



# Captured By the Cold Duke (The Wallflower Pact #2)

**Author:** *Alianna Brookes*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** "I will throw you over my shoulder, and carry you to church if I have to! But you will marry me!"

Desperate to escape the match she is forced into, Lady Cherie runs away... only to be captured by the only man worse than her fiancé.

The last thing Duke Thomas needs is to have to deal with his best friend's sister. Until he gets caught in a scandal with her... and demands her hand in Holy matrimony.

Cherie will not marry him without a fight, but what the duke wants, the duke gets. Even if it means he has to carry her down the aisle...

\*If you like powerful Dukes, loving Duchesses and a marvelous depiction of the majestic Regency and Victorian era, then *Captured by the Cold Duke* is the novel for you.

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:06 am*

One

“ I ’m assuming there’s a very good reason you’ve invited us to your house, in disguise, at such an odd hour of the day?”

Samantha Canford certainly knows how to make an entrance, Lady Cherie Norton thought to herself, as her friend strode into her bedroom, hands on her hips, and asked the question she’d no doubt been longing to ever since she’d received Cherie’s message.

Lady Minerva Berrymoore, Cherie’s closest and oldest friend in the world, followed just behind Samantha. She also looked curious as she peered at Cherie, who was sitting on her bed, too paralyzed to move.

“I’m assuming there is at least a dead body here,” Samantha said, her gaze flitting to the dark corners of the room. “Surely you wouldn’t send such a frantic note if we weren’t going to have to help you hide a body.”

“Don’t sound so excited, Samantha,” Minerva chided. “Or else Cherie will think you actually wish there was a dead body.”

“Please, both of you lower your voices,” Cherie said, finally unsticking her throat. No one can hear us.

“Ahh, so she speaks.” Samantha folded her arms and looked Cherie up and down. “Although you also look rather pale. Did you miss luncheon?”

Only then did Samantha finally notice the stricken look on Cherie's face. The amused glint in her eyes faded, and she crossed to the bed quickly and took Cherie's hand.

"What's happened, Cherie?" she murmured. "I'm sorry to jest if it's something dreadful."

Minerva also walked over to the bed, where she hovered behind Samantha, looking worried. "Tell us what's happened, Cherie, and we can fix it," she said, in her matter-of-fact way.

Cherie licked her lips and nodded. It was something dreadful. But she barely knew how to say the words. She was still in shock. The only thing she'd been able to do after learning the news was pen two quick notes and send them with her lady's maid to the homes of her two best friends. It couldn't have been easy for them to sneak out of their homes in the early evening when calling hours were over.

This was the time of day when ladies might be expected to work on their needlework or the pianoforte, not jump in carriages and ride with haste to their friend's townhouse. But somehow, Samantha and Minerva had managed to do just that, and it left Cherie with an overwhelming sense of gratitude towards them both.

"Oh gosh, something dreadful hasn't happened, has it?" Samantha suddenly became very pale, and she gripped Cherie's hand harder. "Is it Cassandra? Have she and the duke been hurt?"

"No! Goodness, no! Nothing like that! Our friend and my brother are still on their honeymoon!"

"Then what is it?" Minerva prodded. "What has happened?"

At last, Cherie found the words. "My cousin has sold me in marriage."

Minerva and Samantha both started.

“What are you talking about?!” Samantha cried, her voice suddenly so loud that it seemed to shake the walls of the room. “He can’t sell you in marriage! He isn’t your legal guardian!”

“What do you mean by ‘sell’?” Minerva inquired at the same time. “And to whom?”

“To the Earl of Rochford,” Cherie whispered.

“But he is almost five and forty!” Samantha exclaimed, tossing her head. “It cannot be!”

Minerva, of course, took a more practical approach. “Cherie, I think you need to tell us what happened. The whole story.”

Cherie took a deep breath. “I barely know myself what happened. It all happened so suddenly.”

“Perhaps it would help us figure out what to do if we could get all the facts straight,” said Minerva encouragingly.

“Well, as you know, my brother is away, and wanted to have a carefree stay in Italy,” she began. “So, while he is gone, he left our cousin Charles in charge of the estate.”

“Yes, your foolish cousin,” Samantha said with a snort. “How His Grace could think that was a good idea is anybody’s guess.”

“Yes,” Cherie said distractedly. “Anyway, my cousin came to me today and announced to me that he had betrothed me to the Earl of Rochford and that I had to go pick a dress because he was coming over later in the evening to marry me!.”

“Oh, the audacity! Men think that a special license solves everything! You sweet dear!” Samantha rubbed her back.

“I was taken aback, of course, and told him he had no right to arrange a betrothal for me without my brother’s permission. He got angry and said that my brother gave him full power over his property, including me, and that he can do whatever he wants.”

“Oh, women are property now?” Samantha fumed, while Minerva touched her hand dizzily to her head.

“It seems unlikely your brother would do that,” she said faintly. “He would never allow someone else to have that kind of control over you.”

“That’s what I said, and what has been so difficult to piece together,” Cherie said, “but Charles said he has the legal documents to prove it. And that by the time my brother comes back, it will be too late to do anything. I will already be married and on my honeymoon in India.”

“Did he say why he betrothed you to an older man you don’t even know?” Minerva asked.

Cherie closed her eyes for an instant as the horror of the memory washed over her. “At first, he wouldn’t say. But as the quarrel continued, he lost his composure and let slip that he owes the earl a great deal of money. I believe that he made some sort of arrangement to marry me to Rochford in order to have his debts forgiven.”

Even in her distress, Cherie was gratified by just how horrified her friends looked.

“What an awful man!” Samantha seethed. “To trade your life away to cover his debts? He deserves to be locked up!”

“This is shocking beyond words,” Minerva said gravely. “The duke will put a stop to it when he returns.”

“But when will that be?” Cherie cried. The shock was starting to wear off, and with it, the numbness. Now, the panic was beginning to radiate throughout every inch of her, and she stood, suddenly restless. She strode to the end of the bed and stared at her reflection in the mirror for a long moment. She looked pale and frightened, but not beaten.

Promise me, Cherie, that you will live a different life from mine! Promise you will live your life for you and will marry only for love. Promise me!

I promise, Mama!

She turned back around to face her friends, her mind made up.

“I cannot stay here in this house, awaiting my brother’s return. Even if I were to refuse this and expose Charles to the entirety of the ton, he has too much power over me while I am in his custody.”

“What are you suggesting?” Minerva said, her eyes wide.

Samantha, of course, understood her at once.

“Are you suggesting an escape?!” she gasped. “That you flee the house to get somewhere to safety?”

Cherie looked between her two friends, seeing the same wide eyes and parted lips on each face. Then, very slowly, she nodded.

Minerva clapped a hand over her mouth, while Samantha smiled wickedly.

“I never thought I would attempt something so scandalous,” Cherie admitted. “But I must get out of the house before my cousin forces me to marry. I know that once my brother returns, he’ll put a stop to this. But until then, I cannot risk Charles trying something underhanded to force me down the aisle. If I remove myself from his protection... well, he won’t be able to coerce me into something if he doesn’t know where I am.”

“We will help you,” Samantha said at once. She looked as if she was born ready to help, and Cherie couldn’t help but smile in gratitude.

“Oh, Samantha,” she murmured, “you really aren’t afraid of anything, are you?”

“Of course I am,” Samantha said, grinning at her. “I’m afraid of my friends being unhappy. What I’m not afraid of is courting scandal by helping sneak said friend out of her home.”

Cherie laughed. It felt so good to laugh. She’d been afraid, after her fight with Charles, that she would never again.

“We will of course help you,” Minerva assured her, taking her hand. “Anything that you need. And don’t worry about the scandal. It’s your cousin who should be blackballed from Society for this. Women might not have many rights, but we do have the right to consent to our marriages. If people knew he was trying to force you... well, they would never speak to him again!”

“Let us not rely on that, though,” Samantha said at once. “Women must make our own ways in the world. And we must help ourselves. Society cannot be trusted to do so.”

For a moment, the three women shared a meaningful look. Each of them knew exactly how little Society cared for women, especially ladies such as them.

Cherie, Samantha, and Minerva were all considered wallflowers by the ton, so they had banded together and made a pact to help find one another husbands. So far, they been successful in marrying off Cassandra—to Cherie's brother, no less. Now she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that her friends would help her escape marriage to the Earl of Rochford—and keep her word to her mother. Her promise that she made while she lay on her deathbed.

“What is the plan, then?” Samantha asked. She eyed Cherie. “You do have one, don't you?”

“A vague one.” Cherie pulled herself up straight. “First, I'm going to need a disguise. And then I need to get out of London.”

The journey through the house was so frightening that Cherie felt sick with nausea the entire time. She and Minerva had acquired a dress from the housekeeper's closet. Samantha had penned a message to her friend Lady Helen Carter, her acquaintance who would be willing to take Cherie in at her home Carleton Cottage in Margate while Cherie and Minerva acquired a maid's dress from the sympathetic housekeeper. Now Cherie followed Minerva at a respectful distance, her eyes downcast, just like a lady's maid, as Minerva and Samantha attempted to keep up the conversation between them like everything was normal. But Cherie could hear the nervousness in their words.

When she snuck a discreet glance, she felt her whole body go numb.

“My ladies!” her cousin said when he saw Samantha and Minerva. Both ladies stiffened, and Cherie dropped her head even further. “I did not realize my cousin had visitors.”

“We were just leaving,” Samantha said, undisguised coldness in her voice.

Don't antagonize him , Cherie thought wildly. Don't draw attention to yourselves.

Cherie took a few steps back, imitating the way a maid might halt a bit further behind. Though in her case she melted into the shadowy alcove that framed one of her ancestor's portraits.

"Ahh, yes, so was I," Charles said. "I just forgot something, now I'm off back to my club."

He smiled, but the look was strained and insincere.

"Oh, your club, is it?" Samantha began. "It isn't a h?—"

"Have a good day, sir," Minerva said, stomping on Samantha's foot under her dress. Cherie only saw because her gaze was already downcast.

At least Minerva has more sense than passion!

"Ah, yes, have a good day yourselves, my ladies," Cherie heard her cousin bumble. Then Minerva and Samantha were crossing the hall. Cherie followed behind them. She held her breath as she passed by her cousin. She felt dizzy and sick. There is no way this is going to work!

But her cousin didn't so much as glance at her, and Cherie felt surges of both gratitude and anger at how easy it was to overlook women—especially poor ones.

Then the front door of the house was opening, and they were outside, hurrying down the steps, and then Minerva's footman was opening her carriage door, until finally, Cherie was safely inside.

Minerva slammed the door shut behind her and leaned back in her seat, breathing

deeply.

“That was close,” Cherie whispered, as the carriage began to trundle off.

“Now we just hope everything goes according to plan,” Minerva said.

And the first half of that did , miraculously, go according to plan.

The second half, Cherie reflected hours later as she stood nervously in front of a dilapidated inn, hadn't gone nearly so well.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:06 am*

Two

“Could you take my bags to the Carleton Inn, old chap?” Thomas asked as he swung down from his horse.

“Of course, Your Grace!” his valet said, bobbing his head as he took the reins.

Your Grace. He kept forgetting he was now Thomas Casserly, Duke of Wheaton.

The journey from India to Dover had been long and exhausting, and he’d only just gotten off the boat a few hours ago. Even riding his horse to this inn had been difficult, as he still felt as if he were roiling on the sea, and he could barely keep his eyes open. He needed a bath, and sleep, badly.

Which is why he was sure he was hallucinating when he saw Lady Cherie Norton, sister of his best friend, the Duke of Vaston, standing in front of the entrance of Carleton Inn, dressed like a servant.

“Either I’m more exhausted than I thought, or you really should not be here,” Thomas said, staring down in disbelief at the lady in front of him.

Because any scenario where Lady Cherie was really here, at nine o’clock at night, in the cold and dark, and dressed like a maid, could not bode well.

However, the gasp that the lady gave, and the fear that filled her eyes at the same time, was too visceral to be a travel-weary hallucination.

“My lord!” Lady Cherie breathed. “What are you doing here?”

“ I was looking forward to eating while on stable ground for the first time in eight weeks!” Thomas repeated, astonished by the absurdity of the question. “What are you doing here? Where is Aidan?”

“I’m—you must have me mistaken for someone else,” she said, rather lamely he thought.

“You can’t be serious,” he said, tilting his head to one side. “Your brother would have an absolute fit if he knew you were here, alone and unchaperoned. Don’t even try to lie and say that you are a maid. No matter how you may have dressed yourself, you are not fooling anyone.” Lady Cherie flushed, and her hands came self-consciously to the front of her dress.

“I don’t know what you’re?—”

“Come, my lady, you are not fooling anyone in those rags. I would have recognized you anywhere.”

And it was true. Thomas had known Lady Cherie for years, and even if they had met in a more unlikely place than this—and it was hard to imagine one more unlikely than this—he would have recognized her.

Those silver eyes, which seemed to flash with whatever emotion governed them each time, had been haunting him since he left for India. Nor could he fail to recognize her dark hair, which he’d so often seen whipping around corners as she ran through the hallways of her father’s estate, or the heart-shaped face that was a softer and more feminine version of her brother’s.

And now, here she was, standing in front of him. It was shocking that she thought she

could fool anyone with a plain dress, an apron, and a bonnet. No one who looked at Cherie would be able to mistake her for a servant. She was far too beautiful. And even if she wasn't, her countenance was too regal; her air too ladylike; her posture too upright.

"But—" Lady Cherie touched the bonnet on her head, and Thomas had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. She had clearly felt certain that her disguise was foolproof.

"I'm sure you tried hard to look like a maid," he said, "but unfortunately, you are my best friend's sister. I know your face well. Not to mention that you are still wearing jewels." He nodded to the pearls in her ears and the dainty gold pendant around her delicate throat. "I'm surprised that no one has robbed you yet, standing out here alone wearing more than the average person's yearly wage. What were you thinking, Cherie?!"

To his surprise, now that his shock was dissipating, Thomas felt his anger rising.

"My lady, what are you doing here?" he demanded, fear and anger giving bite to his words. How does she not realize how much danger she is in? Ruffians plague inns such as these, ready to rob unsuspecting travelers. And she is here, alone, and unprotected. "Now that we have dispensed with your futile attempt to pretend you do not know me."

Now it was anger that colored Lady Cherie's cheeks and Thomas wasn't surprised when she folded her arms and glared at him.

"It's none of your business why I am in Margate," she snapped.

"Margate? You're in Dover! Over three hours away from Margate!"

Horror filled her features, shock rounding her eyes in a way that meted his heart.

“That’s impossible! I was supposed to be in Margate! I was supposed to be meeting Lady Carter at Carleton Cottage!”

“Lady Helen Carter? What does she have to do with anything?”

“She was taking me in!”

“Well, your driver must have been confused, because this is Carleton Inn in Dover. And for the last time, where is Aidan?”

This broke her from her shocked trance.

“He is in Italy, and I would kindly ask that you leave me alone and let me carry on with my business.”

“Oh, of course! Please, carry on!” Thomas crossed his arms and drew himself up. “Of course, when one stumbles upon his best friend’s unwed, younger sister alone, in a strange part of England, without chaperone or protection, one must simply ignore her and move on with their day. Be serious, Lady Cherie,” he said and tried to ignore what saying her name out loud did to his chest. Cherie. Just the word seemed to inflame every part of him. “At least you brought money, I assume?”

“I—” Lady Cherie patted her skirts, and her face suddenly went pale. “In my haste to leave, I forgot to bring my reticule.”

Thomas felt his irritation grow. She had forgotten to bring money, on top of everything else!? What would she have done if he hadn’t come along? What might have happened to her? Where would she have spent the night? Who might have taken advantage of her?

Possibility after terrifying possibility suddenly filled his head, and fear seized

Thomas's chest with an iron grip. It was such an intense and all-consuming feeling that he staggered slightly. Blame it on exhaustion, if she asks .

Except, he didn't have any right to feel afraid for Lady Cherie. Not beyond her being his friend's sister. The horror he felt was far beyond the protective fear that a brother might feel. As if I could ever deserve someone like her as a sister, his mind sneered. Let alone as a...

Immediately, he became colder in his anger.

"That's it," he barked. "I'm taking you back to London. I suppose I don't need to know the reason you're here, but I do know that if I let you stay here alone, your brother would rightfully have my hide."

"I think you should be less concerned about what my brother would do and more concerned about what I want!" Lady Cherie cried.

"What you want right now, matters not," Thomas snapped. "What matters is getting you to safety as quickly as possible, before anyone finds out that you are here. Do you know what would happen if someone saw you? You would be ruined. And not to mention what would happen if you were robbed, or—" He took a deep, steadying breath. "Your brother is in Italy at the moment, so I will return you to the custody of your cousin. He must be running the estate while your brother is gone, is he not?"

"He is, but?—"

"Very well. Then I will call my carriage, and we will go back to London right away."

Thomas looked around for his carriage, only to remember that he had come by horse. There was no carriage.

Blast. I can't very well have the Duke of Vaston's sister sitting in front of me on my horse as I ride through Mayfair.

"I will not be coming back to London with you!" Lady Cherie said, her voice veering dangerously close to shouting. "You have no right to tell me what to do! What are you even doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in India?"

"Aren't you supposed to be safe on your brother's estate?"

Lady Cherie narrowed her eyes. "You are supposed to be in India. I went to the musicale you held before you went away! That's where my brother and Cassandra became affianced. And then you left, a week later, to help run your father's business interests." She pointed an accusatory finger at him. "You haven't run away, have you?"

"I'm not the one who has run away," Thomas pointed out. He passed a hand wearily over his brow. "But yes, I am supposed to be in India. Or I was until my father suddenly became ill. I only returned to England this morning and rode straight here from the port. I'm to get his affairs in order and sort out the estate, as well as our business interests both in England and abroad."

"So, he is very ill?" Lady Cherie asked. Her eyes widened, lips parting in sudden concern, and all the anger and accusation in her eyes softened.

"No," Thomas said, and he felt his chest tighten in pain. "He is dead."

"No!" Lady Cherie's eyes filled with tears. She took a step towards him and touched a hand tentatively to his arm. "I am so sorry for your loss, my lord. I didn't realize—" she faltered. "Oh, forgive me, you are not my lord anymore, you are Your Grace! You are the Duke of Wheaton now!"

Thomas grimaced. The title still didn't feel right. It was like someone was calling him by his father's name. "I suppose I am. And as the new Duke of Wheaton, it is my duty to bring an unaccompanied lady back to the home of her guardian."

Lady Cherie's expression hardened once more, and she dropped her hand. "You had better be ready to carry me back to Mayfair thrown over your shoulder then" she hissed. "Because that is the only way I am going back to my cousin."

Thomas thought, for a moment, that he just might do it: that he might seize the stubborn young lady, toss her over his shoulder like a bag of potatoes, and ride back to Mayfair with her kicking and screaming. He was close enough now that he could have done so if he wanted, and she was so small and petite that he knew she would weigh nothing to carry.

For a long moment, they stared at each other, the tensions between them mounting. Cherie's hair had come loose under her bonnet, and tendrils of dark hair were now falling in front of her gray eyes, which were sparkling with a fiery energy.

Her cheeks were flushed as well from the argument, and she looked so beautiful in her defiance that he felt his heart hammer dangerously loudly. She was so close. Close enough to scoop her into his arms and carry her to safety.

But before he could move, a shout interrupted them.

"Your Grace! I was not expecting to see you here. And with..."

Both Thomas and Lady Cherie turned at once to see Lord Breckenridge, one of the ton's most notorious gossips, standing in front of them. And as his eyes slid to Lady Cherie, his mouth fell open.

"...with Lady Cherie Norton!"

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:06 am*

Three

“Y our Grace, I demand to know what you are doing alone with this unchaperoned young lady!” Lord Breckenridge said, puffing out his chest in indignation as he stared between them. “And outside of a seedy inn in Dover, no less!”

“This seedy inn was good enough for you, my lord!” Cherie heard the duke grumble. However, it was hard to focus on what he was saying. She was, once again, in shock, barely able to move or think. After all their planning, all the factors she and the other wallflowers had taken into consideration to avoid scandal, here she was, caught in the middle of one.

What are the chances that Thomas—His Grace—would be here? Outside the very same inn that Minerva sent me to? And that Lord Breckenridge would also be here?

“Don’t make light of this situation!” Lord Breckenridge spluttered. “You have been caught in a most licentious position, Your Grace! And with the lady’s brother out of the country, where he cannot call you out! But if you do not make right by the lady... who knows what he will do!”

