honestly, I think I must be had,” he said with a strangled laugh as she returned and took him in hand again, torturing him with lazy strokes. He caught her hips, kneading her curves and considered having her against the wall if she was agreeable. “By you, and all night,” he agreed.

The woman cupped his ballocks, kneading him carefully with one hand, but he still moaned. She traced the muscles of his back with her other hand and then cupped the back of his neck. “Lovely,” she whispered. “I’m so glad we met tonight. This is an auspicious beginning.”

He was glad he’d come tonight too, but... “I’m to be married soon,” he cautioned her.

The woman released him so suddenly he cursed out loud.

“Married? When?” she demanded.

“Just as soon as I meet the woman.” He said it with a laugh but his companion did not join in.

“You... You are engaged to be married without ever meeting her first?”

He nodded, puzzled by her outrage. “Yes, that’s the way it’s always been done in my family—for generations.”

“Sir, this is a bachelors ball. Hen-pecked husbands and panicking engaged men were not invited.” She bent to snatch up her shawl from the parquetry floor and hugged it to her chest. “I thought you knew the rules for this evening’s revel.”

“We were hardly doing anything out of the ordinary, and I am not engaged yet.”

“Merely intending to be so from tomorrow?” Her gaze hardened, but then she rolled her eyes. “And people wonder why I’m opposed to marriage. An arranged match? I suppose she comes from a wealthy family too and has only just come out?”

“She’s not out yet,” he confessed, feeling just a touch defensive on the subject. “The money from her dowry wasn’t why I chose her, but it is vital for the future of my estate and our children.”

“Fortune hunter!” She nearly shouted. “No wonder you look so sad, but I

will not pity you. I pity the poor child, married before she's even had a chance to enjoy her first season and a little attention."

"Now just a minute," he protested. "I'm not going to marry the chit tomorrow."

The woman advanced on him, stabbing him in the chest with her finger. "You, sir, should really consider if this arranged marriage is what you want before it is too late to remove the scowl you wear when you speak of it. Goodbye."

"Wait!"

"For you?" She looked him up and down coldly and then shook her head. "I'd rather drink paint."

Chapter One

Worcestershire
August, 1814

Whitney Crewe stepped from the dark carriage into torchlight, casting a wary eye up at Lord and Lady Taverham's country home. She shook out her rumpled travel clothes once more, considering the subtle intimidation of the large building looming above her.

So this was Twilit Hill.

The property name had implied she'd discover an elegant, almost delicate structure but Whitney wasn't prepared for the enormity of the reality. Dear God, this place was a cold monstrosity, and she was expected to paint those who lived here into some semblance of a happy family. No wonder the lady of the house had run away.

For the first time, she wasn't sure she was up to the challenge.

"Miss Crewe, you've come at last!" Lady Taverham cried out as she hurried down the manor's steep front steps to meet her on the drive.

Surprised by her hostess' sudden arrival, Whitney smiled broadly and rushed to meet her. The Marchioness of Taverham was a dear friend of her cousin's, and by association, now hers, too. Whitney thought Miranda the most remarkable woman she'd ever met, but not one given to enthusiastic greetings likes this. "Miranda!"

The woman caught her by the shoulders, puffing slightly. "My dear, what kept you? I've been fretting for hours that something had happened

to you after we parted.”

“Forgive me.” Whitney kissed Miranda’s warm cheeks, noting that although out of breath from her dash down the stairs, Miranda’s eyes seemed to glow with happiness. “I met the most charming newly married couple after you had been driven off, and when they learned of my accomplishments, they commissioned a sketch to be done to mark the occasion. Since it will be weeks before I pass that way again, I decided not to lose a moment and had them sit for me there and then.”

Miranda’s smile slipped. “I was beginning to suspect you’d tricked us all and changed your mind about coming to visit.”

Whitney smiled and hid the truth. She *had* thought about it several times since leaving London. She still doubted the wisdom of taking this trip even now. “I just stole a few hours for myself.”