This got Cherie’s attention. She looked up, startled, and took in Lord Breckenridge’s outraged face. Glancing at the duke, she thought he had gone pale as well. Is Breckenridge right? The duke was her brother’s closest friend, but Aidan was also very protective. Would he really challenge the duke to a duel if he thought he had taken liberties with her?

“There will be no need for His Grace to call me out,” the duke said, straightening and

taking a small step towards Cherie. As he did, he reached out and took her hand in his. “Lady Cherie and I are engaged.”

Cherie felt as if all the air had been sucked out of her lungs. She swayed, dizziness overcoming her, and the duke tightened his grip on hers as if to steady her. When her sight came back into focus, it was to see an equally shocked look on Lord Breckenridge staring at them.

“Engaged!” he repeated, thunderously. “By Heaven! Then what are you doing here, in the middle of the night, with your fiancée dressed like a maid? You aren’t... I haven’t stumbled upon an elopement, have I?”

“Certainly not!” the duke said, and the indignation in his voice sounded so convincing that even Cherie believed, for a moment, that they weren’t in as scandalous a position as they actually were. “The lady was merely coming to meet me after my return from India. Her chaperone is inside.”

Lord Breckenridge’s eyes narrowed, then flickered between the duke and Cherie, who was still too numb and in shock to try and look innocent. Breckenridge’s mouth formed a pouty little smile. “Is that so? I hope you are telling the truth, Your Grace, for the lady’s sake. I should hate for you to be lying, and for scandal to haunt you from your first moments of taking up the duchy.”

“Of course I am telling the truth!” The duke sounded truly outraged now, and he took a threatening step towards Lord Breckenridge, releasing Cherie’s hand in the process. “And I shall not hear another word from you that puts my lady’s virtue in any doubt! She is a paragon of virtue, and any insinuation otherwise will be met with my full fury. In fact...” the duke paused as if thinking hard.

“If I hear any gossip, even the faintest whiff of a rumor, about her presence here at this inn, then I shall know it was you who said something, Lord Breckenridge. And

then you will have not one duke as an enemy, but two. Because Lady Cherie is now protected not just by the Duke of Vaston, but the Duke of Wheaton. And very soon, she will be the Duchess of Wheaton. And if you breathe even a word intimating any indiscretion on her part, then I can assure you, you will never again know what it means to be in Society's good graces."

Lord Breckenridge flushed. His eyes flashed with anger, but underneath that, Cherie could also sense his fear. After all, he was a mere baron, whereas the duke was, well... a duke. And Breckenridge's love for gossip meant that he considered it of the utmost importance to be in the good graces of all Society's most important players. He would not take well to being on the outside.

For a moment, Breckenridge did not answer. Cherie felt as if she could see the wheels in his head turning, as he tried to figure out what was, for him, strategically the best move.

At last, he seemed to make up his mind, because he nodded and bowed low, his expression suddenly obsequious.

"Of course, Your Grace, you are right. My deepest apologies to you, and Lady Cherie, for my mistake. I can be so quick to jump to conclusions, you see... but of course, it is as you say. There is no scandal. I see that now."

The duke glared down at Breckenridge. "And we will not hear any stories of running into Lady Cherie at this inn?"

"Of course not, Your Grace." Breckenridge bowed again. "And I hope you will remember my discretion in the future. After you are married, of course."

And with one last simpering smile at the two of them, the baron departed, leaving a weighty silence behind him.

“What did you just do?!” Cherie gasped, turning furiously to the Duke of Wheaton.

The duke, however, ignored her. Instead, he seized her hand and pulled her away from the entrance of the inn, towards an alleyway where, in the darkness, she knew they would not be recognized. Only once they were fully covered by darkness did he release her.

“That was too close,” he murmured distractedly. He was still looking over his shoulder as if fearful Breckenridge might reappear at any moment. “Far, far too close.”

“You cannot be serious about what you said to Lord Breckenridge!” Cherie shouted, not caring who heard them. The duke looked around at her, clearly startled by her tone. She glared up at him, tears of panic pricking her eyes. “We cannot marry!”

“What do you mean?” the duke looked as if he genuinely did not understand her. “Of course we must marry!”

“But I am only here because I am trying to escape a marriage that wasn’t of my own choosing! I will not now be forced into another one!”

The duke stared at her incredulously. “We were seen, Lady Cherie! Do you not understand what that means? If I had not said we were engaged to be married, then Lord Breckenridge would have told the entire ton about you being here, alone with me, at an inn known for its licentious rendezvous! You would be ruined, my lady.”

“But...” Cherie's mouth had gone very dry. She knew that what the duke was saying was correct, but at the same time, she couldn’t bear to let herself be forced into another marriage. “We are not in love!”

The words came out before she could think about them, and she flushed as the duke

took her in. His expression was cold, even a little angry, as he stared down at her.

“Love has nothing to do with this,” he said at last. “Love has nothing to do with marriage in general, for people such as us.”

“But I desire a love match! I promised my mother that I would not have the same fate as her, that I would be happy in my marriage.” Cherie said, desperation filling her voice. She didn’t want to tell him about the promise she’d made to her mother, all those years ago, but she knew it was the only way for him to understand.

She took his hand and locked eyes with him.

“I have always desired a love match. That’s why I ran away! My cousin was trying to force me to marry the Earl of Rochford. Can you believe it?! That terrible man wanted to force me into a union with him, no matter if I actually wanted him...”

The duke blinked, and Cherie could tell that this news shocked him to the core. There was a long silence as he absorbed it, during which the color drained from his face. At last, he spoke, his voice shaking slightly. “Why would your cousin do that?”

“Because he owes the earl money, from what I was able to gather.”

“But your brother?”

“Is in Italy and would not have been able to stop it in time.”

The duke’s hand balled into a fist, and he looked so angry that for a moment, Cherie thought that he was going to hit the side of the alley. “You cannot marry a man as wretched as the Earl of Rochford,” he said at last. “And now that you have been implicated in a scandal, it is clear to me that if you do not marry me, your cousin will have even more power to force you to marry the earl. I am sorry, Lady Cherie, but I

can see no way forward other than our marriage.”

Cherie shook her head and drew back. “But we cannot! My friends and I, we made a pact to all marry for love, ” she explained, trying a last effort to save her from the future she tried to flee.

“ We are old friends,” the duke pointed out. “Isn’t that good enough?”

“Is that good enough for you?” she demanded. “Don’t you desire a love match as well?”

Something flickered in the duke’s eyes, and then his expression turned to stone.

“I will not allow you to be ruined!” he snarled, squeezing his fist so tightly that his knuckles turned white. “Nor will I risk my own social standing, not to mention my relationship with your brother, who is the only true friend I have ever had. There is no other way, and at the very least, it will save you from a life of being the Countess of Rochford!”

The harshness in his tone surprised Cherie, and her own hands balled into fists.

“I will not be coerced into a marriage I did not choose,” she said, holding her head high. The duke’s eyes flashed with anger, and when he spoke, it was in the most unfeeling tone of voice she had ever heard.

“Then you should have thought first before sneaking out of your home and traveling, unchaperoned, to a dangerous town. I understand why you did it—believe me, I do—but you should have known what a risky undertaking it was.”

“It’s not as if I planned to run into you here!” she said desperately.

“Hang meeting me—you could have been killed! Do you not realize that?”

“I would rather be dead than forced into a marriage I don’t want!”

The duke scoffed. “Then you are as foolish as you are reckless.”

“Don’t call me foolish,” Cherie shouted, and she was furious to feel the prick of tears in her eyes. “Not when you say you understand the fate that awaited me if I stayed home! You should be showing me compassion, not cruelty!”

“I do understand,” Thomas said, his voice softening slightly. “But it was still a terrible risk to run away, both to your honor and your safety. Your actions put not only your own reputation in danger but also the reputations of all those who associate with you, including your brother. Now, you are being forced to deal with the consequences of your actions. And while you might not like it, I do not see what other choice you have. What other choice either of us have.”

Cherie could not believe the words that were coming out of the duke’s mouth. She had known Casserly—as she still thought of him—for many years. They had been friends, of a sort. He had always been kind to her; not just to her, but to everyone. In fact, his kindness was one of her favorite things about him. And now, he was speaking to her with such coldness and cruelty that she could hardly believe that this was the same person.

“When did you become so cruel?” she whispered, as tears filled her eyes. She didn’t want to cry in front of this cold, unfeeling man, but the last twelve hours had been the most emotionally fraught of her life, and she was so overwhelmed, scared, and alone.

If only Aidan were here... her brother would know how to set everything right.

The duke’s face hardened at her words, and he turned away. “Life is cruel,” he said,

not looking at her. “The sooner we accept that, the better. Now come, we must get you back to London before news of your escape gets out.”

Cherie sniffled involuntarily, then wiped the tears from her cheeks quickly. The duke, however, had heard her. He paused, and his shoulders slumped slightly, as if the sound of her tears had actually broken through his shell.

When he spoke, his voice was kinder, and she wondered if he truly thought what he said next was meant to comfort her. “Fear not about our lack of a love match, my lady. This will be a marriage only on paper. We will not live together as true husband and wife.”

But this did not comfort Cherie one bit.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:06 am*

Four

“A re you really refusing to talk to me? Surely you recognize this is childish?”

Lady Cherie was quiet all the way from Dover. She sat in front of Thomas on his horse, with his arms wrapped around her as he awkwardly held the reins. And despite her riding sideways, she avoided looking at him. In fact, her body was turned away from him as far as the saddle allowed.

“Truly you cannot fault me, I know it seems cruel, but you cannot pretend this was not our only reasonable option. Even if I adhered to your wishes, you would have a truly hard time finding someone after the scandal.”

He could feel how stiffly she rode, her back as straight as a board, and he knew what it meant: she was furious at him.

He huffed. “Keep your silence if you wish, then. My conscience is clear.”

Thomas didn’t know if he should be angry at her for her naivete and stubbornness, hurt by her apparent disgust at marrying him, or pitying that she was, despite her best efforts to the contrary, being forced to marry against her will.

“That is not to say that I don’t understand where you were coming from, of course I recognize your position, and empathize with the bitter irony of it. Believe me. It wasn’t as if I wanted to marry you, either.”

You’ve thought about it though, a voice in his ear whispered. Again, the voice that

sounded so eerily similar to his father's. You've thought about marrying her, but you knew you weren't worthy.

And nothing had changed, even with a new title and everything that came with it.

"Oh, isn't that lovely!" her head snapped back to glare at him. "In addition to everything, now I am being told that you feel repulsed by me!"

"I did not say that!"

"You didn't have to!"

Thomas took a few steady breaths. They still had an hour's journey to Mayfair, surely he could make her see reason by then!

"Short of blackmailing Lord Breckenridge into silence—which mind you might still not keep him from eventually wagging his tongue—there was nothing we could do to save you from being ruined."

"Don't pretend this was selfless on your part!"

"Of course not. I would lose my sense of honor, my friendship with Aidan, if not my life at his hands."

"So, while I empathize with you, you need to get over your refusal to accept the reality of the situation."

She gave him a very cold look, then turned back around. "I think we should go faster," she snapped after a moment. "It looks like rain, and we don't want to get trapped outside if there is going to be a thunderstorm."

Despite the coolness of her tone, Thomas could hear an edge of fear in it. Lady Cherie had been deathly afraid of thunderstorms as a child. She must still be afraid of them, he thought wonderingly.

He would have liked to have commented on this, to have reminded her that he knew about this foible of hers and had helped her overcome it in the past, but her body language was so angry and unforgiving that he didn't dare.

"I shall make haste," he said instead, and urged the horse to move faster.

When they arrived at Vaston Manor, it was nearly midnight. Far too late for Thomas to come in and have a word with Charles Norton. That, however, didn't stop him.

"You're coming in?" Lady Cherie asked, as he dismounted his horse.

"Of course I am," he said gruffly. "I want to make sure your cousin understands how things will be from now on."

"Tell Norton I am here to see him," Thomas said to the butler as they handed him their riding cloaks. "And tell him I have brought back Lady Cherie."

Several minutes after they had settled into the parlor, Norton appeared in the hallway, looking irate. He had barely opened his mouth to launch into whatever tirade he had planned for Lady Cherie when Thomas cut him off.

"You are a disgrace to your family name, Mr. Norton," he snarled, advancing on Charles and cutting off his direct line of sight to Lady Cherie. "If I didn't want to spare Lady Cherie and His Grace the scandal, then I would call you out at once for what you did to Lady Cherie."

"Wh-what are you talking about, Lord Casserly?" Norton sputtered, his eyes growing

wide at the sight of the furious duke.

“It’s Duke Wheaton now,” Thomas snarled, enjoying the look of surprise and horror on the man’s face. “And you know exactly what I am talking about. Selling Lady Cherie’s hand in marriage to a man as detestable as the Earl of Rochford. It is beyond the pale!”

Norton flushed with anger, and he puffed himself up. “What I do with my cousin’s hand in marriage is none of your concern!” he exclaimed. “She is mine to do with what I will!”

“She is mine!” Thomas shouted, his anger getting the better of him. The whole house seemed to echo with his shout, and the chandelier above them rattled dangerously. Norton even took a step back, alarmed. Behind him, he heard Lady Cherie shift, but he didn’t dare look at her.

“His Grace did not put you in charge, besides, she is my family.”

“No, but she is, however, my fiancée.”

“Your—?”

“Yes, my fiancée.” Thomas stood up straighter, delighting in the look of pure astonishment on Norton’s face. “It was not public knowledge yet, which is why she came to me today after hearing of your disgraceful behavior. She begged me to make the engagement public, even though the banns have not yet been read. So, I am here, telling you: the lady is my fiancée, and therefore off limits to you or anyone else.”

“But—Your Grace! I did not know! And you have been in India.” Norton’s eyes narrowed slightly. “How could you be engaged when you have been on the far side of the world?”

“The engagement is a long-standing one,” Thomas said at once, thinking fast. “Confirmed in our letters. But that is of no concern to you. What is your concern is apologizing profusely to the lady for treating her so abominably. When the Duke of Vaston hears of this, I would not be surprised if he called you out himself!”

“I-I am so deeply sorry, Your Grace!” Norton spluttered. “I did not mean for it to happen! It was the earl, he tricked me!” Tears gathered in Norton’s eyes, and Thomas felt a deep disgust. “He got me drunk and cheated at cards! He took everything from me, Your Grace, everything! I had no choice but to give him the most valuable thing I had to offer: a wife, and a wealthy one at that. Please, forgive me, Your Grace. I have truly acted abominably, as you say!”

“I am not the one to whom you should be apologizing,” Thomas said coldly. “It is Lady Cherie whose forgiveness you should be begging.”

“I—yes of course.” Norton turned to Lady Cherie and bowed—not very low, Thomas noted. “Please forgive me, Lady Cherie. My actions were self-interested, and I was most wrong.”

“I do not forgive you,” Lady Cherie said, without a hint of remorse in her voice. “And I will make sure my brother deals with you as harshly as you deserve.”

She then stormed past both of them—refusing to look Thomas in the eye—and out the door. Her footsteps echoed as she strode away down the corridor, then disappeared.

Thomas turned back to Norton, who seemed to cower before him. He took a step forward, anger radiating off of him.

“I will give you money to settle your debts with the Earl of Rochford,” Thomas said softly. “As much as it pains me to help a bounder such as you, I will do it to ensure

that you never again try to use Lady Cherie as a negotiation tactic.”

“Your Grace, thank y?—”

“And if you ever threaten my fiancée again or try to marry her off before the Duke of Vaston returns, then nothing—and I mean nothing—will save you. Do you understand?”

Norton nodded, and Thomas turned and swept from the room, hoping with every ounce of his being that Norton was scared enough not to try anything else.

The next morning, Cherie sent notes to Minerva and Samantha, and that afternoon, they both called on her during visiting hours. She waited for them in the parlor, pacing back and forth, unable to sit still.

“Cherie!” Samantha said, the moment she flung open the doors to the parlor and hurried inside. “What happened?! Did your cousin discover you? Did Helen never arrive?”

Minerva followed close behind her, and Cherie quickly explained everything that had transpired the night before. By the end of her story, both women were staring at her in horror.

“This is my fault!” Minerva finally said, breaking the silence. “I should have double-checked that my driver knew to take you to Carleton Cottage, not a seedy inn of the same name. He didn’t seem surprised by the destination, though...” she trailed off, her eyes filling with tears. “I’m so sorry, Cherie! Please, forgive me.”

“It’s not your fault,” Cherie murmured. Her mouth felt as dry as sand. “I know you were only trying to help. You could never have predicted that the Duke of Wheaton would be there, or that we’d be discovered together.”

Samantha looked up at her shakily. “I cannot believe how spectacularly our plan failed,” she said. “It feels almost comical.”

“Yes,” Cherie said dryly. “Almost.”

“Although...” Samantha hesitated. “Surely if you have to marry someone, then the Duke of Wheaton isn’t the worst prospect? Aren’t you two friends?”

“We were,” Cherie said, “but the duke seems to have become a new person entirely since inheriting his title. I could barely recognize him. He is so cold and cruel now. His title must have changed him...”

Cherie suddenly recalled an afternoon, six or seven years ago, when she’d been a mere girl of thirteen, and her brother had returned home from Cambridge with several friends in tow, including Lord Casserly. Casserly often accompanied her brother home from university, and he was by far Cherie’s favorite of her brother’s friends. While the other young men had competed in a game of pall mall outside on the lawns—refusing to let Cherie join them, of course—Lord Casserly had sat with her in the drawing room and let her beat him at cards. She had always appreciated this gesture. He was older and had every reason in the world to make fun of her the way her brother did or ignore her as his other friends did.

But Lord Casserly had been kind, and, sensing her loneliness, had taken it upon himself to amuse her. Her mother had recently died, and with Aidan away at university, those years had been especially difficult. She had been forever grateful for his kindness, and while they had become less close when he’d gone abroad to India, she had always looked forward to his trips home. At the beginning of the Season, when he’d returned home the last time, her heart had leapt in her chest when she had glimpsed him across the ballroom.

But now... now the Duke of Wheaton had replaced Lord Casserly, and he was as

distant and cold as all the other fashionable lords who cared for nothing other than titles and rank.

“But you would rather marry him than the Earl of Rochford, surely?” Minerva asked, disrupting her thoughts.

Cherie shook herself, forcing these memories from her mind, and turned to look at her friend. Minerva was watching her closely, her brow wrinkled slightly.

“Anyone is better than the Earl of Rochford,” Cherie finally relented. “But I made a promise to my mother that I would marry for love, and I am not going to compromise that now. Not after everything I went through to try and escape that... detestable marriage.”

There was a short silence as all of them contemplated her words.

“I know!” Samantha exclaimed at last. “You must write to Cassandra and His Grace! Urge them to return from their honeymoon as quickly as possible. Explain what has happened and that you need their help. The Duke of Vaston will know what to do.”

“You’re right,” Cherie said, and she stood from where she was seated on the couch and strode over to the writing desk in the corner. “I’ll write to them at once! I hate to cut short their honeymoon, but this is an emergency.”

She sat down, pulled a piece of paper towards her, and dipped a quill into ink. Aidan will save me. He will understand that I can’t get trapped in a loveless marriage like Mama did .

“Well, if it isn’t the two people who most dread seeing me,” Thomas said, as he stepped into the drawing room and saw Lady Cherie and Mr. Norton sitting on opposite sides of it, not looking at one another. “My fiancée, and the man I had to

save her from.”

Both Lady Cherie and Charles Norton looked up at his words, and both of them scowled. Although in Norton’s case, it was more of a fearful look than an angry one.

Good. Let the man be scared of me. That’s the only way I can keep Lady Cherie safe from him.

His fiancée’s scowl was a less welcome sight. She was already sitting stiffly, her arms crossed in front of her chest, and at the sight of him, her frown deepened, and her eyes filled with a stormy look.

“Now is not the time for jests,” she snapped. “My brother and the duchess will be arriving at any moment. Then we will have this whole affair sorted, and you and I will no longer be affianced.”

“You say that like I myself wouldn’t be relieved by the prospect,” Thomas said, seating himself near Lady Cherie in a stiff wooden chair. It was better to stay alert, after all. “But it’s not as if I wanted to get married. I have just come into a large duchy that is taking up a considerable amount of my time and energy. My father’s finances are difficult to fully understand, and on top of that, I’m now in the process of selling our business in India so that I might remain on this continent for the foreseeable future. This is not the ideal time for me to take a wife.”

“Then release me from the engagement,” Lady Cherie said at once.

Thomas sighed and crossed one ankle over his knee. “And see you ruined? And my own reputation in tatters? Absolutely not.”

Lady Cherie huffed and turned away from him, but that was all very well for Thomas. He had better things to think about than how to deal with her ill temper. Like what he

was going to say to his best friend when he walked through those doors.

It had been a fortnight since the disastrous night when he and Lady Cherie had been seen outside the inn by Lord Breckenridge. The intervening weeks had been so busy with the management and running of his duchy that he hadn't been able to spare much thought to his upcoming nuptials—or to what Aidan would say to him when he arrived home from his honeymoon. But now, sitting in the drawing room he knew so well, nerves filled him.

You have nothing to be nervous about , he reminded himself. If it weren't for you, Lady Cherie would be ruined—or worse.

Thomas had written to Aidan, of course, the moment he'd arrived home after dropping Lady Cherie off at Vaston Manor. But he hadn't known exactly where his friend was staying in Rome, and it seemed that Lady Cherie had also sent a letter that had reached the duke before his own because the letter Thomas had received from his friend had been clipped and irritated sounding. Thomas was sure that in Lady Cherie's version of events, he was the villain, not the hero.

Still, there was no saying how Aidan would react, even once he knew the full story. Brothers were very protective over their little sisters, and Aidan was no exception to this rule.

At that moment, the door to the drawing room burst open, but when Thomas stood, it wasn't the Duke of Vaston that he greeted, but the Ladies Minerva and Samantha.

“Cherie!” Lady Samantha cried, holding out her arms to Lady Cherie. “We're here!”

“Oh, thank heaven!” Lady Cherie said, standing and greeting her friends.

“Are we on time?” Lady Minerva asked.

“And why, pray tell,” Thomas interrupted, “are you ladies here, exactly?”

All three ladies turned to face him, each with sour looks on their faces. None more so than his fiancée, of course.

“We’re here to support Cherie,” Lady Samantha said, putting her hands on her hips. “To make sure she is not coerced into marriage.”

“This is a private family matter,” Thomas snapped. He didn’t at all like the tone that Lady Samantha took with him. “One that does not involve you in the slightest.”

“But it does involve us,” Lady Minerva said. “We are as good as sisters to Cherie.”

“This is a difficult enough situation,” Thomas said, “without the lot of you meddling.”

“Meddling, are we?” Lady Samantha asked heatedly. “Is that what you call protecting a lady?”

“I am protecting the lady!” Thomas said through gritted teeth. “I am protecting her from scandal and ruin!”

Lady Samantha and Lady Minerva looked at each other, and he couldn’t quite read the look that passed between them.

“I must say, he seems quick to jump to your defense, Cherie,” Minerva noted. She was addressing Lady Cherie, but her eyes were still on Thomas, appraising him.

“Or he is obsessed with playing the part of the hero,” Lady Samantha suggested, more dryly. “Many men love to be a white knight, even when the lady doesn’t need one.”

“Please stop talking about me as if I am not here,” Thomas said crossly.

“And he is handsome,” Samantha said, ignoring him. “I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him so close-up before.”

“He’s certainly improved to look upon since he was at university,” Lady Minerva agreed. “Cherie, remember when he helped us decorate the treehouse? I thought he was rather ungainly then, and awkward.”

“I was never awkward!” Thomas said indignantly. He colored as the women all stared at him. As much as he didn’t like to acknowledge them when they spoke of him as if he wasn’t there, he had to make sure that particular remark was stricken from the record. “I was merely unsure how to interact with young ladies who were almost, but not quite, of marriageable age. Especially when one of them was the youngest sister of my best friend.”

“The very definition of awkwardness,” Lady Samantha said, smiling wickedly. “But I will count it as a point in your favor that you helped two young ladies decorate a treehouse. Not many young men would do so.” She glanced at Lady Cherie. “I have to stick to my original assessment, which is that if you had to marry someone, he wouldn’t be the worst.”

Thomas flushed again. Is that supposed to be a compliment?

Lady Cherie, however, glowered at her friend. “You’re not helping!” she hissed at her.

“Ladies,” Thomas said, and this time, he lent a note of insistence to his voice, “I must ask you to leave. We have a delicate matter to discuss with the duke and duchess, and it will only be more difficult for all of us if you are here.”

Lady Minerva looked thoughtful. “Although we are also here to visit Cassandra, whom we haven’t seen since she left for her honeymoon. So perhaps it would be better if we stayed.”

Next to her Lady Samantha nodded enthusiastically.

“I am sure the duchess is excited to see you as well,” Thomas forced himself to say with as much calm as possible, “but wouldn’t another time be better to call upon her?”

“Certainly not!” Came a voice from the doorway. “I am overjoyed to see all my friends here, waiting for me!”

The commotion that followed was so chaotic that Thomas had trouble following everything that happened. What was clear to him was that Lady Cherie, Lady Samantha, and Lady Minerva all squealed with delight and then launched themselves at the duchess, and for the next few minutes, the four women were chattering with each other so exuberantly that no one else could get a word in edgewise.

Thomas closed his eyes briefly against the cacophony of noise. This is overwhelming. When he opened his eyes again, he saw that Norton also looked mildly terrified, and for a moment, he felt sorry for the man. These women will eat him alive for what he did to Lady Cherie.

At last, the duchess bade her friends sit down, and then she and her husband, who had stood behind her the whole time, watching the scene unfold with an expression of alarm and amusement, came fully into the room.

The duchess looked well, Thomas thought. Happy and pink-cheeked. She had always been a round, vivacious person, and she seemed even more healthy and full of vigor now. Aidan, meanwhile, looked tanned and happy as well. In fact, Thomas had never

seen his friend look as well as he did now.

Until, of course, his eyes came to rest on Thomas.

The duke didn't scowl, but a small frown did crease his brow.

"Wheaton." The duke said Thomas's new title with authority, and Thomas felt the word fall around his head like a noose. "I am glad you came."

Aidan crossed the room to his old friend, and the two of them shook hands briefly. As their hands met, Thomas's heart sank. Aidan didn't seem angry, but there was a distance to him as he shook his hand which had never been there before. It was as if he was still deciding how he would like to proceed with their friendship.

"I'm glad you're back," Thomas said. "We have many things to discuss."

"Most importantly," Lady Cherie cut in, "that I refuse to marry the duke!"

Thomas flinched, as if the words had physically hurt him, and turned to Aidan. "She keeps saying that, but I am determined to marry her. I would not have it any other way."

"Then perhaps you should have asked her," Lady Samantha objected loudly. "Instead of deciding for her!"

"But my dear, she was compromised!" the duchess said, her eyes wide as she looked at her old friend.

"None of this would have happened if Mr. Norton hadn't tried to marry Cherie off!" Minerva pointed out.

“I was duped!” Norton said, wringing his hands. “Tricked! Bamboozled!”

“That’s enough!” This time, it was the Duke of Vaston who had spoken, and at once, all the hubbub in the room died down. Everyone turned to look at him. He was staring at Thomas, but then his eyes snapped to Lady Cherie’s. “This is chaos. We will not figure anything out with all this noise and people talking over one another. I require a word with my sister—in private. And you as well, Wheaton.”

Aidan turned and left the room, and Thomas and Lady Cherie had no choice but to follow. As they did, Thomas couldn’t help but notice that Lady Cherie refused to look at him.

Once they were in Aidan’s study, Thomas and Lady Cherie seated themselves across from him. The Duke of Vaston looked wearier, now, as he settled in his chair and looked back and forth between them.

“Before I say anything else,” he began, “I wanted to say to you, Wheaton, that I am sorry about the loss of your father.”

Thomas was surprised, and he took a moment to respond. “Thank you,” he said at last, and he felt himself relax, and soften, for what felt like the first time in weeks. His body seemed to unclench, and he actually allowed himself a small smile of gratefulness. “It was a sudden illness and a quick death. But painless, at least.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Thomas saw Lady Cherie fidget and bite her lip. He would have been willing to guess that she had clean forgotten about the fact his father had just died. Immediately, he stiffened again, retreating into the “cruel” persona that he had built around him since his father’s death.

Aidan nodded, then steepled his fingers in front of him. “Now, will someone tell me exactly what is going on?”

Thomas and Lady Cherie launched into the story at the exact time, and for the next five minutes, they corrected each other and filled in each other's blanks, until they had arrived back at the present day. Thomas couldn't help but feel like they were two petulant children sitting down in front of their father to explain their mischief. Which was very annoying, considering he was only trying to do the right thing.

After he had heard everything, Aidan sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He then leaned forward and looked very seriously at Lady Cherie.

"After hearing all this, I do not understand why it is you still refuse to marry Wheaton. I know it isn't the ideal match you dreamed of—no offense, Wheaton—but what other choice do you have? He has done the right thing, the honorable thing, by offering for you, when he was under no obligation to do so." Aidan's gaze briefly met Thomas's, then it flickered back to his sister. "It wasn't his fault you were caught together like that. But he still did the right thing to save you."

Lady Cherie's mouth fell open in surprise, and her eyes filled with tears. Despite himself, Thomas felt his heart go out to her. "Please don't misunderstand me," she murmured, "I fear the scandal Lord Breckenridge could start, but I know there must be another way. You could talk to him, tell him?—"

"Tell him what?" Aidan interrupted. "That there was another reason you were there? The real reason, perhaps? Would that be less scandalous?"

"No," Lady Cherie said, reddening. "I thought perhaps you could incentivize him to keep quiet."

Aidan sat back in his chair and gave her a hard look. "I won't threaten the man."

"I don't mean threaten," she said quickly. "You could offer him something..."

“Cherie, you don’t understand how real life works,” Aidan said, shaking his head. “Coming to Lord Breckenridge with some kind of bargain is risky. He might take it, but what if he doesn’t? My trying to shush things up could only make it more scandalous. He might feel that he is being threatened.”

“And he has probably already told people,” Thomas said. “There have been mutterings at my club.” He swallowed. He hadn’t wanted to have to tell Lady Cherie this. “Several gentlemen have asked me if we are courting. Which means they’ve heard something, if not the whole truth.”

Lady Cherie’s silvery eyes began to brim over with tears, and she turned helplessly to her brother.

“There must be something we can do!”

“There is!” Thomas answered for him. “You can marry me! Is that really so bad a fate?”

Lady Cherie looked at him, and Thomas felt the strong urge to reach out and take her hand. But then his father’s words filled his head, Not good enough , and he hardened his gaze.

“I suppose it is,” he snapped, and stood. “But I should warn you, this is the last time I will make this offer. After today, I will rescind it. I cannot keep trying to get you to see reason, Lady Cherie, when you are so stubbornly refusing to. Just know that it won’t be my reputation that is permanently scarred. Mine will suffer, but it will be yours that is impossible to salvage.”

He knew the words he was saying were cruel, but he couldn’t help it. It was too much to hear, from the lady, what he already knew to be true: that he was unworthy of her.

“He’s not wrong, you know,” her brother said after the duke was gone, and Cherie turned back around to face him. His expression was grave but sympathetic, and now that they were alone, she finally let the tears run down her cheeks. “If you do not marry, it will hurt you both, but only you will be permanently tainted. He will continue to lead his life with relative ease.”

“It’s so unfair,” Cherie whispered.

“I know,” Aidan agreed. He sighed heavily. “And I’m very sorry about all of this, Cherie. It’s my fault, really.”

“No, it’s not!” Cherie protested. “It’s Charles’s, for trying to force me to marry Lord Rochford.”

Aidan’s expression clouded, and his hand balled into a fist on the desk. “Well, yes, and he will answer for that. But I should have been here to protect you. I should have known Charles was untrustworthy.”

“It’s not your fault,” Cherie repeated, shaking her head. “It all became a mess so quickly. My friends tried to help, but they couldn’t have predicted this would happen. No one could have!”

Aidan hesitated, then folded his hands on the desk. “About your friends... have you thought what it would do to them should you become embroiled in scandal? I know they will stick by you. They are brave and loyal ladies. But if you were to be ostracized from the ton, they would be as well. Especially if they didn’t denounce you.”

Cherie gasped and clapped a hand to her mouth. She hadn’t thought about this. In her panic, it hadn’t even crossed her mind that her friends would be negatively impacted by the choice not to marry the duke.

She lowered her hand and blinked up at her brother.

“Thomas would be a good husband,” Aidan continued more gently. “He is a good man. Far better than the Earl of Rochford. Perhaps he has become more severe since inheriting his title, but I have known him for many years, and I know that his heart is in the right place. He would be loyal to you; generous; kind.”

“But I promised Mama,” she said. “I promised her I’d marry for love.”

Aidan sighed again. “Mama is dead, Cherie. And even if she were alive, she would tell you to marry the duke. She would want to protect you. As do I. As do your friends. And as does Wheaton, which is a credit to him.”

Silence filled the room. Somewhere else in the house, Cherie could hear her friends laughing. They had reached the end of the road, she knew. There was nothing else she could do.

Very slowly, she nodded. Her brother was right. She had to marry the Duke of Wheaton.

## Page 5

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Five

“Are you ready to get married?” Cassandra asked, peering at Cherie underneath her veil.

Cherie, who was looking at herself in the looking glass above her vanity, just gritted her teeth. “Is a lady ever ready?” she asked grimly.

“Perhaps if she has the love match of her dreams,” Samantha said, from where she stood in the window, looking out over the London streets. “But even then, I think ladies are nervous before their weddings. After all, they are the ones that have everything to lose in a marriage.”

“You’re not helping, Sam,” Cassandra said, frowning at her old friend. “We’re trying to cheer Cherie up, not make her feel worse.”

“It’s fine,” Cherie said, sighing. “Nothing will cheer me up. She might as well be honest about the marriage state.”

At that moment, Minerva burst through the door of Cherie’s bedroom, looking distinctly ruffled. “The servants have just told me that your cook never implemented my dinner plan!” she cried. “The meal I had planned for you will now be something else entirely! I can’t imagine what has gotten into them, defying my orders like that...”

In the mirror of the vanity, Cherie and Cassandra’s eyes met, and they both stifled a smile. Minerva was the worst person at planning events that any of them had ever

met, and Cassandra had specifically instructed her staff to never let her arrange anything at Vaston Manor. Apparently, the staff had done well.

Cherie sighed again. “If I weren’t getting married and leaving to live with the Duke of Wheaton, we would have been able to live here together as sisters,” she said to Cassandra. “I have never had a sister, and I was so looking forward to it.”

“Sisters can be overrated,” Cassandra said with a rueful laugh. “Although don’t tell Helen I said that.”

“I dearly love my sister,” Minerva added, “but she can be a pain. She’s so painfully shy she makes even me feel like a social butterfly!”

“It would have been nice to live together,” Cassandra said, smiling warmly at Cherie and fluffing the end of her wedding gown. “But instead, you will be living in a grand house of your own. You will have a staff to manage, and responsibilities, and a grand estate in the country of which you are the mistress. It will be wonderful, Cherie. You’ll see.”

“And then soon, you’ll have children,” Minerva said.

Cherie swallowed and then smiled tightly. “You’re right. It will be well, even if it wasn’t what I wanted.”

But inside, her heart felt heavy. She had not told her friends what the duke had told her about how theirs would be an unconventional marriage; that they would not live together as man and wife but be married only in name. She was too ashamed of having failed so completely at making the match they’d set out for when they’d decided to team up together to find each other husbands.

“It’s going to be wonderful, just you wait and see,” Cassandra said, squeezing her

shoulder. “You and the duke might not love each other now, but Aidan assures me he is a good man. And you will grow to love and respect one another. That is a solid foundation for a long and happy marriage.”

Cherie thought of the coldness the duke had displayed so far and had to suppress a shudder. Instead, she forced herself to nod in agreement.

“You are right. Now, we should make haste, before I’m late to my own wedding.”

She stood, and her friends gathered around her. “Well, we did it,” Minerva said, forcing a smile. “We married another one of us! And it might not be a love match, but it is a perfectly respectable one.”

“More than respectable!” Cassandra said. “The duke is handsome, rich, and kind.”

Samantha just harrumphed , and Cherie couldn’t help but laugh.

“You each have gotten me through this difficult time, in your own unique ways,” she murmured. “And I will be grateful to you forever.”

And, holding hands with Cassandra and Minerva, Cherie made her way out the door and towards her wedding.

The wedding was a small, private affair, held at the church closest to Vaston Manor. Throughout the whole ceremony, Cherie felt as if she couldn’t breathe. It was warm inside, and her stays were tighter than she usually liked them.

That, or she was simply nervous.

Everything had proceeded so quickly. Only a week had gone by since her brother had returned from Italy and made her see reason, and now, she was standing at the altar

with the Duke of Wheaton, repeating the vows back to the rector, and then he was pronouncing them husband and wife.

As the audience politely clapped, Cherie and the duke turned to look at one another. She felt sick and dizzy, and the duke looked stoney-faced. She had always found him handsome, ever since she was a little girl. He was tall and blue-eyed, with dimples when he smiled, and brown hair that was long and luxurious. But the hard look that had graced his face ever since she'd seen him outside the Carleton Inn in had rendered him less handsome. Or really, he looked the same, but the coldness in him was so off-putting that it was impossible to find him handsome.

That, or he resents me for forcing him to marry me through my foolish actions . The thought twisted her stomach with guilt, but only for a second.

If he didn't want to be forced to marry me, he could have just said so. I was happy to release him at any moment.

However, he surprised her by taking her hand. "Now that we are married," he murmured, "I would like for you to call me by my Christian name. Thomas."

Cherie blinked, taken aback by the sudden and intimate request. For a moment, she felt touched, and even considered accepting his request. But then she remembered that they were married and that she would never, as long as she lived, know what it felt like to fall in love.

"I don't believe that will be necessary, Your Grace," she said coolly. She then removed her hand from his, turned and began to walk down the aisle. If any of the guests thought this odd, she didn't care. The duke hurried to catch up with her and took her arm in his, but when she glanced at him, his face was once more stoney.

The wedding breakfast, at least, was delicious. This was thanks to her sister-in-law

directing the cooks to ignore Lady Minerva's instructions, and for that, she was grateful. If she couldn't enjoy her new marriage, then she could at least enjoy eating as much good food as was humanly possible—and drinking perhaps a little bit more champagne than was strictly acceptable for a young lady.

I'm not a young lady anymore . I'm a married lady. Which means I can do whatever I want.

Thankfully, the duchess had also gone to pains to arrange the wedding breakfast table so that Cherie was seated on the opposite end of the table from her husband. She had also arranged it so that her friends were surrounding her, so for the next few hours, Cherie busied herself with talking to Cassandra, Minerva, and Samantha. She also made sure to keep motioning for the footman to refill her champagne glass. The third time this happened, she caught her husband's eye from across the table. He was watching her, a wary look on his face, but she looked away quickly and refused to make eye contact with him for the rest of the meal.

It was only as they were digging into dessert that the wedding breakfast became truly interesting.

“Am I late?” A cool, cutting voice cut through the chatter of people, and Cherie looked up from her pudding to see a tall, thin, middle-aged man standing in the doorway of the breakfast room, a thin smile on his face. The man had blonde hair and tawny eyes, and they were fixed on her husband with an intensity that made her uncomfortable.

The room grew silent at once. Most people present knew who this was. Those who didn't looked around curiously at the dark expressions on everyone's faces.

“Lord Rochford,” the duke said, at last, setting down his knife and fork. “You are, in fact, not invited.”

“I am aware that an invitation was not extended to me,” Lord Rochford said, smiling benignly. “But I chose to believe the snub was accidental, considering that we are family, and considering that the Duke of Wheaton is not an unforgiving man.”

Once, Cherie might have agreed with him. The Casserly she had known had been kind and funny. But the new Duke of Wheaton was as cold and unforgiving as she could imagine.

“However, if you are in an uncharitable mood,” the earl continued, his cold blue eyes flickering around the table and coming to rest on Cherie, “then I at least hoped I could appeal to the sensibilities of your new wife.”

The duke stiffened, and Cherie set down her fork and knife and gazed furiously at the earl.

“What is it I can help you with, my lord?” she asked.

“I am here hoping to beg for your forgiveness,” Rochford said, and the tension in the room became even sharper.

“You’re not in a position to make entreaties of my wife,” her husband said, his voice as cold as ice, and Cherie felt goosebumps go up her arm. She glanced covertly down the table at him. His face had remained calm and composed, but there was a cold dislike and even anger emanating from his eyes that she hadn’t seen before.