And in that time apart, she had put her plan into motion. The inn where Lady Taverham had last seen her had been the perfect spot to dispense with the fussy companion her cousin, Lord Louth, had foisted upon her at the last moment. Finding the woman already waiting for her in the Taverham’s carriage upon leaving London had soured her good feelings toward her cousin considerably.

“Well, no harm done, I see.” Miranda squeezed her hand. “With all that has happened this season, I can understand you might feel overwhelmed and need the peace. It must be difficult to venture so far from your cousin and his growing family.”

“I have no qualms about leaving my cousin in Iris’ capable hands.” Her cousin had recently married Miss Iris Hedley, a love match she wholeheartedly approved of, and discovered himself a father to an illegitimate child. Neither situation required her supervision or involvement.

Especially not when Martin was always too protective of everyone.

Whitney collected her case containing her paintbrushes and such from an overeager footman and tucked it under her arm. She was very ready to be on her own at last. To make her way in the world with no one to answer to. She had money enough, and she had no responsibilities. She was free to live how she chose. “Besides, I promised Christopher art lessons, didn’t I?”

The woman smiled broadly. “So you did. Christopher tried so hard to remain awake long enough to greet you, but Kit had to carry him up to bed over an hour ago.”

“He must have loved that,” she said with a laugh. Miranda and Kit’s son might be too old to be carried but Kit was very new at being a father to him. “Well, tell Christopher that I always wake early so we can meet first thing in the

morning, if his tutor will release him to be with me that is.”

Miranda nodded and looked beyond Whitney’s shoulder. “Where is your companion, Mrs. Fry?”

Whitney shrugged. “She, ah, remembered friends she simply had to visit immediately and went on her merry way.”

Miranda sighed heavily. “Martin warned me you’d try something underhanded, but I told him he was worrying for naught. Oh, he’s going to be so angry with us.” Miranda closed her eyes briefly.

“Only with me,” Whitney promised Miranda. “I’m sorry, but I told you—and Martin—many times that I do not need or want a companion following me about anymore.”

“It is expected, Whitney. You’re not married yet. You must think of your reputation.”

“I’m five and twenty, Miranda.”

“And look as young as anyone fresh on the marriage mart.” Miranda sighed deeply. “But it is done now, and I trust you compensated the poor woman for the trouble of being dismissed after a mere two full days’ employment.”

“I did indeed. She has a glowing reference and fifty pounds, and that should ensure Mrs. Fry never has to work for an obstinate, headstrong spinster like me for a while,” she said soothingly, experiencing a twinge of guilt that she made the marchioness worry over her. Miranda wasn’t always in good health, so Whitney led the marchioness up the long flight of stairs by taking her elbow. It was Miranda’s heart, of course, the organ most likely to give a lady trouble. Tonight, the marchioness did seem to lean on her arm, so Whitney held her up a little more firmly. “How are things with you?”

“Very well. The dowager moved out to the dower house as if the devil chased her upon my arrival. She expects our son to visit her daily but other than that, we are quite civil. Of course, she dotes on Christopher, so she tolerates me for his sake.”

Whitney winced. Miranda and her husband hadn’t had the best start to married life, and the dowager, the most fearsome woman she’d ever encountered, was said to have favored another woman for many years. It had been a messy situation all round. Love did that. “Perhaps I’ll ask Christopher to escort me to the dower house when I go to pay my respects tomorrow morning.” Only for the sake of peace for Miranda, of course. “I suppose everyone else has gone off to bed by now.”

“Heavens no. The dowager is here, and the entire household remains awake and waiting on your arrival. Lord Acton and his guests have joined us, too.”

“What is Acton doing here?” Whitney groaned. “Last I heard, he was in

London.”

Not that Whitney was keeping track of the scoundrel.