“We are family,” the earl said, his eyes unmoving from Cherie’s face. “And family forgives one another.”

The Duke of Wheaton let out an astonished laugh, and everyone turned at once to look at him.

“What kind of man tries to buy a woman’s hand in marriage?” he asked Rochford, the remark sarcastic and cutting. “Is that what you consider to be proper behavior?”

The duke’s cool anger was so strong that Cherie was surprised the earl didn’t look more discomposed. She herself felt discomposed, but not out of alarm or fear. It was as if she was seeing the old Casserly, and it made her heart ache... the boy she’d known might have defended her that way.

Instead, the earl bowed low, an obsequious smile on his face. “Thomas, we are old friends as well as cousins, and I can assure you, I came here only with the best intentions. You are right, of course: it was not the correct approach to accept Mr. Norton’s offer of his cousin as a match. But it didn’t come from any place of malice. I am simply in want of a wife, and Lady Cherie is a beautiful, intelligent, and wealthy woman. I knew she would make an excellent wife and countess.”

“You will refer to her as Her Grace or not at all,” Thomas said slowly, and although his voice remained calm, there was a finality to his tone that told everyone listening he would brook no opposition. To her surprise, Cherie felt her heart leap at her husband’s defense. She didn’t fully understand why it made her feel as if her whole body were on fire, but it did.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause, and then the Earl of Rochford smiled again. “Of course. I apologize, Your Grace.” He bowed his head in Cherie’s direction. She did not respond. “However, as I was saying... You cannot fault me for thinking it wise to marry the duchess. I did not intend to “buy” her, as you phrase it. I merely thought it would make a good match and would have allowed her cousin Mr. Norton to fulfill his debts and keep his dignity intact.”

At the end of the table, Norton had turned the color of beetroot. “You have only brought me more indignity!” Norton cried out. “And now you lie by telling these people that I offered Her Grace to you?! I did not offer, my lord. You asked for her

hand in marriage, in order to settle my debts.”

Cherie pressed her hand to her mouth to keep from gasping. So, the earl had requested her hand in marriage?! She had assumed her cousin had merely offered, out of thoughtlessness for her feelings. But knowing that the earl specifically requested the marriage changed everything. It meant he had been thinking of her as a potential bride, even before whatever card game had led to her cousin’s debt.

But why? We are barely acquainted! Why would I be his first request?

“It is no lie,” the earl said smoothly. “I am not ashamed to admit I asked for the lady’s hand. But again, it wasn’t merely to ‘buy’ her, but to allow two gentlemen to mutually benefit from a difficult situation. My intentions, I assure you all, were pure.”

“Surely you don’t expect me to believe that,” the duke said, raising an eyebrow. “If your intentions were pure, you would have asked the lady for her hand in marriage, or at least waited until the Duke of Vaston had returned to ask his permission to court her. Instead, you took advantage of a weak man to try and manipulate the situation to your advantage.”

If Cherie hadn’t been so angry at the sight of the Earl of Rochford, she might have found it funny her husband didn’t think twice about abusing Cousin Charles to his face as if he weren’t present.

“I am inclined to agree with Wheaton,” Aidan said, from where he sat across from his wife. “You have shown your true colors, Rochford, and you cannot be trusted.”

The Earl of Rochford’s smile finally faded, and he stared around the room with a beseeching look on his face.

“I came here to make amends,” he said at last. “And to bring a present to the newlyweds, so that I might show them that while I did once hope to marry Lady Cherie, I am happy that she has found such a perfect match with someone else.”

The earl snapped his fingers, and a servant entered after him, bearing a bottle of expensive-looking brandy. After taking it from the servant, Rochford turned to Cherie and bowed low.

“This cognac is one of the rarest and most exclusive ever produced,” he explained. He took several steps closer to her, and even though she saw both her brother and husband stiffen, neither moved. When Rochford was only a meter away, he stopped and glanced down at the bottle.

“It is considered one of the rarest bottles distilled in France, distilled with a rare combination of herbs that give it strong healing properties. Apparently Louis XIV himself believed in its restorative powers so much that he had it brought to him with every meal. As you know, I am an amateur herbalist myself, so I couldn’t help but look for a bottle on my last trip to the Cognac region. I was saving it for my medicinal purpose but thought that I should, perhaps, give it to you instead, Your Grace, to show that there is no resentment between us. And to assure you that I never would have married you without your consent.”

The earl’s expression had softened, and when he extended the bottle out to her, she reached for it automatically.

“I promise you, Your Grace, I was going to ask for your hand in marriage personally,” he said more quietly as if they were the only two people in the room. “I called upon you, the evening after I spoke to your cousin, but was told by Charles that you had run away. I assure you, if you had been present, I would have cordially asked your consent to marry you.”

But despite the softness in his expression and the kindness in his voice, Cherie still felt a chill go through her. No matter how gracious his expression or how honeyed his voice, the earl's eyes remained unsmiling.

She clutched the bottle closer to her and nodded. "Thank you for the gift," she said, her voice neutral.

"I trust you know the way out," her husband said dismissively. He did not seem at all moved by the gift. "Please leave before you do any more damage here—just like you always do."

The phrasing of this caught her attention, and Cherie suddenly wondered if there was more to her husband's relationship with the earl than she knew. And indeed, the air between them seemed particularly tense with unspoken hatred. Every time they looked at each other, it was with daggers in their eyes.

Once again, she wondered why exactly Rochford had asked for her hand in marriage. If he was really in want of a wife, surely there were many other women he might have been able to pursue, without having to resort to bribery. If it was Thomas that he hated, why had he come after her?

Rochford straightened and looked around at everyone assembled, then plastered one of his signature cold, obsequious smiles onto his face. "Of course, Your Grace. I do not wish to intrude. I hope you will have a pleasant wedding breakfast and the beginning of your marriage. I'm sure I will see you soon."

And he flashed her a smile that chilled her to the very bone. It wasn't just a smile: it was a leer. And the look in his eyes seemed to say, That isn't just a promise, it's a threat.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:06 am*

Six

“What exactly is your relationship with the Earl of Rochford?”

Thomas looked up to see that his new wife was watching him carefully from the other side of the carriage. The wedding breakfast had ended, and they were now on their way to his residence, where they would begin their life as a married couple... or at least a married couple wherever society's eyes could see.

“What do you mean?” Thomas asked, feigning ignorance. “He is my cousin.”

“But there is something else you're not telling me,” Cherie said, her eyes narrowing. “The animosity between the two of you is palpable.”

“Well, he did try to buy you in marriage,” Thomas pointed out. He knew he was being purposefully difficult, but he didn't particularly want to go into it all with her.

Cherie, however, was watching him closely, her brow furrowed but her eyes soft, as if she were genuinely curious. “But it doesn't make sense. The earl and I have only spoken a few times. We are not well acquainted. Why would he ask for my hand from Cousin Charles? And out of the blue like that? If he had really wanted to marry me, why wouldn't he have asked my brother for permission to court me? And why me? That's the biggest question of all. It makes no sense.”

Thomas sighed. As much as he didn't like rehashing his family relationship with the Earl of Rochford, he knew that he owed his wife at least a little bit of the truth.

You can't tell her everything, of course.

"I don't know exactly why he asked for your hand in marriage," he began truthfully, after a long moment. "But it's true that the earl and I do not get along. Perhaps he thought that he could best hurt me by forcing my friend's sister into marriage."

"That seems rather roundabout," Cherie pointed out fairly.

"Yes, it does," Thomas agreed. "Perhaps he merely wanted your dowry, which is significant."

"But it feels more conniving than that, doesn't it?" Cherie leaned forward in her seat and cupped her chin with her hand. "He was gambling with Cousin Charles specifically when he knew my brother was in Italy. That's when he fleeced Charles for everything he had. Then he demands that Charles give him my hand? There is something suspicious about the timing..."

Thomas's heart beat faster in his chest. While he wouldn't put anything past the Earl of Rochford, he hadn't considered before that there had been a nefarious plan behind the earl's bid to marry Cherie. He had merely thought that the earl had taken advantage of an opportunity to get a rich wife. Not that he had purposefully planned this while Aidan was out of town.

I should have known. The earl will do anything to get his way. But why? Other than being wealthy and titled, why would he go after Cherie? If it's revenge on me he wants, well... What does she have to do with me?

A horrible thought occurred to him, then. Is it possible Rochford knows about the tender feelings I have always held for Cherie?

But it wasn't possible. No one knew about that. No one...

“Perhaps he knew that Aidan would refuse him,” Thomas said at last. “So he had to resort to less-than-savory tactics.”

“Aidan would surely have said no!” Cherie said with feeling. “And so would I. He is the last man in the world whom I would ever want to marry...”

She trailed off, then looked out the window, and Thomas’s heart hitched in his chest. Does she feel any relief to be married to me instead? Or is she just as disappointed to find me as her husband?

She had been forcing herself to smile all day. He had seen how hard she’d worked to maintain that smile. She had looked so beautiful all day, as she always did, with her dark hair lustrous and always catching the light, her gray eyes alert. His heart had skipped whenever he’d seen her, especially when she would smile so winningly that it could fool almost everyone who looked at her.

But not Thomas. He had known her long enough to be able to see underneath her smile. And underneath it, she was unhappy. It broke his heart to see her like that. For as long as he’d known Cherie, he had tried to make her happy. By playing games with her, bringing her books that he’d stolen from the library at Cambridge, and answering her questions about the outside world whenever she was curious. And now, he was the one causing her unhappiness. It made him want to reach out across the carriage and take her hand, to pledge to her that he would do everything, from this day forward, to make her happy.

But of course, he didn’t.

How could he ever make her happy? Someone like him could only be the villain in her story, not the white knight.

“So, tell me,” Cherie said, turning back to him at last. “Why is there so much

animosity between you and the earl?"

Thomas grimaced. "I caused him grave harm and he cannot bring himself to forgive me. I cannot blame him, but I won't allow him to take his enmity out on you."

"But how could you have possibly injured the earl? The man I remember you being was kind and funny, not one to give offense."

The way she looked at him made his heart ache, but he forced himself to keep going. "Constantine was involved in my father's India venture, and he is vehemently opposed to me closing down the India operation, although I am eager to. But it's more than that..." He hesitated. "Constantine was my father's heir apparent until I was born. For years, my mother struggled to conceive, and during that time, my father doted upon Constantine and planned to leave him everything. His own father had died when he was young and had been a cruel man, so I think Constantine really saw my father as his own. But after I was born, Constantine was pushed aside and ignored for many years, until he started working in the business."

"So, I think he always hated me and resented my place as my father's rightful heir. It didn't help that we never much got along. You heard him say he is an herbalist, but that is putting it nicely: he is an amateur alchemist, if you can believe it! When we were growing up, he was always mixing elixirs, trying to come up with concoctions to make boys he didn't like sick, or to make himself taller or stronger. I believe that now he takes clients for his strange medicines."

"That is rather sinister," Cherie agreed, but she was more interested in the business arrangements he'd mentioned. "But why do you want to close down your father's business in India? Isn't it supposed to be quite profitable?"

"I have spent too many years abroad," Thomas explained, "and I would like very much to spend my time here now. Especially now that I am married."

Thomas gave Cherie a tentative smile, and for a moment, it looked as if she might return it. But then her eyes narrowed, and she scowled.

“Don’t pretend as if you are eager for us to set up house together as husband and wife,” she snapped. “I know that you are not. You have already promised me that we shall not live together as a true married couple, and after how you have acted over this past fortnight, I am not going to believe that you have suddenly become kind again.”

Thomas felt his anger, so close to the surface ever since his father’s death, once more flare up. “How many times must we go over what happened this past fortnight? You know my hands were tied! And you agreed to the match in the end!”

“Only to protect my friends from scandal!” Cherie cried. “And I still think that you should have helped me escape from the inn and find my way to freedom, even if it meant you had to blackmail Lord Breckenridge. That would have been the truly chivalrous thing to do. But no, instead you’re trapping me in a marriage I didn’t want and telling me this sad story about Lord Rochford to try and prove that you’re at least better than him. Well, I don’t buy it! You might not mistreat your workers, Your Grace, but you still mistreated me by forcing me into a marriage I never wanted!”

Thomas ground his teeth together. He was tempted to tell her, for the hundredth time, that he had only done what he had in order to protect her, but he couldn’t. Not when a very small, very secret part of him wondered if there was another reason.

You have her now , the voice whispered. The girl you always wanted. You just had to force her into it, because you would never be worthy without the weight of society coercing her.

Thomas gritted his teeth and tried to force this thought from his head.

“I asked you to call me Thomas, not Your Grace ,” he said at last. “Even if our marriage is to be untraditional, I should like my home not to feel so stuffy and formal.”

“Why should I care what you want?” Cherie cried, although a slight quaver in her voice made him wonder if that was fully true. “I wanted a home full of love, but will I ever get that? No! Therefore, I will continue to call you by your title, as that is what clearly has made you into this hard, unfeeling person. Your Grace.”

“I’m not hard and unfeeling,” Thomas snapped. “An unfeeling person would have let you be ruined, not offered to marry you.”

“You are unfeeling! You—you are nothing like the young man I knew. You came back from India cruel and unfeeling. You could have at least tried to make this wedding more bearable for me by telling me that you wanted to marry me. Lied to me if you had to. Told me that I looked beautiful today. Anything, even the smallest amount of tenderness, would have gone a long way.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she turned determinedly away, brushing them away with her hand.

Thomas opened his mouth to speak. He wanted to say Of course I wanted to marry you , and You have always been my favorite person in the world , and You looked so beautiful today it melted my heart , but he couldn’t bring himself to say the words. How could he? If he did, she would only get her hopes up that he could be the kind of man and husband she deserved.

But he wasn’t. And that would only lead to more disappointment. He couldn’t do that to her.

So instead, he said, “You didn’t want to marry me either, Cherie, but we are both

making the best of a bad situation.”

Tears began to leak down her cheek, and he forced himself to turn and stare out the window, unseeing. Never in his life had he felt more certain that his father was right about him. He was worthless. He was even ruining his wife’s wedding day.

At last, the carriage pulled up outside of his family’s townhouse, and Thomas descended from it. He held out his hand to help his wife down, but she ignored it, choosing instead to hold onto the side of the carriage.

“Would you like to have supper?” he asked, hopefully, as they walked together to the front door. The butler opened it, and he followed his wife inside, where they were greeted by the housekeeper, Mrs. Mallow. As they entered the hall, Thomas watched his wife take in the space around them. It was beautiful if he said so himself. His father, despite all his flaws, had good taste and had decorated the hall in pink marble from India and a wealth of other colorful paintings and tapestries from the Subcontinent. The result was that the house looked nothing like most of the other homes in Mayfair.

“I think I’ll take supper in my room,” Cherie said quietly. She wasn’t looking at him, but at least she had stopped crying.

“All right. I’ll show you to your bedroom.”

“Mrs. Mallow can do that,” she said. She pulled off her gloves and moved away from him. “I shall see you tomorrow morning, although perhaps not until the afternoon, as I plan to sleep late.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Thomas saw the butler and Mrs. Mallow exchange a surprised expression.

They're not spending their wedding night together?! It seemed to say.

"Of course," Thomas said, unsticking his throat. "Whatever you prefer. It's your home now, and I want you to be comfortable."

Without looking at him, Cherie followed Mrs. Mallow up the stairs and disappeared from view. Thomas had no choice but to follow the butler to the dining room, where he ate supper alone.

When Cherie entered the duchess's bedroom, which had been prepared for her ahead of her arrival, her first thought was that the late duchess must have had remarkably good taste. She was surprised, in fact, that the late duchess's taste had been so modern. The bedroom wasn't wrapped in the usual heavy fabrics that the older members of the ton preferred.

Instead, the curtains on the four-poster bed were light and airy, and an eggshell blue that was remarkably similar to the color of her bedspread when she was a girl. And the room, instead of being dark and wood-paneled, had been painted a soft cream color, with blue wainscoting that matched the drapes on the bed. Even the vanity was in a modern style.

While the rest of the house looked like a museum of the Far East, this room alone felt as if she could have decorated it herself. The style was very similar to the way she'd decorated her brother's townhouse, and she had to admire the effort that had gone into ensuring this room would be comfortable and feminine.

"The late duchess must have defied her husband to decorate this room so," she murmured to her lady's maid, who had come with her from Vaston House, as she undressed her. "It's not at all like the rest of the house."

"It reminds me of home," the lady's maid murmured in agreement.

The reminder of home was helpful as Cherie got into bed later and twitched the curtains closed around her. Because other than the similar decorations, this place felt completely foreign, and as she stared at the canopy above her, she let the tears once more flow down her cheeks.

I'm completely alone. Trapped in a loveless, passionless marriage for the rest of my life.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:06 am*

Seven

“Do you like running your own estate, Your Grace?”

Lady Chastity Berrymoore, Minerva’s younger sister, rarely spoke, so Cherie took it as a great compliment when the young lady asked the question. She looked up from the tea set, which she had just been pouring, to smile at her best friend’s sister.

Lady Chastity was sitting opposite her on the settee, next to Minerva, and went pink in the face when Cherie looked at her. She was so painfully shy that even though Cherie had known her for most of her life, she was still embarrassed to speak to her.

Chastity was only two years younger than Minerva and had just come out this Season. She and her sister looked almost identical, but their personalities were so different that they almost didn’t seem related.

Where Minerva was smart, exacting, opinionated, and unafraid to tell a man when he was wrong, Chastity was quiet, easygoing, and quick to agree with others. She was a pleasant girl, and Cherie had always been fond of her, but she was difficult to get to know. Her shyness was a barrier for most people, and Cherie wasn’t sure how well she would fare on the marriage mart.

However, as Cherie set her teapot down on the coffee table, she was determined to make Chastity feel comfortable.

“I do enjoy running my own estate,” she said. “It is nice to have responsibility after so many years of having nothing to do but decorate cushions and play the pianoforte.

It's challenging, to say the least, but I like a challenge."

Chastity nodded as if she understood. "And the duke?" she asked, her cheeks still pink. "What is he like? Do you enjoy being married?"

Cherie hesitated. She had been married for two weeks now, and while there were many things she could tell Chastity, she wasn't sure that she wanted to disillusion the young lady. She had just come out and probably excitedly looked forward to marriage. Cherie didn't want to ruin that for her.

"The duke is a wonderful husband," Minerva finally rushed to say, filling the awkward silence that had begun to grow between them. "Weren't you just telling me how hard he works at maintaining his businesses?"

Cherie smiled quickly at her old friend, a current of understanding passing between them. Minerva was so good at reading Cherie that she always knew when to jump in and say the right thing when Cherie was at a loss for words.

"Yes, he works very hard," Cherie said, forcing a smile as she turned back to Chastity. "It is wonderful to have a husband who provides for me and all my needs."

Except my need for love .

"Now, shall we start our tour?"

Chastity nodded eagerly, and the three ladies stood and took their cups of tea with them as they began to wander through the house. It really was a sight to take in, and Cherie knew that it would keep Chastity occupied with all its splendors from the Far East.

And she was right: the young lady was soon busy walking quickly from one statue to

the next, gasping in admiration over the colors and exotic artistry that she had never seen before.

“I should love to go to India someday!” she exclaimed, as she stood in front of a statue of a woman with many legs, who appeared to be dancing. “How marvelous it must be!”

“It’s hard to imagine someone as shy as Chastity doing well in India,” Minerva said in an undertone to Cherie as they lingered behind her sister.

“Perhaps,” Cherie said. “Or perhaps she would benefit greatly from the independence it would afford her. Maybe she would finally come out of her shell.”

Minerva nodded thoughtfully. “That is one possibility. But then she would have to marry a man who wants to go to India.”

Cherie sighed. “It is unfortunate that ladies cannot travel on our own to distant lands. We are entirely at the whim of our husbands...”

“Speaking of husbands, how are things going?” Minerva asked, eyeing her. “Really?”

“Really?” Cherie sighed again. “I suppose it could be worse. We have not spoken much since our wedding. And our routines could not be more opposite. He usually rises early and goes riding, then he takes breakfast alone and works until the afternoon when he goes to his club. He is always home late and again, has supper alone. I am the opposite. I rise late, then receive callers, then go for a ride in the afternoon, then take supper in my room.”

She didn’t mention anything about the nighttime, when she would lie awake for hours, wondering what it would be like to share a life with a husband that she actually loved.

“Don’t you want to have supper with him?” Minerva asked. “Maybe if you got to know him better, the marriage might be more pleasant.”

“I do not want to give him that satisfaction,” Cherie said, folding her arms. “And I am still too angry at him to desire to spend so much time in his presence.”

“You must let go of this anger,” Minerva said, surprising her. She was watching her younger sister admire several paintings, her expression thoughtful.

“How can you say that?” Cherie snapped. “You know what he did to me! Aren’t you on my side?”

“Of course I’m on your side,” Minerva said, turning to face her. “That’s why I’m advising you to let go of your anger. You are only making yourself miserable by holding onto it. It is done. You are married. There is no going back. So, you can either make the best of your situation, and try to get along with your husband, or you can keep this anger up, and doom yourself to a life of unhappiness.”

Cherie bit the inside of her cheek to keep from lashing out at her friend. She knew, deep down, that Minerva was right. It was just difficult to hear it.

“I know that I know nothing of marriage,” Minerva continued. “So, forgive me if this is overstepping. But now that my sister is considering marriage, I find myself thinking often of what it must take to make a relationship work over such a long period of time.”

“Hopefully your sister’s husband will not do what the duke did to me,” Cherie said.

“Yes, hopefully. But all marriages have resentments and betrayals,” Minerva said wisely. “And he will surely do something, at some point, which angers her. And she will have to choose to let go of that anger, eventually, if she wants to be happy.”

Cherie sighed and took her friend's arm. "You know, you're a very wise woman," she said. "You're going to make a man very happy someday."

Minerva laughed. "I am afraid that after your wedding, we wallflowers are feeling rather uninspired to help one another find matches. So, for now, I am focusing on Chastity."

"Does that mean she has met someone?" Cherie asked curiously.

"In fact, she has." Minerva smiled. "It is actually one of the reasons that she asked to accompany me here today."

"Oh?" Cherie was surprised. "And why is that?"

"The man in question, Lord Joshua Dawson, is apparently a friend of His Grace's. Chastity wondered if you might be able to ask your husband if he could arrange a promenade between the two of them."

"Lord Joshua Dawson..." Cherie couldn't put a face to the name. "I don't know him. He is a friend of the duke's?"

"According to Chastity, yes. But fear not that you don't know him. He is as introverted as my sister is." Minerva laughed. "The perfect match, don't you think?"

"Indeed. Have the two been introduced?"

"Not formally. They spoke briefly at a ball, and Chastity had to do some sleuthing to find the man's name. We were hoping the duke would make the introduction."

"I will certainly ask him," Cherie promised. "I'd like for somebody to have a love match, after all." She squeezed her friend's arm and leaned in conspiratorially.

“However, it does not mean I won’t dread having to speak to the man.”

Minerva shook her head. “I see you’re not going to take my advice then, and let go of your anger?”

“But I promise that I will consider it,” Cherie said. “In due time.”

The knock on his study door surprised Thomas, and he looked up from the paperwork he had been poring over, his eyes a bit out of focus.

How long have I been working? He rubbed his eyes, yawned, and stretched. What time is it anyway?

But he’d only just glanced at the clock by the door when the knock sounded again.

“Come in, come in,” Thomas said hurriedly.

The door creaked open, and to Thomas’s surprise, his wife appeared in the doorway.

“Cherie!” he said, forgetting, in his shock, that she didn’t like it when he called her by her given name. “What are you doing here?”

“May I come in?” she asked, looking dubious.

“Of course, of course.” He stood, and she entered the room slowly, looking tentatively around as she did. Her eyes took in a few of the things he had brought home from India, and they widened into pools of silver.

“That’s a kirpan ,” he said, as he watched her gaze at the small curved sword with the elaborately decorated sheath that sat on a blue velvet pillow near the door. “It is carried by Sikh men, wrapped in cloth and always worn sheathed, in order to

symbolize the Sikh's duty to stand up to injustice wherever he goes.”

Cherie's lips parted slightly. “It's beautiful.”

“Yes,” Thomas agreed. “It is. The craftsmanship is of the highest level, and it is of great value as well. But of course, I would never sell it.”

“Why not?”

Thomas stood and joined her in front of the kirpan. They both gazed down at it for a moment, and Thomas was filled with a sudden nostalgia. He rarely missed India, but he did miss Raj. “It was given to me by my dear friend Raj.”

Cherie blinked up at him, surprised. “Your friend would give you something of such immense value?”

“Well, it was after I stood up for him and other Sikhs who were being discriminated against because of their religion. Sikhism is not the most common in India, and they face unfair laws and biases.”

Cherie nodded as if she understood this. “He gave it to you because he saw you stand up for injustice,” she said. “He sees you as a Sikh—in spirit, at least.”

Thomas stared at her, suddenly at a loss for words. “I think you must be right,” he said at last. “I had never thought about it that way. My assumption at the time was that it was merely his way of saying thank you.”

“It was deeper than that,” she said softly. Tears pricked Thomas's eyes, and he swallowed the lump that was rising in his throat. How could I never have realized the deeper meaning of the gift?

It astonished and humbled him that Cherie had seen it.

“That was a difficult time for me,” Thomas explained, “and my friend Raj was very helpful in getting me to see the bigger picture.”

“Why was it such a hard time for you?” Cherie asked, and when she blinked up at him, she actually looked curious.

“I had just returned to India from England, and I was terribly homesick. It was the trip where we met at the tea house, do you remember? I’d wanted to stay in England very badly. I’d asked my father if I could set up our house in London and find a wife, but he refused.”

“I remember that,” Cherie said. “That trip to the tea house. You asked me when I thought my brother would let me make my debut.”

“Yes,” Thomas said, smiling slightly. I wanted to know when I could officially court you , he didn’t say out loud. “And then I didn’t see you again until I returned from India earlier this Season.”

Cherie looked softer and more forgiving than she had in a long time as she turned to him and laid a bare hand on his sleeve. “I didn’t realize you had such a difficult time in India. But I’m glad, at least, that you had good friends there to comfort you. And I hope you know you were dearly missed.”

“I was?” Thomas had once nurtured a crush on Cherie, but India and his father’s words had withered it at the roots. Or so he’d thought. But now, as he looked down into her eyes, he felt it stir.

“Indeed,” she said, more briskly, and her hand dropped to her side. “We were friends, then, or don’t you remember? Before you hoodwinked me into marriage.”

“Cherie—”

“I’m only jesting,” she said quickly. “I actually came here today to offer an olive branch.”

“Oh?” Thomas returned to his desk and settled behind it, while his wife took the seat opposite him. “And what exactly is this olive branch?”

“Well... I need your help,” she began tentatively. “Or rather, Lady Minerva’s sister needs your help. But because Lady Minerva is my friend, that means you are also helping me. And I thought that perhaps if you were to help me, that it might help us... attain a little more tranquility, at least.”

“So, it’s a bribe?” he asked, raising a skeptical brow.

“No,” she snapped, then took a deep breath. “No,” she repeated more calmly. “It’s an acknowledgment of the many ways in which our marriage is good for me.”

“I see.” Nothing about me is good for you, he thought with disgust, but he didn’t let this show. “And what can I do for you—I mean Lady Minerva—er, I mean her sister.”

Cherie smiled. “We hear that you are acquainted with a Lord Joshua Dawson. Is that true?”

“Lord Dawson?” This surprised Thomas, and he leaned forward with interest. “I am a little acquainted with him. Why?”

“I gather that Lady Chastity recently met the viscount but was not properly introduced. She now wants a proper introduction.”

Thomas still didn't understand. "Yes, but why?"

"Why does any young lady want to be introduced to a viscount?" Cherie asked impatiently. "She fancies him!"

"Oh!" Thomas leaned back in his chair, thinking hard about this. "Well then, of course, I can help. Making the introduction will be no problem at all. It's just that..."

"What?"

Thomas wasn't quite sure how to phrase it. "I do not think Lord Dawson is a very good match for Lady Chastity."

Cherie prickled at once. "And why not? You don't know her, after all, so you can hardly have an idea of her character and the kind of man who suits her."

"Yes," Thomas said patiently, "I just think that Lord Dawson wouldn't suit any lady. He is..." he searched for the words. "Odd."

"I know he's shy," Cherie said, then her eyes narrowed. "But isn't he a friend of yours?"

"He was childhood friends with a close friend of mine from university, but we are not well acquainted."

Cherie tilted her head to one side. "So, you hardly know him, and not for many years, I presume?"

"Well..."

"Then he may be far less odd than you remember him being! And surely Lady

Chastity, who has actually spoken to him recently, would have a better understanding of his character than you do!” She lifted her chin defiantly. “Or do you just enjoy trying to dictate whom young ladies should marry?”

“That’s a low blow and you know it,” Thomas said, eyeing her warily. After a moment or two, she relented and sighed.

“You’re right. I’m simply protective of my friend, and she wants her sister to have a love match. Truthfully, so do I. It is what I would wish for any young lady.” She looked away wistfully, and Thomas felt his heart tighten. “Speaking of which, I would like to present a united front when you make the introduction.”

Thomas tensed, even more wary now. “Meaning what, exactly?”

“Meaning that even though things have been tense between us recently, I don’t want to infect the budding romance of the young couple with whatever resentments and disagreements we have. I’m sure the introduction will be at a ball or a promenade, and I would like us to act as if we are happily married. We do not need to pretend that we are head-over-heels in love with one another, simply that we get along and are well-suited for one another.”

“There was a time when we did get along,” Thomas said quietly, “and I do think that we are well-suited for each other.”

Cherie blinked, and for a moment, he thought she was going to say something vulnerable and tender to him. But then she crossed her arms and said, “Do you think you can do that when we make the introduction? Act as if we’re happy?”

“Yes, of course,” he said at once. “Anything for you and your friends. You’re my wife now, Cherie, and whatever our differences, I’m always on your side.”

Cherie's lips parted slightly, and this time he was sure that he saw a flash of something—maybe forgiveness?—in her eyes. She closed her mouth and smiled.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “I am grateful to you for this.”

He nodded. “Anything you need.”

She smiled and then turned to go. He watched her with a sharp feeling of regret in his chest. If he could just speak to her truthfully, tell her how he really felt, tell her how highly he thought of her, then maybe he could make all of this right.

“Cherie—” he called out, just as she turned the doorknob.

“Yes?” She turned back around to face him, and he suddenly felt tongue-tied.

“I—” he swallowed and tried to speak again. “I never wanted this.”

I never wanted ours to be a cold or uncomfortable relationship. I never wanted to cause you this pain. But he couldn't get the words out, and immediately, Cherie's face twisted with anger.

“Well, neither did I, as I've made abundantly clear,” she snapped. “And if you didn't want this, then you had every opportunity to call it off.”

She turned and stormed from the room, leaving Thomas gaping after her, wondering how he could have married a woman who never seemed to understand what he was trying to say. Wondering if she ever could come to understand.

### Eight

“ A hh, Lady Chastity, Lady Minerva, what a pleasant surprise!” the duke said as Cherie’s friends approached down the path of the Serpentine. It was a beautiful afternoon, and everyone who was anyone seemed to be outside, promenading. Including them, although the purpose of their promenade wasn’t just for the exercise.

“Your Grace,” Lady Minerva murmured, sweeping into a curtsy. The duke took her hand, and as he kissed it, he sent Lady Minerva a wink. Cherie had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

She kissed her friend’s cheek, shook hands with Lady Chastity, and then turned to the dour-looking fellow who was standing next to her, and whom she had been trying to engage in conversation for the last ten minutes—to no avail.

“Lady Minerva, Lady Chastity, may I introduce Lord Joshua Dawson? An old friend of my husband’s! Lord Dawson, this is my dear friend Lady Minerva Berrymoore, and her sister, Lady Chastity Berrymoore.”

If Lord Dawson suspected that this entire meeting on the Serpentine had been arranged and carefully planned down to the last detail for his sake, he gave no sign of noticing. Instead, he stepped forward and removed his hat, then bowed low to the ladies.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” he muttered, so quickly that Cherie almost couldn’t hear them. He straightened, and his eyes swept over Chastity again, and this time, Cherie caught the twinkle of recognition in them.

“I believe we have met before,” he said to Chastity, bowing again. “Did not we speak briefly at the Tallot ball?”

“Indeed we did,” Chastity said, lowering her eyes demurely. Although in her case, it probably wasn’t a coquettish trick. Chastity really was that shy. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance properly.”

“As am I.” The viscount held out his arm to Lady Chastity. “May I?”

Chastity nodded and took his arm, and the two of them began to walk ahead of the group. Cherie watched them with narrowed eyes. Lord Dawson walked very stiffly and did not seem to be asking Chastity many questions. He barely even looked at her as they set off ahead of them.

“He is introverted,” Minerva said, taking her arm, and sharing a meaningful look with her that said that she had noticed this as well. “Perhaps she likes that he doesn’t speak much.”

“Or perhaps,” the duke said quietly, leaning towards them, “he’s afraid of opening his mouth because he knows that everything he says is insipid!”

Cherie and Minerva both laughed, Cherie pressing a hand to her mouth to muffle the sound.

“Your Grace! That is cutting!” she whispered, and he grinned.

“Didn’t you listen to him moaning about having to give a measly portion of his farming profits to his tenants?” the duke asked, shaking his head. “You tried so hard to engage the man in conversation, and the only thing he could think to speak of was how dreadful it is to be a rich, titled viscount with pesky tenants who want to keep some of the profits of their labor!”

Cherie couldn't help but laugh, although she sobered when she saw the look of concern on Minerva's face.

"Fear not," she murmured, taking her friend's hand. "If Chastity likes him, then I am sure he is a good man. He is just shy, as you said!"

"Indeed," the duke said, bowing to Minerva. "I shouldn't make assumptions about a man I hardly know." He slid a glance at Cherie. "Although any criticisms I have are simply because I think Lady Chastity deserves the best. And anyone who knows me could tell you I have a long-standing history of standing up for tenants!"

"Yes, I have read about your work with your father's company," Minerva said, eyeing the duke. "I must say I was rather impressed. You flew in the face of your father's opposition, as well as his board of investors, in order to demand a higher wage for your workers."

The duke looked suddenly embarrassed. His cheeks went pink, and he looked down at his toes. "Yes, well, it's important to make your workers happy," he said quickly. "They make the product, after all!"

"How did you read about His Grace's exploits in India?" Cherie asked, turning with some surprise to her friend.

"It was in the Financial Times," Minerva said with a shrug. "And I found it rather interesting."

Of course she reads the Financial Times! Cherie shook her head. Minerva was too smart for her own good.

"I'm surprised you didn't tell me," she said.

“Well, I thought your brother might have told you,” Minerva said with a shrug. “Since you two were such good friends back then.”

Minerva’s tone was light, but Cherie couldn’t help but wonder if her friend was trying to remind her that there was once a time when she had very much liked the duke.

Her friend’s words from the other day came back to her: you can either make the best of your situation, and try to get along with your husband, or you can keep this anger up, and doom yourself to a life of unhappiness.

Was this Minerva’s attempt at trying to encourage Cherie to get along with her husband? By reminding her of their previous friendship?

Cherie glanced at her husband, and she was surprised to see that he was already looking at her, a slightly sad look in his eyes. It seemed that Minerva’s words had also reminded him of an earlier and simpler time in their relationship.

Minerva isn’t the only one reminding me of our friendship , she thought. He is also different today: funnier; charming. He reminds me of the Casserly I used to know before he was the Duke of Wheaton.

The duke’s eyes slid from Cherie’s to her friend’s, and he smiled. “I appreciate that you have been following my career in such detail, Lady Minerva. And I hope that when it comes time for you to marry, that you will marry a man who appreciates your interest in the world.”

“I’m very interested in the world,” Minerva said seriously. “How did it go, anyway? With raising the wages? Did it lead to a higher quality of life for the workers and better productivity, as you argued?”

The duke's smile faltered. "At first it did," he said. "But my father decided it was too expensive and that the rate of productivity had not increased enough to justify the raise, so he fired about half the workforce. It was... a very difficult time."

"I can imagine," Minerva said, nodding. "It is a pity your father couldn't compromise."

Thomas looked away. "He was an uncompromising kind of man."

Minerva nodded, then seemed to lose interest in the conversation, her eyes riveted to the sight of her sister walking ahead of them with Lord Dawson.

Cherie, meanwhile, fell back, and after a small hesitation, her husband also slowed his pace to walk beside her.

"It must have been very hard to work for your father," she murmured. "I know that you never got along with him."

"Yes," the duke said, a little stiffly. "It was not easy. We rarely saw eye-to-eye on business... or anything else. He would probably be very disappointed if he could see the changes I'm making to his company now."

The duke swallowed as if there were a lump in his throat, and Cherie felt a small piece of the ice that encased her heart these days melt.

"I realize that I have not been more sympathetic to the grief you must be experiencing," she said after a moment. "In all the chaos of everything that has happened, I don't think I have even properly offered you my condolences for his death. Everything has been such a mess these past few weeks, but I am deeply sorry for your loss."

“It’s all right,” the duke said, very quickly. “But thank you. I appreciate it.”

Cherie bit her lip, wondering if she dared to ask more. “What happened, exactly?” she asked after a long moment. “You said it was quick, but were you able to put any of these differences behind you and say the things you wanted to say?”

The duke frowned, and his body became even more rigid. Tension seemed to be radiating from him, and Cherie knew that he was not going to tell her anymore.

“Let us not speak of such unhappy things,” he said, his voice oddly emotionless. “Not when new love is blooming around us.”

He gestured towards Chastity and Lord Dawson—who didn’t appear to be speaking—and then set off at a faster clip, catching up to Minerva and taking her arm. Cherie lingered behind, watching and wondering.

So, it is his father’s death that has led to the change in his personality . It was good to have this clue, but Cherie also felt determined to discover more.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:06 am*

Nine

“ I t looks like there's going to be thunderstorms tonight, Your Grace,” Thomas’s valet said as he removed Thomas’s cravat. The wind had just let out a frightful howl, and rain had begun to lash against the window of Thomas’s bedroom.

“Yes, I believe you’re right,” Thomas said, glancing out the window where thick rain was illuminated by one of the oil streetlamps that had recently been installed in Mayfair. “Will you see if Cook has any wax from the leftover candles that she could make into earplugs?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” his valet replied, then hesitated. “Does the noise disturb you when you sleep?”

“It’s not for me,” Thomas said, grimacing. “It’s for the duchess. Her Grace dislikes thunder.”

The valet finished undressing Thomas, then bowed and left, promising to speak to Cook at once.

Thomas, meanwhile, went to the window, where he waited less than a minute before seeing the telltale bolt of lightning illuminate the sky.

“Thunder is next,” he murmured to himself, and seconds later, the boom of the thunder seemed to rip open the sky.

At once, he heard the sound of something falling over in the room next to him, and he

would have been willing to bet that it was Cherie knocking over something in her fear. He crossed to the door that separated their chambers and pressed an ear against it. He couldn't hear much, except for the sound of footsteps going back and forth.

She's pacing.

Behind him, lightning flashed in the window again, and, once more, the boom of thunder shook the house. It seemed to be getting closer and louder, and indeed, the rhythm of his wife's footsteps increased at the same time.

There was a knock on the door, and his valet came in holding a small box.

"The wax you asked for, Your Grace," he said, handing the box to Thomas before bowing and leaving the room.

Thomas turned to the door that separated his room from Cherie's and hesitated.

She is still mad at you . But he couldn't stand it anymore. Her anger, his own foolishness, how much of a mess he'd made of his marriage. They'd only been married a fortnight, and already, everything was a disaster.

Another clap of thunder sounded from outside, and Thomas didn't even think; he raised his hand and knocked on his wife's bedchamber door.

It seemed that she wasn't thinking much either, because the door flew open at once, and Thomas looked down to see the fear-stricken face of his wife staring up at him.

"What is it?" she whispered, her face as white as a sheet.

Thomas held out the box. "I have something for you."

She gave him a curious, wary look, then took the box from him. Tentatively, she opened the lid, and then looked up at him. "Candle wax?" she asked.

"It's for your ears," he said. "I used to do this in India during the Holi festival, when the streets were so loud that I couldn't sleep at night. The wax will fit right into your ears and blot out all the sound. Then you'll be able to go to sleep and you won't have to be afraid of the thunder."

Cherie turned the wax over in her fingers, as if deciding what to make of it, and then looked back up at him.

"Do you want to come in?" she asked, gesturing to her room.

"Yes," Thomas said, more quickly than was proper.

She raised an eyebrow. "For a nightcap, I meant."

"I know," he said hurriedly.