“He is our nearest neighbor and my husband’s good friend,” Miranda reminded her. “He called earlier in the afternoon with the Quartermanes and a friend, Mr. Thompson, so Kit invited them all to stay for dinner. When I heard them arrive, I at first thought, hoped, it was your carriage.”

Whitney had no acquaintance with a Mr. Thompson, but Miss Quartermane was a young lady she’d met early in the season. She was nice if a little forward and competitive for attention. Her mother gave Whitney a megrim though. Mrs. Quartermane had stated very plainly that she disapproved of Whitney’s avoidance of matrimony, which had made for some awkward encounters during the last few weeks.

As for Lord Acton, she couldn’t imagine why he’d choose to linger in wait for her, unless he wanted the breeches of his she’d accidentally taken returned before he wed the innocent Miss Quartermane.

Miranda squeezed her hand. “Miss Quartermane is quite lovely, and I’m sure we will become great neighbors and friends one day. But promise me you’ll behave around Acton? He really has been on his best behavior since the reconciliation, especially so since his sister went to live in Bath.”

Whitney smiled, but inside she was seething. Lady Brighthurst, Lord Acton’s sister, had attempted to take Miranda’s place as marchioness through devious and despicable acts that could have ended Miranda’s son’s life, by all accounts. Whitney knew enough of the facts to know not to trust Lady Brighthurst or her brother, even if he protested his innocence. “I’ll not say one word to upset the starch in Lord Acton’s smile.”

“Oh, Whitney. If I can forgive him for the unsuspecting part he played, surely you can.” Miranda sighed. “He is trying to make amends, but I caution that you must not say a word about his sister before the Quartermanes. I don’t believe he has revealed the true state of affairs to his betrothed yet.”

Whitney came to a complete halt beneath the wide front portico. “Alice is on pins and needles to meet Lady Brighthurst and win her approval. She told me so the last time we spoke together in London.”

“I agree it is badly done of him to keep such a secret, but as far as I’m concerned, it is his business to manage.” Miranda smiled. “All I ask is to never see the woman again.”

“Yes, but surely the right moment to tell Alice that Lady Brighthurst isn’t a good person was long ago. Acton announced their engagement in the first weeks of the season. Is he afraid to tell Alice?”

“I wondered about the delay myself,” Miranda whispered as a servant

approached. “Hush now. The less said, the better.”

An aged man wearing livery approached from the shadows of the hall and bowed. “I am Anders, Lord Taverham’s butler. May I take your coat, Miss Crewe?”

“Indeed you may, sir.” Whitney moved to a mirror set above a marble-topped hall table and put her treasured paint box down. She shrugged out of her coat, removed her bonnet, and shook out the skirts of her favorite pink gown. She fluffed out the cap sleeves and then peered at her face in the mirror, noting that her bright red hair looked far from elegant again. It did gleam nicely in the candlelight of the Taverhams’ front hall though, so Whitney did her best to tame it. Largely unsuccessful, she teased a few strands into ringlets beside her ears and hoped that would do. Still, she looked like she’d recently tumbled out of bed, or off the top of the carriage she’d been grudgingly allowed to drive a few miles on the way here. What an exhilarating experience that had been!

“Barely presentable,” she apologized.

“You always look lovely,” Miranda promised.

The old butler nodded too and then hurried away with her coat and bonnet. Whitney tucked her paint box under her left arm again and smiled. “Ready.”

To be nice. To be civil. To bite her tongue rather than say what she really thought of Lord Acton’s impending marriage to Miss Quartermane.

Married by arrangement?

She shivered. Whitney did not approve of that sort of thing.

The butler returned to open a tall set of doors to the left of the marchioness, and Whitney stepped into an elegant drawing room beside her.

She was barely in the room before her eyes found Acton’s.

As always, the man turned his beautiful body toward her without a sliver of shame or awkwardness in his bearing. It was as if they’d never almost climbed into bed together one decadent night.

What a mistake she’d made, thinking she’d met a kindred soul at the Fairmont Bachelors Ball.



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