He followed her inside, and she poured them glasses of claret from a small decanter on her dressing table. There was another strike of lightning and clap of thunder as she was pouring the claret, and her hands shook so violently that she spilled some onto the serving tray.

"Here you go," she said, handing him the glass. As he took it, his hands brushed hers, and he was shocked by how cold they were.

"How did you know I was frightened of thunderstorms?" she asked, as she sat down at her vanity and gave him a searching look.

"You don't remember?" he asked, surprised.

She gave him an uncertain look. "Remember what?"

"The second summer I came home from Cambridge with Aidan," he said. "We were at your family's country estate, and there was that big summer storm. You were young, then. Only nine years old. So you were already in bed by the time the thunder started. But after a particularly loud burst of thunder, you came bursting into the parlor where the adults were drinking brandy and playing whist, shouting for your mother. You were still in your nightdress! And although you were frightened, you were still so brave, and after your mother had calmed you down, you stayed and wanted me to teach you how to play whist."

He laughed at the memory of the smart, curious little girl who had sat on the chair next to him, her feet not even touching the floor, and tried to comprehend the rules as he explained them to her.

"I remember that," Cherie whispered. Her eyes were very wide, and there was a strange look on her face that he couldn't read. "I didn't realize that was you."

"That was me," he said, shrugging and trying to sound casual. "Your mother allowed you to stay until the worst of the storm had passed, and by the time you went back to bed, you had mastered the basics of the game. We were all very impressed."

Cherie smiled. "You know, to this day, whist is still my favorite card game."

"I'm not surprised. You nearly beat your brother. He was in a foul mood all the next day because, of course, we teased him mercilessly about it."

"I remember that!" Cherie laughed out loud. "I can't believe I had forgotten that was you. You always had my back, didn't you?"

Thomas tried not to let this comment hurt him more than was necessary. "I always

tried.” He looked at her, and he thought that perhaps she knew what he was trying to say: I was also trying to have your back when I said we were engaged.

“You wrote to me,” she said suddenly. “From India. After the first time we met, and you promised to play with me, but then your father called you away to India. You kept your word to me, even though I was only a girl of eight. You actually wrote me letters.”

“I did,” Thomas said, his throat tightening as emotion overwhelmed him. She remembers that!

She opened her mouth as if to say something, but just at that moment there was another crash of thunder—this one the loudest of them all.

Cherie let out a scream and then clapped her hand over her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” she said, through her fingers. “I know it’s foolish to be afraid of thunder, but it makes me feel like the walls and ceiling are going to collapse around me.”

“You don’t need to be ashamed of fearing thunder,” Thomas said. “The ancient Greeks feared it so much they made it the purview of the most fearsome and powerful of all their gods!”

This tidbit was lost on Cherie, however, as another crash of thunder shook the room, and she clapped her hands over her ears and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, her eyes were streaming with tears.

“It’s okay, Cherie,” he murmured, and instinctively, he reached out and took her hands from her ears and held them tightly in his own. From the look on her face, he knew they were both aware that he had used her name, without a title, for the first time since she’d asked him not to. But she didn’t correct him, and instead, she

squeezed his hand.

“That summer when you first visited,” she said after a moment, “I was very disappointed when you had to leave suddenly. You were the first adult who ever took me seriously. None had ever written me a letter before.”

“I was disappointed, too,” he said, smiling sadly at the memory of the crushing sadness that had filled him when he’d realized he had to leave.

“Did you like me then?” she asked, and it took him a second to realize she didn’t mean romantically, but merely as a person.

“I liked you a lot,” he said. “If I’m honest, I was more excited to play with you than hunt with Aidan.”

Cherie laughed. “I promise never to tell him that. But why? Why would you prefer to play with a little girl than hunt with your friend?”

Thomas considered this. “Remember how you said I must have been a lonely child? Well, no one had ever noticed that about me before. It made me feel an instant and deep connection with you. And I think I felt that playing with you would help heal my own sadness at not having anyone to play with as a child. At having a father who had left me so alone.”

“Your father doesn’t sound very nice,” Cherie said, echoing what she’d said that distant afternoon so eerily that Thomas felt his heart hitch.

“No, he wasn’t.”

“I hope at least you were able to make amends with him, before the end?”

“No, I wasn’t.” The words felt heavy in his mouth, the bitterness acidic on his tongue.

“Really?” she murmured. “Was his death so swift that you weren’t able to say what you needed to say?”

“Well, yes, that was one of the reasons,” Thomas said, his throat very dry. “But the main reason was that he didn’t give me the opportunity. Cherie... I had a very difficult relationship with my father.” He had to stop for a moment, as the words had shocked him by how much they’d made him choke up, but after a moment, he was able to continue.

“He contracted some virulent tropical fever,” he began. “That’s what he died of. It’s a swift illness, and there is no cure. He had contracted it by the time I arrived in England for the first time this Season, and that is why he called me back. He had unfinished business with me, you see. But he hid the real reason from me, saying instead that it was a business emergency. When I arrived back in India, he was already at death’s door.”

“That must have been dreadful,” Cherie whispered. “I can only imagine how distraught you must have been.”

“It was confusing,” he said, frowning as memories of those days swept over him. “I was sad, of course. He was my father, and despite the difficulty of our relationship, I know I still harbored love for him. But I was also angry. Angry that I didn’t have time to say all the things that I wanted to say, and that when I did try, he wouldn’t listen to me.”

“What did you want to say?” Cherie asked, leaning forward. Thunder clapped as she stared at him, but she was so wrapped up in his story that she barely seemed to notice.

Thomas felt a rush of hope. I’m distracting her! She’s so engrossed that she isn’t

afraid anymore!

“I wanted to get him to apologize for how he’d treated me all my life. He was a cruel man, Cherie. I know that you had a kind, loving father who adored you, so I’m sure it’s hard to imagine, but all my life, I was sure my father hated me.”

“I’m sure he didn’t!” she gasped.

“It felt that way,” he said heavily. “From a very early age, he treated me with contempt. He told me outright that I had to earn his love, and never once did he say I had earned it. You cannot... you cannot know how that affected me as a boy.” He forced himself to look at her, surprised to see tears in her eyes.

“The first person who ever made me feel loved, or who convinced me that my father might be wrong, was your brother. From the day we met, he treated me with such unconditional love and trust that I could hardly believe it. I was sure at any moment he would realize his mistake, but he never did. He treated me like a brother, and when I was with him, I felt strong, and outside of my father’s control, for the first time.”

He gave her a very serious look. “That’s one of the reasons why, when Lord Breckenridge saw us outside that inn, I had to pledge to marry you; I could not imagine losing the love of your brother by making him think I would compromise his sister.”

Cherie swallowed, and for the first time since that fateful night, there seemed to be understanding in her eyes.

“Did your father treat you any better after you returned to India from university?” she asked at last.

“A little,” he said. “I was a man, so I could stand up to him. And I think he was afraid

that if he was too hard on me, I would walk away from the family business. So he gave me just enough approval to keep me coming back for more, but never enough to truly satisfy me. We had a twisted relationship. He was cruel, I stood up to him, he would back down and lure me back in with promises that he'd changed, and I would hope he had, only to be disappointed again and again."

There was a short silence, during which Thomas found it hard to look at his wife. It was hard to admit how worthless his father had made him feel—to her, to the woman who made him feel that he might have some scrap of value to offer.

But to his surprise, Cherie reached out and took his hand. For several seconds, she held it in hers, and they both stared at where their fingers touched.

It was this that gave him the courage to keep going.

"When I returned to find him on his deathbed, these were the subjects I tried to discuss with him. I wanted to know why he had always treated me so cruelly. It didn't make sense to me; what had I done as a child that could have turned him against me?"

"Did you ask him?" Cherie whispered. "Did you ask him why he treated you so horribly?"

"I did," Thomas said. His throat was very dry, and he tried to swallow, but couldn't.

"And did he tell you?" His wife's eyes were wide. He stared into those beautiful green eyes—those eyes that had bewitched him from the moment he first saw her; those eyes that had haunted him in dreams on the opposite side of the world—and he considered telling her the truth.

But how could he, when it would fill those eyes with hate?

It cost him more than he had thought it would to lie to her. “No,” he said, looking down and shaking his head. He cleared his throat. “No, he never said. He maintained only that he was trying to bring me up to be tough, that boys shouldn’t be coddled by their fathers.”

“Oh...” The disappointment on Cherie’s face was evident. “It would have helped you so much to get a clear answer. But perhaps that was the truth: he was simply a cruel old man who took out his discontentment on his son.”

“Yes,” Thomas forced himself to say. Cherie’s hand gently squeezed his.

“I’m very sorry,” she murmured. “I never knew your childhood was so awful. My brother never said anything.”

“He didn’t know. I never told him. I was too ashamed.”

“But it wasn’t your fault! You had nothing to be ashamed about!”

“Yes, but when you’re a child, you don’t understand that,” he said, shaking his head. “You think there must be something you did to make your parent hate you.”

She bit her lip. “I suppose I understand that.”

“Actually...” Thomas hesitated, then plunged on. “You’re the first person I’ve ever told about this.”

“Really?” she looked taken aback, then moved, as she stared into his eyes. “Thomas, that’s... it means the world to me that you would trust me with this.”

He smiled crookedly. “I just wanted to distract you from the storm. And look... all that thunder, and you didn’t even notice!”

Cherie started and then laughed. “Oh, my goodness, you’re right! I was so engrossed in your story I completely forgot about the thunder.” She looked slightly guilty. “Not that I was enjoying hearing about how monstrously your father treated you...”

Thomas laughed. “I understand. I’m pleased that my story engrossed your attention, even if it’s a tragic tale rather than a rousing adventure.” I would give you a fairy tale if I could. He glanced out the window; rain was no longer pattering against the glass. “I should let you get some sleep. I think you’ll be all right now. The storm seems to have passed.”

“Yes, I should get to sleep.” Cherie released his hand and stood up. “Goodnight. Thank you for the wax. And for everything.”

“Goodnight.” Thomas stood as well, then went to the door. As he closed it behind him, he snuck one last glance back into his wife’s room. She was curled up in the bed now, the box of wax open on her nightstand, the wax gone. “Sleep well, ma cherie ” he whispered, and he was glad that she couldn’t hear him.

Ten

“ You seem to be looking around for someone,” Minerva said, surveying Cherie over her glass of lemonade. “Or is it just my imagination?”

“What?” Cherie was flustered, not least because of the crush of people in the ballroom, which was making the sweltering evening even more unbearable.

“You look anxious,” Minerva repeated. “Like you’re looking for someone you’re worried you won’t find. Is it your nerves? Have you not been sleeping because of the storms?”

The summer rainstorm that had scared Cherie several days previously had held sway over London all week, making it hot and muggy, and there had been thunder and lightning storms every night since then. Although for the first time in Cherie’s life, they hadn’t bothered her. With the earplugs made of wax, she couldn’t even hear the thunder.

“No, no, I’m all right,” Cherie said, forcing herself to concentrate on her friend.

Minerva, of course, wasn’t convinced. “You’re looking for the duke, aren’t you?”

“No, no, of course not!”

“Hmm.”

“So how are things progressing with Chastity and Lord Dawson?” Cherie asked,

eager to change the subject.

“I think they are going well,” Minerva said, although her brow furrowed. “Chastity enjoyed their promenade the other day, and the next day he called at the house. But I must admit, there is something odd about the viscount. People say he is reserved, but I’m not sure that’s it. He gives his opinion readily enough; he merely doesn’t talk often. But I get the impression he is watching everything, and it sometimes gives me the shivers.”

“Really?” Cherie was surprised by this and intrigued. “In fairness, I didn’t get to know the gentleman well, but I trust your instincts.”

“I don’t know.” Minerva shook her head. “Maybe I’m just being the over-protective older sister. Perhaps the man is perfectly fine. Chastity seems to like him, anyway, and it is flattering for her that he called upon her so soon after the promenade.”

“Yes, that is a good sign...” Cherie looked around. “Where is Chastity now?”

“She’s dancing with Lord Dawson there,” Minerva said, nodding towards them. And indeed, Cherie could see the young couple on the dance floor. Chastity was smiling and laughing with delight, and Lord Dawson also seemed to be enjoying himself. Although Cherie had to agree that there was something odd about the way he was smiling at Chastity. His grin was almost... wolfish. Hungry.

She shuddered and turned away.

“Chastity is lucky to have you as a sister,” she said, placing a reassuring hand on Minerva’s arm. “You would not let her marry a man who wasn’t worthy of her.”

Minerva nodded, then turned to Samantha, who was fanning herself vigorously and not paying attention to their conversation. The two of them began to talk of their most

recent board game competition, which had ended in a shocking win by Minerva. Cherie looked around for Thomas again, but before she could see him, Cassandra appeared by her side.

“Your husband is staring at you,” Cassandra whispered, as she sidled up to Cherie.

“What?” This time, Cherie nearly dropped her glass of lemonade. “Where?”

“Over by the pillars.” They both glanced in that direction. The duke was standing there, but he was engaged in conversation with the Duke of Vaston and didn’t seem to be paying any attention to Cherie at all.

“You’re mistaken,” she said, a little bitterly.

“He was! Just a moment ago!” Cassandra protested.

“Are you in league with Minerva to try and get me to find happiness in my marriage?” Cherie asked crossly.

“I wouldn’t say we’re in league,” Cassandra said, laughing slightly. “It’s more that we hope you can find happiness in the situation you’ve found yourself in since there isn’t exactly a way out of it.”

“Yes, well, you’ll be happy to know then that my animosity towards the duke has somewhat lessened in the last week.”

“Really?” Cassandra looked intrigued—and delighted—by this news. “Did anything in particular happen?”

“We spent more time together,” Cherie said diplomatically. What she wanted to say was: I understand now why he became so cruel after he inherited the dukedom. He is

a man haunted by his past.

But she wasn't about to betray his secret to anyone else, so she merely smiled. "Getting to know him better has helped me to understand him and to respect his point of view."

"Well, I'm very glad to hear that," Cassandra said, but she didn't press the subject anymore, which Cherie appreciated. They turned to join their friends' conversation, and Cherie tried hard to focus on what they were saying. But it was difficult when every other minute she was turning her head, looking for...

"Looking for me?" A low voice said behind her. She turned at once to see her husband smiling down at her. "Or do you merely have a pain in your neck?"

Cherie's heart skipped a beat at the sight of him, and she laughed. Behind her, she heard her friends' conversation grow quiet, and she knew they were all watching her and the duke.

"Of course not," she said, a small, coy smile snaking across her lips. "I was merely trying to cool myself by finding any breeze I could."

"It is rather hot," the duke conceded. "Are you too hot to exert yourself even more?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" she stuttered, flushing.

Her husband raised an eyebrow. "I meant a dance."

"Oh, of course! I mean..." she was becoming tongue-tied around this man, which was absolutely ridiculous. "I would be honored, Your Grace," she said, curtsying. Behind her, she thought she heard Samantha giggle. It only made her flush more.

The duke offered her his arm, and he led her away from her friends and towards the dance floor. Once the music had started, and they began to dance, he gave her an amused grin.

“You know, you don’t have to stand on ceremony with me,” he said, his voice low and teasing. “You can just say, Yes, Thomas, I’d be delighted .”

“A duchess should never call her husband by his given name while in company!” Cherie said, pretending to be scandalized.

“But when we are alone...?”

“Do you really want to negotiate that right now? We might draw a crowd if we start arguing, and we’re already being scandalous enough.” She cocked an eyebrow at him. “Strictly speaking, husbands and wives are not supposed to dance with one another. It is considered gauche .”

The duke scoffed. “Those rules were made by fussy ladies who hated their husbands and wanted to keep everyone else’s for themselves on the dancefloor. If I want to dance with my wife, then I should be allowed to do so! I’m a duke, after all. There should be some benefits, at least, to having inherited the duchy.”

Cherie laughed. “You’ve spent too long away from London, Your Grace. It has made you far too cutting towards the members of the ton and their fussy rules.”

“Not at all! I adore the members of the ton . This—” he gestured at the dance floor “—is why I was so eager to return to England.”

Cherie raised an eyebrow. “To come to balls and dance with ladies? I thought that gentlemen resented having to take ladies to the floor and be pursued by marriage-minded mamas.”

“Perhaps with some ladies,” he said thoughtfully. His face suddenly grew very serious. “But yes, Cherie, this is exactly the reason I returned to England, to attend balls and dance with ladies. Or really, one lady in particular.”

His eyes were fastened on hers, and Cherie felt the breath leave her chest. Was it possible...?

But no, she would have known if he had carried a torch for her all these years. He was just flattering her. Teasing her.

She opened her mouth to make some sort of teasing remark back, but just then, they were interrupted.

“Cherie! Your Grace!” Minerva burst onto the dance floor and grabbed both their arms, pulling them away from the other couples. People around them threw them scandalized looks, and several muttered angrily as Minerva dragged them away from the dancing, a terrified look on her face.

“Minerva! What is it?” Cherie asked, fear seizing her. She had never seen her usually impeccable friend look so frazzled before. “Tell us!”

“It’s Chastity,” Minerva whispered, her face very pale. “She has disappeared—with Lord Dawson!”

Eleven

“What happened?” Thomas asked as the three of them raced towards the exit of the ballroom.

“I don't know exactly,” Minerva said. “One minute, Chastity was dancing with Lord Dawson, and the next, they were gone.”

“And did you search the ballroom?” Cherie asked. “You're sure they didn't just go for some lemonade?”

“I'm sure,” Minerva whispered, her voice becoming very faint as she glanced about in all directions. “I checked everywhere: the lemonade table, with all her friends... I even looked out on the terraces to see if she and Lord Dawson might have gone out there to catch a breath of fresh air.”

“It would be highly improper of him to take her out to a terrace!” Thomas said, his anxiety increasing.

“Yes, but it's not unheard of,” Minerva said. “And the terraces are in view of the ballroom, so one can usually claim that they were still being chaperoned...”

“I would expect better of a viscount,” Thomas said.

Lady Minerva and Cherie shared a glance, and he read the understanding that passed between them.

“What?” he asked, looking between them. “You think a viscount would behave so improperly?”

“We’ve just had enough experience being treated terribly by titled gentlemen to know that rank does not necessarily guarantee virtue,” his wife said.

Thomas clenched his jaw. He knew she was right. And he would need to inquire more about her experiences with titled gentlemen—and which ones he needed to destroy—at a later date.

“Yes, I wouldn't like Chastity married to a man who would take such liberties as bringing her out to a terrace,” Lady Minerva said, “but it would be better than... well, whatever has happened.”

“We don't know anything is amiss yet,” Cherie said firmly. “Everything could be well, and this could all just be a misunderstanding.”

But even Cherie didn't look as if she fully believed her own words. There weren't many reasons why a young, innocent debutante would have disappeared from a ball with a wealthy, entitled, older gentleman.

The three of them were out of the ballroom now, and they all hurried towards the stairs, Thomas leading the way.

“Maybe she was hurt?” Lady Minerva asked uncertainly as they sped across the marble corridor. “And Lord Dawson went to fetch help?”

“He wouldn't have taken her from the ballroom if she were hurt,” Thomas said at once. “He would have sought help then and there and made sure her family knew what was happening.”

They turned right at the stairs, then Thomas paused, his foot on the top step.

“Should we check the gardens, Or...?” His gaze flickered upwards, towards where the private quarters of their hosts were. He looked at Cherie, and he could tell from the sick look on her face that she knew what he was asking: Is there a chance Lord Dawson took her upstairs to a bedroom? The thought made him sick.

“The gardens,” Lady Minerva insisted. “My sister might be young and naive, but even she would know something was wrong if Lord Dawson tried to take her upstairs. And I believe she has enough sense that she would say no to such a proposition.”

Thomas and Cherie shared a look. Unless he forced her upstairs, their eyes seemed to both be saying. It wouldn't be hard to overpower a girl as fragile as Lady Chastity.

“Okay, let's check the gardens first,” Thomas said, making a decision. “It would be foolish for Lord Dawson to take Lady Chastity upstairs where servants could see them. Dawson, I'm sure, would want the cover of night and the anonymity of the gardens to hide his ill intentions. He is a sneak, after all. He would operate under cover of darkness.”

“I thought you didn't know him well,” Cherie said.

“I don't. But I know men like him: the ones who pretend they are simply shy or sensitive, when really, they are monsters. They aren't always as easy to spot as the outright rakes and cads, but they are just as dangerous.”

Lady Minerva looked as if she might faint, so Thomas said nothing more.

They hurried down the stairs, Thomas taking them two at a time, then out the front door. Thomas led the way around the side of the house to the opening to the gardens,

which were hedged, providing the perfect cover for prying eyes.

“It's so dark,” Lady Minerva whispered. “We'll never find them.”

“We will,” Cherie reassured her.

If I have to die trying, the voice in Thomas's head growled.

Not only did he feel responsible for whatever had happened because he had made the introduction between Lady Chastity and Lord Dawson, but his wife's fear had awakened something primal in him. Everything inside of him had become single-minded. His mind was focused and clear. And he knew that he would go to lengths beyond the capacity of man to ensure Lady Chastity's safety and assuage his wife's fear.

They stepped into the gardens, and immediately, the light and sound from the house seemed to be swallowed up by the hedges. It was dark and very quiet. They crept forward, trying to peer through the trees to see if they could see anything, but for several minutes, there was nothing.

They rounded a corner, and then, all at once, two figures emerged from the darkness, holding hands. They didn't seem to have seen Thomas and the ladies yet. The smaller one, a woman, was giggling, while the taller person was adjusting the front of his cravat.

“Chastity?” Lady Minerva said, rushing forward, but the couple drew back, and Thomas quickly assessed that this woman was much too tall and curvaceous to be Lady Chastity.

“I beg your pardon,” Lady Minerva said, shrinking back. The couple quickly turned and disappeared back into the bushes. Lady Minerva's shoulders slumped.

“We’re never going to find them,” she said desperately.

“Don’t give up,” his wife said bracingly to her friend.

“Let’s keep going,” Thomas said. With each passing moment, he could feel time running out. Lord Dawson might have compromised her already. We can only hope that Lady Chastity is made of sterner stuff than Dawson gives her credit for.

They moved deeper into the garden, until even the light from the moon seemed to have been blotted out by the thick trees and hedges. Lady Minerva and Cherie were now holding hands, and Thomas felt his own spine tingle with fear. Questions whirled through his head. Where are they? Did we choose wrong? Did they go upstairs? Is it too late for Lady Chastity?

And then Thomas heard something: the sound of a muffled cry, a man’s angry grunt, and then the rustling of bushes.

His heart began to race. Motioning at the ladies to be silent, he pointed to the thicket of bushes where the sound had come from. They all crept forward.

Then a voice hissed from inside the bushes: “Just be still! You know you want this.”

It was Lord Dawson’s voice.

Immediately, there was a muffled wail, then more sounds of someone thrashing around.

Thomas didn’t hesitate. Leaping forward, he tore back the bushes.

A terrible sight met his eyes: Lord Dawson was pushing Lady Chastity up against a hedge, using one of his hands to cover her mouth. With the other, he was pinning her

against the hedge so that she couldn't escape. Meanwhile, his mouth was fastened on her neck. He seemed to be mauling it savagely, with none of the tender passion with which a man should kiss his lover—and certainly not what anyone should do to a woman who looked as terrified and unwilling as Lady Chastity.

Even in the darkness, Thomas could make out her expression: her eyes were wild with fear, and from under Dawson's hand, she was crying out with muffled sobs. Tears poured down her cheeks. Her hair was in disarray, and there looked to be mud and leaves all over her dress.

She put up a fight, then.

Even now, she was struggling against her attacker, trying to push him off of her with her free hand, with the other trapped behind her back. But she was small and frail, while Dawson was much bigger, and she seemed to be weakening with every second.

“Get your filthy hands off of her!” Thomas shouted.

Sprinting forward, he grabbed the back of Dawson's jacket, wrenching him backward with all his might.

Dawson let out a startled shout and stumbled back, almost falling to the ground. Thomas kept a firm grip on his jacket, which he used to throw the viscount to the ground.

Chastity, meanwhile, slumped down against the hedge, put her head in her hands, and began to sob.

“Chastity!” Lady Minerva shouted, and she ran to her sister, bending down and taking her in her arms.

“M-Minerva?” Chastity hiccupped, as her hands circled tentatively around her sister. “Y-you're here?”

“I'm here,” Lady Minerva said, clutching her sister even closer. “Everything's all right now. You're safe.”

Thomas, meanwhile, had turned to face her attacker.

Lord Dawson had managed to get back to his feet, and now he turned warily towards Thomas, his eyes flashing with fury.

“What are you doing here, meddling in my affairs?” He seethed at Thomas. “You have no right!”

“I have every right!” Thomas thundered, righteous fury burning through him. “Not only did I introduce you to this young lady, but she is a friend of my wife's! And any friend of the duchess has the full and unquestioning protection of the Duke of Wheaton!”

“If Lady Chastity is friends with the duchess, then the duchess should choose her friends more wisely,” Dawson sneered. “Or do you approve of your wife cavorting with loose, immoral women?”

Lady Chastity let out another sob, and Thomas's hands balled into fists.

“How dare you impugn Lady Chastity's honor?” he hissed. “When you are clearly the one who has taken advantage of an innocent girl.”

“Innocent?” Dawson laughed derisively and took a threatening step towards Lady Chastity. Before Thomas could move, his wife had dashed forward and put her body between Dawson and the Berrymoores. Her jaw was clenched, and she stood very

straight and tall like she was ready to fight Dawson herself.

“Don’t you dare come near her again,” Cherie said, her voice surprisingly clear and loud, despite the fear Thomas knew she must be experiencing. “You will never lay hands on her again!”

“I will not be spoken to like that by a woman,” Dawson scoffed. He took another step forward, and Thomas drew himself up.

“Take one more step towards my wife and you die, Dawson,” he said in a low, deadly voice.

Dawson froze. The whole clearing seemed to freeze. Cherie’s eyes were wide, while behind her, even Lady Chastity had stopped crying.

Very slowly, Dawson turned around to face Thomas. His face was a mask of fury. After a long moment, he spat on the ground in the direction of Lady Chastity before turning back to Thomas.

“If that girl is innocent then I’m the King of England,” he said. “You’ve seen the way she’s been throwing herself at me. She has no shame! The girl was asking for it.”

“It isn’t true!” Chastity howled. “Minerva, I swear it isn’t. He said we were going for a walk, and that he had an important question to ask me. I knew it wasn’t proper to be alone with him, but I thought he was going to propose! Please, you have to believe me!”

“Of course, I believe you!” Lady Minerva said at once.

“Sure, believe her lies, if it makes you feel better,” Dawson sneered. “But you can’t blame me if she was begging for it, only to change her mind once she realized she

was in over her head. That's the problem with young ladies these days. They've been given modern notions of independence and taught how to tease men, but they aren't prepared for the repercussions of their disgusting tawdriness. That's why they need men to put them in their place, show them the consequences of behaving like wh?—”

Wham . Thomas’s fist collided with the side of Dawson’s jaw and sent him flying. Cherie gasped at the same time that Lady Chastity screamed, and even Lady Minerva let out a small, choked cry.

Thomas hadn’t even been thinking. He had simply acted on instincts. However, he had no regrets, even as his hand throbbed with pain. It had been a long time since he’d punched someone, and he had forgotten just how painful it could be. It was worth it, however, to see Dawson collapse on the ground in front of him, his eyes wide with shock.

Dawson let out a groan, then scrambled backward and pushed himself back to his feet. He spit, then rubbed his jaw. It appeared to have been cut, and blood was dripping down his chin. He glared up at Thomas and let out a low hiss.

Thomas, meanwhile, raised his fist again.

“Say another word and you'll feel my fist again,” he snarled. Dawson stared at his fist, and Thomas glanced at it as well. His knuckles were white, and there was blood smeared across the knuckles. It shocked him to see, and for a moment, he could do nothing but stare at it.

But he paid for his momentary lapse in focus.

“Watch out!” Cherie screamed, and a split second later, Dawson tackled him.

Thomas felt himself hit the ground hard. Pain shot through his hip, and the wind was

temporarily knocked out of him by the weight of Dawson on top of him. He gasped, trying to catch his breath, but he didn't have a chance to recover, because the next second, Dawson had hit him hard in the face.

Thomas brought his hands up in defense, then rolled, freeing himself from Dawson. He was larger than the viscount and stronger, and he pushed through the pain and sprang to his feet. His cheek and hip were throbbing, but he didn't care. All his senses were heightened and alert. He knew exactly what he had to do.

Defend the ladies. Defend Cherie. The words pounded through his head, giving him strength and clarity.

Dawson lunged at him again, but this time, Thomas was ready. He easily dodged the attack, stepping swiftly to his left, and by the time Dawson turned, his hands were already striking their blow.

This time, he hit Dawson hard on the nose. It was a brutal shot, but he knew it would stun his opponent and maybe even break his nose.

And indeed, Dawson stumbled back, confused and clutching his nose.

"You'll have to be quicker than that to beat me!" Thomas roared. "I learned to fight from the most fearsome Sikh Warriors in Amritsar, the bodyguards of the Raj himself."

Dawson released his nose and stared at Thomas with fury.

"You can't intimidate me with your mumbo jumbo!" he shrieked. He threw himself once more at Thomas. This time, Thomas didn't dodge. He leaned forward into the punch and met it with his own, pummeling again and again until he felt Dawson's defenses begin to break. Only then did Dawson fall back, snarling and spitting.

“Done yet?” Thomas taunted. “Or do you want more?” He almost hoped that Dawson would say he wanted more. After all the frustrations of the last few weeks, after all the hurt and sadness his father had inflicted on him, it felt good to let it all out.

Not in front of Cherie, a small voice said in the back of his head. You are trying to be better for her.

Dawson wiped the back of his mouth. He seemed to be thinking, perhaps trying to buy himself time. There was a long moment when no one moved. Thomas waited, patient and taut, to see what Dawson would do next.

Then, without warning, Dawson darted towards Cherie.

Thomas had a split second to react, and he didn't even stop to think. With a speed and agility he never knew he had, he leapt across the clearing just in time to slide tackle Dawson and send him sprawling into the mud. The viscount howled in pain.

Thomas scrambled back to his feet and went to stand over Dawson. He towered over the viscount, and the look that Dawson gave him, as he stared up at him, was one of fear and even awe.

“I never want to see you in Society ever again,” Thomas murmured, his voice soft but deadly. “You will get out of London—the country, if you know what's best for you—and you will stay away. For good. Otherwise, you will lose even more than you already have today. I will ensure that. Nor will you try any kind of revenge against Lady Chastity. She is under my protection. Not just mine, but the Duke of Vaston's as well. Do I make myself clear?”

Dawson moaned, then pushed himself to his feet. His eyes were full of hate, but also fear, as he backed away from Thomas.

“DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?” Thomas roared.

Dawson’s eyes had grown wide with horror, and he seemed to shrink under the force of Thomas’s shout.

“And if two dukes isn’t frightening enough,” Thomas finished, “then know she is protected by four fierce, strong women, and that whatever Vaston and I might do to you, it is nothing compared to what they will do.”

“That’s right,” Cherie said, and her voice did not so much as shake.

When Dawson still didn’t answer, Thomas took a threatening step forward.

“DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?” he repeated, for the third time, and his tone brooked no opposition.

“Perfectly,” Dawson spat. Then he turned and ran away into the night.

Thomas let out a deep, slow breath. He was suddenly exhausted. His jaw hurt, his hip was aching, and his hand felt as if all the bones in it were broken.

When he turned to the ladies, he saw that the three of them were now all standing. Lady Chastity was leaning against her sister, supported by her and Cherie.

“He won’t be bothering you again, my lady,” Thomas said to Lady Chastity. “He is a weak man, and he might be spiteful, but he fears me now. He also knows I can crush him, and he will not risk my revenge.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off.

“There is no need to thank me. I would have done this for any lady. It is the

gentlemanly thing to do. I just hope you know that you are not in the least to blame.”

“I d-don’t know that,” Lady Chastity mumbled, her lips quivering. “I shouldn’t have agreed to go on a walk with him. It was foolish. I’m s-so s-sorry, Minerva.” She turned to her sister, the tears spilling once more from her eyes. “I let you down. You t-taught me so w-well to deal with gentlemen, and then I got s-swept away...”

“It isn’t your fault,” Minerva said. “You merely thought you were going for a walk. You were expecting a proposal!”

“And even if you had wanted more from him, it still wouldn’t be your fault.” It was Cherie who was speaking now, and the rest of them turned to look at her. She looked nervous but determined.

“It’s okay for women to have wants,” she said quietly. “It’s okay for them to have desire.” Here, her eyes flickered very quickly to Thomas’s, then away again, back to Lady Chastity. “And even if there had been a part of you that hoped for a kiss, or for something—and I’m not saying there was—then that would not be anything to be sorry for. The moment you told Lord Dawson to stop, he should have. It wouldn’t have mattered what you had agreed to already, he still should have stopped. But he didn’t care about your desires, Chastity. He only cared about himself. And no gentleman should ever treat your desires as if they don’t matter.”

There was a short silence as all of them absorbed these words. They were unusual, but Thomas was surprised by how wholeheartedly he agreed with them.

“That is very wise, Duchess,” he said, and their eyes met once more.

Lady Chastity stopped crying. She smiled very weakly. “Thank you, Your Grace,” she whispered to Cherie. “And to you, Your Grace.” Her eyes flickered to Thomas’s. “I know you said I don’t have to thank you, but I do.”

“Yes, thank you,” Lady Minerva said, her eyes also shining with tears. “You have saved my sister from ruin.”

“It is Lord Dawson who should be ruined,” he said vehemently. “And I will make sure he is. Now, we should get Lady Chastity home as quickly as possible.”

He, Cherie, and Lady Minerva helped Lady Chastity out of the garden as quickly and quietly as they could. There were still couples concealed in the bushes as they passed, although fewer than there had been on the way in. Some of them had undoubtedly heard the commotion and left, not wanting to be caught up in a scandal.

Good. The fewer of them who see us leaving the garden, the better.

Once they reached the drive, Thomas went on ahead of the ladies. “Stay here,” he called back to them. “I’ll have the carriage come here to pick you up.”

Once he reached the front of the house, he had a footman bring round the Berrymoore carriage, then he asked the driver to stop down the drive where the ladies were waiting, so no one would see Lady Chastity’s state of disarray. He then quickly followed the carriage back to where Cherie and the Berrymoore sisters were waiting.

Once Lady Chastity and Lady Minerva had been safely loaded into the carriage, Cherie turned to Thomas.

“I’m going to go with them,” she said. “Just to make sure they’re all right.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll send our carriage to wait for you at the Berrymoore house to bring you home when you’re ready. Take all the time you need, and if there is anything that Lady Chastity needs—a doctor, anyone—then please send word at once. I can find someone discreet.”

“Thank you.” Cherie was looking at him as she never had before, a hard, intense look in her eyes. His heart hammering, he held out his hand to help her into the carriage. She took it and ascended the steps of the carriage. But just before she slipped inside, she turned back to him. In the dark night, her eyes were silver stars radiating out of the inky blackness, shining just for him.

“Thank you,” she murmured again. “Thank you, Thomas.”

Twelve

“My friends will be here this afternoon,” Cherie said as she sat down at the breakfast table next to him. “They are coming over to play a board game. And Minerva is bringing Lady Chastity.”

“Ahh.” Thomas set down his newspaper, which he had been pretending to read as his wife came into the breakfast room and dished herself up eggs and toast. “Is Lady Chastity much recovered from her trial last weekend?”

“She is much better than she was,” Cherie said. “Although still a little shaken. Actually, it was Samantha's idea that we invite her so that she would have some distraction from everything that happened.”

“That was very thoughtful of her.” He observed his wife closely. She was sitting closer to him than she usually sat at breakfast, and her cheeks appeared to be a little bit pink.

Is she unwell? There didn't seem to be any other reason that his wife would be flushed in his presence. Perhaps she got up early and went for a ride this morning? But he had never known Cherie to go riding early in the morning. Usually, she liked to sleep in.

“Yes, it was.” She fell silent, her gaze falling into her lap. There was a long moment, during which she said nothing and didn't even eat. Then she looked back up.

“And you, Your Grace? Are you much recovered as well?”

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "I am afraid that after you used my given name last weekend, you are stuck using it now. I will not accept you reverting to formality."

Cherie's mouth twisted, and he was sure she was trying not to smile. "I spoke your name in a moment of heightened emotion," she pointed out. "You cannot hold that against me!"

"Oh, but I can," he said, smiling wickedly. "And I will."

She laughed, and his heart sped up. The sound of her laughter had been rare ever since they had married, but he loved hearing it more than anything on earth.

"And to answer your question: yes, I am much recovered. It turns out I didn't break all the bones in my hand, I am simply out of practice when it comes to punching villainous viscounts. My hip, as well, is healed."

"And your jaw?"

"I won't be eating any hard candies anytime soon," he observed, and she smiled slightly. "But I suppose I can live without them. And you?" He leaned towards her, gazing into her eyes to try and gauge her emotions. "Are you much recovered from last weekend?"

"Me?" Cherie looked surprised. "I'm not the one that was assaulted by Lord Dawson. Nor did I have to fight him."

"That doesn't mean you weren't affected by it," Thomas pointed out. "It was a frightening ordeal for you as well. Both you and Lady Minerva suffered greatly, even if you weren't the one who was attacked. And you both acted with great bravery."

Cherie bit her lip. "Minerva's sister was the one who suffered. I don't want to put

myself forward...”

“Nor have you,” Thomas said. “We have not even discussed the events of last weekend.”

And it was true. Over the last few days, Cherie had been keeping mostly to her room, except to make trips to the Berrymoore house to check on Lady Chastity, and she had been taking dinner in her room. Thomas had checked on her frequently but hadn’t yet brought up what had happened with Lord Dawson. She hadn’t seemed ready to talk about it.

“Well, I didn’t really want to think about it...” she said quietly. “I just wanted to put it from my mind.”

“That makes sense. But I think it’s good to talk about it as well.”

Cherie nodded. “I’m doing all right, I think,” she said at last. “It was disturbing, though, what Lord Dawson did.”

“Yes,” Thomas agreed heavily. “I found it disturbing as well.”

“I knew that gentlemen could be untrustworthy, of course. And I’ve had my own problems with gentlemen in the past.”

“You alluded to as much when we were looking for Lady Chastity.” Thomas waited a moment, then leaned forward. “Did something happen in the past?”

“Nothing like what Lord Dawson did,” she said quickly. “But you know, I wasn’t always a wallflower.”

“You? A wallflower?” Thomas snorted. There is no way a woman as beautiful as

Cherie was a wallflower.

She raised an eyebrow. “No, really. I was.”

“But... how is that possible?”

“Several of the men who courted me early in my first Season were vile old men who were looking for nothing more than a broodmare..” Her eyes clouded with anger. “Of course, I told them I wasn’t interested and even gave a few of them a piece of my mind.”

“I’m sure they loved that.”

“Exactly,” she snorted. “They retaliated by spreading rumors that I was difficult and selfish. A perfectionist who never thought anyone was good enough for her.”

Thomas mulled this over. “You always were a bit of a perfectionist growing up,” he said, smiling slightly. “But I always liked that about you.”

She gave him an annoyed look. “Yes, well, that streak of perfectionism led me to be ostracized by most of the men of the ton , and hence being in a position to be married off to Lord Rochford, and hence?—”

“Ending up as my wife?”

She gave him a dubious look. “Well, yes.”

“The men of the ton are foolish if they fear a woman simply because she’s a perfectionist,” he said dismissively. “That reflects more on their own characters. They are afraid you will find them wanting—which you probably would—and therefore avoid you to find women of weaker characters who will tell them what they want to

hear and flatter their egos. Trust me, you are better off without any of those men.”

She tilted her head to one side and gave him a coy smile. “Am I better off with you, then?”

“But of course.” He smiled widely. “I appreciate you.”

Her smile faltered, and he remembered that they were not even living as proper husband and wife.

You idiot , he chided himself. But he was determined not to let this ruin the moment.

“Those gentlemen were terrible to spread those rumors about you,” he said. “And I’m very sorry you had to experience that.”

“Thank you,” she said, very quietly.

He thought for a moment, then said, “And while it is perhaps less extreme than what Lord Dawson did, I think both are symptoms of the same disease: the disease of thinking that, as a gentleman, you are entitled to whatever you want from a lady. You heard Lord Dawson: he thought that because Lady Chastity had shown interest in him and ‘teased him’—which I know she had not—he was entitled to whatever he wanted from her. Those gentlemen who spread those rumors did the same thing: they wanted your hand in marriage, and when you expressed your own desire and said no, they couldn't bear it.”

“I hadn’t thought of it exactly that way,” she said slowly, “but I have noticed that these past few days, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about how they treated me. Their words, the way they insulted me when I told them I didn’t want to marry them, keep repeating in my head. I have been surprised by how much Lord Dawson’s behavior brought up those memories. So, I think you are right: they are cut from the

same cloth.”

“It sounds as if you are traumatized. And that Lord Dawson’s actions brought it up again.”

“Yes.” Cherie gave him a small, sad smile. “I think you’re right.”

It was quiet for a moment, and Thomas had to fight the urge to reach out and take his wife’s hand.

He began to eat his breakfast, an unaccustomed feeling of satisfaction filling him up. After several minutes of silence, he looked back up, only to see Cherie watching him, with an anxious, shy look on her face. The moment he caught her staring, she colored and looked back down at her plate.

“Was there something else?” he asked after a moment. It was odd for Cherie to struggle to say something. It was something he had always liked about her: she had an opinion about most things, and she was never afraid of making it known. As she’d demonstrated amply since their marriage.

“Well... yes.” Her cheeks grew pinker, and his puzzlement at her strange behavior grew as well. She glanced up at him. “My friends and I were wondering if you wanted to join us in our board game tonight.”

“Oh!” Thomas had not been expecting this, and he was a little flattered. “Are you sure you want me there?”

“Well... again, it was Samantha’s idea,” Cherie said quickly. “She thought that Chastity might be more comfortable if you were there.”

“Really?” This surprised Thomas quite a bit. “I would think my presence might be

distressing for her, as it might remind her of that horrible day...”

“On the contrary, according to Minerva, she has been nothing but excited to see you again. She believes you to be the most chivalrous and honorable man in the ton , after how you saved her.” His wife’s eyes twinkled. “In fact, I think she might have a little bit of a crush on you.”

“Oh, Lord.” Thomas felt his cheeks grow pink. “I very much hope she doesn’t!”

“Why?” Cherie raised an eyebrow. “Because you’re taken.”

“And because she’s the sister of my wife’s best friend!” Thomas said, his cheeks now blazing. “And it’s mortifying...”

“Relax,” Cherie said, laughing. “I’m sure it’s nothing. Ladies just tend to get a little fond of the men who save them.”

“You didn’t,” Thomas pointed out. “When I saved you from being ruined.” He grinned as her mouth opened in surprise and then narrowed to a thin line in annoyance.

“Well, I’m not so easily duped by chivalry,” she said loftily. “I know it is more about a gentleman’s pride than his actual sense of decency.”

Thomas actually laughed out loud. “You’ll find any excuse to punish me, won’t you?” he asked lightly.

“I’m inviting you to our board game night, am I not?” she shot back.

“But that’s only because it’s Samantha’s idea.”

A teasing spark lit her eyes, and her lips parted as if to say something—but then her mouth slammed shut and she glanced away. Watching her, Thomas was suddenly struck by a thought: it wasn't Samantha who had invited him.

It was Cherie. She actually wants me there. And not for Chastity's sake.

It was such a pleasant thought that he found himself grinning, despite the fact she still looked irritated.

“Very well, Cherie,” he said, smiling at her knowingly. “I will come to your board game night. Just be prepared to lose.”

It didn't take Thomas long to realize that when it came to the “Wallflowers” board games, there was no way he was going to win.

“What are the rules again?” He asked for the seventh time as Lady Samantha moved her piece past his on the board. She had just answered a riddle incorrectly, and this had forced her to move back four paces. But the square she'd landed on had sent her halfway across the board, and now she was ahead of him.

How he had ended up so far along the board in the first place was a mystery to him anyway.

“Don't worry about the rules,” Samantha said happily, as she rolled several dice in her hands. “Just do whatever we tell you to do.”

“That seems dubious,” Thomas said, frowning at her. Next to him, Lady Chastity giggled, and he threw her a small smile. She blushed and looked away.

Cherie was sitting on his other side, and he nudged her slightly. When she glanced at him, he raised his cards to cover his mouth and whispered, “She's flirting with me.”

Cherie didn't laugh, although she did look amused. Instead, her eyes fell demurely, and her cheeks went pink again.

Thomas frowned. What is going on with her? He'd enjoyed their mutual teasing earlier and had been hoping they would continue to banter this morning . But instead, she was acting like a shy schoolgirl. Except that Cherie had never been shy, even when she'd been a schoolgirl!

"Are you calling me a cheat?" Samantha asked, peering at him closely.

"I would never do something so foolish," he said, winking at her. She laughed and shook her head.

"So, this is the Casserly we heard so much about," she said, letting the die fall from her hands. They spun across the table and landed face-up on seven and two.

"Samantha!" Cherie said, her cheeks blazing. "The duke no longer goes by Casserly!"

"I'm not offended," Thomas said, holding up a hand. "I want to know what Lady Samantha means. What are you referring to, This is the Casserly we heard so much about ?"

Samantha shrugged as she moved her piece forward another five spaces. "Cherie has told us about you," she said. "Back before you were the duke. When you were quite a laugh—or at least that's what she tells us."

"My husband also speaks about this side of you," the Duchess of Vaston said, smiling slightly. "He said you were his most amusing friend."

"I like that my wife and best friend say such nice things about me," Thomas said, and he nudged Cherie again. "I shall have to thank you later," he added in an undertone.

“For making me look so good.”

She blushed and rolled her eyes. “Just play the game,” she hissed back.

“I’m trying,” he muttered, as Minerva went to take her turn, and the other ladies began talking more among themselves. “But it’s a bit difficult when I’m trying to figure out what on earth is wrong with you.”

“Wrong with me?” Cherie looked taken aback. “Nothing is wrong with me. What are you talking about?”

“You’re so quiet,” he said. “I’m not used to it.”

“I’m not quiet!” she said indignantly, and he heard some of the usual sparks in her tone.

“You are,” he said. “Usually, you would be the life of the party. But now you are hardly speaking at all, and you keep blushing as if everything I’m saying were mortifying. You would tell me, wouldn’t you, if I were mortifying you?”

“Believe me, I’d have no trouble telling you if you were mortifying,” Cherie said sarcastically.

“Oh, there she is,” he chuckled. “The real Cherie.”

She folded her arms. “So what if I’m quiet sometimes? Can’t I be quiet?”

“Sure you can, I’m merely curious as to where it’s coming from. There have been a few occasions since we married when you were quieter than usual, but those times, I could feel the anger coming off of you as if it were heat from a fire. This is different. You don’t seem surly or angry. If anything... you seem embarrassed.”

There was no denying it now. Cherie really was embarrassed. Not only were her cheeks flaming, but there was a choked sound in her voice when she spoke again that reminded him of someone who was so embarrassed they were about to burst into tears.

“You were right about Lady Chastity,” she muttered. “Your presence reminds her of the horrible incident with Lord Dawson. It is for her sake that I’m embarrassed.”

But a quick glance at Lady Chastity told Thomas that his wife was lying. Lady Chastity looked perfectly at ease and was laughing at something that her sister was saying.

He raised an eyebrow. “Whatever you say, my dear.”

She blushed again, but before she could respond, the Duchess of Vaston said, “It’s your turn, Cherie!”

Cherie picked up the die and shook them in her hand, then let them roll across the table. They landed on five and eight. At once, all the ladies let out shrieks of delight.

“Lucky number thirteen!” Samantha shouted, and she actually jumped up out of her chair. “You move ahead ten spaces!”

“What?!” Thomas stared at the die. “What is happening? What are the rules of this game? ”

The ladies all laughed at him, and Cherie delightedly moved her marker forward. When she passed his, she knocked it out of the way, and it clattered to the floor. “I’m sorry, my dear ,” she said, flashing him a smile. “But you have been knocked out of the game.”

“This makes absolutely no sense,” he informed them, as he collected his marker from the ground. “Did you ladies make this game up?”

They all exchanged furtive glances, and he laughed.

“Wait—did you?” he asked, staring at each one of them in turn.

“Well... not exactly,” Samantha said sheepishly. “But the instructions were in German, and we couldn’t understand them all, so... there were a few things that we made up.”

“Including that a roll of thirteen entitles the roller to knock out any player she passes on the board,” Cherie said happily. She grinned at him, then lowered her voice. “Am I still being quiet, Your Grace? Or is this level of volume more accurate to me?”

“Believe it or not, I much prefer you forthcoming to shy,” he said, smiling slightly. She reddened again, then rolled her eyes.

“Samantha is right,” she murmured. “This is closer to the Casserly I remember.”

“You and your brother were the only people who ever really knew that Casserly,” Thomas said, a little heavily. “For most people, at least of my father’s acquaintance, the somber, version of me is much closer to the truth.”

This softened the look on his wife’s face, and she looked at him curiously. Perhaps even tenderly.

“After what you told me, that my brother was the first friend you ever really confided in, I can believe that,” she said at last. “And I’m glad that we got to know the real you.”

The real you. Thomas wondered, not for the first time, what exactly that meant: who was the real him?

Was it the surly, frustrated man who had constantly been going up against his father, trying to demand better treatment for their workers and better business practices? Or was it the fun-loving, laughter-prone, teasing gentleman who had always carried a torch for his best friend's sister?

He certainly liked the version of himself he was with Cherie and Aidan better, but that didn't mean it was the true him. He'd spent so long feeling angry at himself and his father to fully believe that the lighthearted, charming side of him could be the real one.

She'll only be disappointed when she realizes that this is the real you, the voice said in his mind. For the first time, he realized how much like his father that voice sounded. You'll disappoint her like you do everyone.

"Are you all right, Your Grace?" Thomas was startled by the voice to his right, and he turned to see Lady Chastity peering at him closely. "Are you upset that Her Grace knocked you out of the game?"

Thomas forced himself to laugh. "No, no, not at all. It's only a game, after all."

She smiled hesitantly, and Thomas remembered how his wife had told him how painfully shy Lady Chastity was.

It must take a great deal of effort to speak to me, being so shy and having gone through such a dreadful experience.

"Then is something else amiss?" she asked. There was such genuine concern in her eyes that Thomas felt his heart go out to the girl. Around them, the other ladies were

hotly discussing Samantha's latest move, and no one seemed to be paying attention to them.

"No..." he began, but then he paused. You have seen her at her most vulnerable, he reminded himself. Perhaps you can give a little bit back. "I was just thinking about my character," he said at last. "Sometimes I worry I will let others down. It can be hard when people have such high expectations of you."

"I understand that," Lady Chastity said. "But there is no way you could let anyone down, Your Grace." She paused. "I wanted to thank you for how you helped me with Lord Dawson. My sister keeps saying how chivalrous it was of you to help me, but I don't think that was why you did it."

"No," Thomas said quietly. "It wasn't."

"It was because you believe in doing the right thing," she said. "I can tell."

"I hope I do."

"And that's why you won't let anyone down," she continued. "Because you try. No one can always do the right thing. None of us are saints, after all. But when we know what is right and what is wrong, when we can try, then we won't let others down. Not when they can see how we try."

"That's very wise," he said, looking more closely at the girl. "How are you holding up, after everything?"

She shrugged, glancing down. "I'm well enough. I think I learned a valuable lesson about trusting people. Not everyone deserves my trust just because they say the right thing when it's easy. The people I want to trust do the right thing even when it's hard."

“I wish you hadn’t had to learn that lesson that way,” Thomas said. “But I have known quite a few people like Lord Dawson, and I understand how they can take you in.” He glanced at Cherie. She was laughing at something the duchess was saying. “You’re very lucky to have these women looking out for you, Lady Chastity. They are good souls, all of them.”

“And so are you,” Lady Chastity said.

He wasn’t sure he believed that yet, in his heart, but as Thomas gazed at Cherie, he knew that it was who he wanted to be.

Maybe the real me was angry and unworthy, too bitter at my father to go after what I wanted. Maybe the real me was so busy working to impress my father that I never tried to impress the only person I ever wanted. But that doesn’t mean the new me has to be as well.

Thirteen

“Y our Grace, you have a visitor.”

Cherie looked up from where she was embroidering a seat cushion to see the butler holding out a tray, a calling card on it. She took the card and glanced at the name on it. Immediately, she felt herself go cold.

She glanced back up at the butler. “Is His Grace here?” she asked.

“No, Your Grace. He is at his club this afternoon.”

Cherie felt her heart race. She knew that her husband would not be pleased that Constantine Banes, the Earl of Rochford, was visiting her when he wasn’t home. He had been so tense at the wedding breakfast when Lord Rochford had appeared. And truthfully, Cherie was a bit nervous to see him as well. After how he had tried to marry her against her will...

But what choice did she have? The Duchess of Wheaton could not deny entry into her home to her husband’s cousin.

Not just Thomas’s cousin, but his heir, since we won’t be producing a child...

“Show him in,” she heard herself say.

The butler bowed and left the room, and Cherie had only a few seconds to prepare herself before the Earl of Rochford was swept into the room, a cold smile on his thin

lips.

“Your Grace,” he said, bowing low over her hand as she extended it. To her deep displeasure, he kissed her hand, and she felt herself shudder. There was something so unnerving about the earl, although she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. Maybe it was the cold, dead look in his eyes...

“It is a pleasure to see you again,” the earl said. “Especially under better circumstances than the last time we saw one another.”

“Oh, you mean the circumstances where you tried to coerce my cousin into giving you my hand in marriage?” Cherie asked sweetly, as she settled herself back on the sofa. “Or the circumstances where you showed up at my wedding breakfast and were rightly shouted at by my husband?”

To her surprise, the Earl of Rochford laughed. “The latter, I suppose,” he said, seating himself across from her without waiting for her to invite him. “That was a rather unpleasant scene. But then again, I wouldn’t expect much more from the Duke of Wheaton. Even when he was in India, word of his temper reached all the way to England.”

Cherie bit her lip to keep from speaking. Part of her longed to ask Rochford what he meant by that, but a larger part of her didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of asking.

“So how have you been settling into your life here?” the earl asked, looking around at the parlor where she was sitting with a critical eye. “Are you enjoying being the Duchess of Wheaton?”

“Of course,” Cherie said quickly—perhaps too quickly because the earl raised an eyebrow.

“Indeed,” he said, lingering on the word like a cat stalking its prey. “And when shall we be wishing you congratulations on producing an heir to the duchy?”

“My lord!” Cherie gasped. She could feel herself growing pink in the face. To ask a lady such a question was a great impertinence, and from a man she hardly knew, like Lord Rochford, it was deeply inappropriate.

However, he didn’t look at all abashed as he raised an eyebrow. “You can’t blame me for asking,” he said. “After all, it is my business whether or not you and the duke produce an heir. Without one, I am the heir to the duchy.”

“I am well aware of that,” Cherie said coldly. “But I would kindly ask you to refrain from inquiring into matters of such a deeply personal nature.”

“We are family now, Your Grace. There is no need to stand on ceremony with your own cousin.” Rochford’s leer made her skin crawl, but Cherie tried to force herself to remain calm.

“We might be family now, but we are not so close as that.”

Rochford spread his hands wide. “Well, I hope you will keep me informed as to when we can expect such happy news. I’d like to know as soon as possible whether or not my position in life is changing drastically.”

“Well then, you’ll be waiting a long time,” Cherie said without thinking. The moment the words left her lips, she was filled with horror and mortification.

Why did I say that? I just gave him everything he wanted to know!

Rochford leaned forward at once, interest gleaming in his eyes. “Is that so?” he asked, his eyes sweeping over her. “And is there a particular reason why I will be

waiting so long to find out if you are with child?"

"I only meant—" Cherie tried to think quickly. "I only meant that it takes some months to be sure of such a delicate situation."

"Indeed." But Rochford didn't look convinced, and Cherie felt herself redden even more. He was watching her with narrowed eyes, and she got the terrible feeling that he could see through her mask and glean all her secrets. "You know, I am an amateur herbalist myself," he said at last. "And I would be happy to mix a potion for you that might help inspire the duke to action... if that is what he requires. Or, if the problem is you, I have many remedies already at my disposal that clients have found helpful."

"There is no problem!" Cherie said shrilly. "With either of us!" But she knew she sounded guilty as charged.

He knows. He knows that Thomas and I are not living as man and wife.

"The duke is interested in producing an heir, isn't he?" Rochford asked after a moment, and Cherie's heart began to race. Her hands suddenly felt wet, and the back of her neck prickled with sweat as well.

"Of course he is," she said, trying to keep her voice as even-keeled as possible. "Why wouldn't he be?"

The earl shrugged, but there was a steely glint in his eyes that Cherie didn't like at all. "Perhaps he feels that his line is not worthy to pass on."

Cherie frowned, the vagueness of this statement grating against her. "Why would his line be unworthy?" she snapped. "He is one in a long line of dukes. He comes from one of the most illustrious families in the realm. A son of his would be from a far better line than a cousin such as yourself."

But her attempt to get the earl riled up didn't work. Instead, a strange look once more came over Rochford's eyes, almost as if he knew something that she did not. It made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. But after a long moment, the earl shrugged again, and the look in his eyes vanished.

"The duke's relationship with the late duke was strained," he said lightly. "Fathers and sons can have such complex feelings about one another. It can even make some sons wonder if it is such a good idea to become a father."

Cherie leaned forward. She could feel the anger rising in her, and she suddenly knew that she had to go on the offense. "You had a difficult relationship with your father, didn't you?" she said, her voice low but firm. "Tell me, my lord, does that make you not want to be a father?"

The earl blinked, clearly taken aback that she was privy to this information, but he recovered quickly.

"Yes, my father and I didn't get along," he said at last. "But at least he saw me as a proper son."

"What does that mean?" Cherie asked sharply.

The earl smiled. "There is much your husband doesn't tell you, isn't there?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Cherie said through gritted teeth. "Either speak plainly or don't speak at all."

"It's as I thought," he said, smiling contemptuously and leaning back against the sofa. "You should ask the duke more about his relationship with the late duke. I think you would find it... informative."

“The duke has told me plenty about his relationship with his father,” Cherie said coldly. “I know the late duke was a cruel man, which is why it makes sense he favored you at one point. The current Duke of Wheaton is not a cruel man, and if that made his father dislike him, then I will take that as a compliment to my husband.”

“Indeed.” Once more, the earl spread his hands wide. “I’m sure you know much more than I do. But I was very close to the late duke, Your Grace, and I know there were moments when he did not feel as if Thomas was anything like him.”

“At least my husband was actually his son,” she snarled. “Unlike you, whom he only treated like a son until he could discard you. Tell me, doesn’t it make your skin crawl to still be so loyal to a man who treated you so contemptuously? If anything, you should admire Thomas for standing up to his father’s tyrannical ways. You should have joined him in that, after the way his father treated you!”

This time, there was no mistaking the flash of anger in the earl’s eyes. “The late duke made many mistakes,” he said quietly. “But he was a good man. A noble man. And more of a father to me than my own.”

There was a quiet lull, during which Cherie was unsure what to say, and then the earl sighed and stretched his legs.

“I apologize for upsetting you, Your Grace,” he said, and his tone was much lighter and more pleasant than it had been moments before. “The truth is, I did not come here to discuss your husband. I came to see you.”

“Yes, and you have seen me...” Cherie said, looking pointedly at the door as if to suggest he leave now.

“But I am worried about you,” Rochford said, leaning towards her again, a frown creasing his brow. “You are clearly unhappy in your marriage.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, so startled by this statement that she didn’t even remember to be angry.

“Your husband... he is not attentive enough to you.”

“What are you talking about?”

Rochford smiled. “Your lack of a child,” he murmured, so quietly that Cherie wasn’t sure she had heard him correctly. “The fact that you will be waiting for a long time to announce that you are expecting. A man can read between the lines, Your Grace. Your husband is not attentive to you in a way that a wife requires. Especially a wife as beautiful and enchanting as you are.”

Cherie’s mouth fell open slightly as she realized what it was exactly that Rochford was saying.

“How dare you,” she whispered, still so shocked that she couldn’t summon the volume she knew she should have. “To come into my home, ask such impertinent questions, and then imply?—”

“I still find you as beautiful now as I did when I hoped we would marry,” Rochford interrupted. He didn’t even seem to have heard her. His eyes were gleaming, and there was an intensity in his tone that he hadn’t had before. “Everything I said at your wedding breakfast was true. I find you captivating.”

“I think it is time that you leave,” Cherie said, trying to sound as firm as possible. She stood, but Rochford remained seated.

“You deserve better, Cherie,” Rochford murmured. His eyes bored into hers, and she felt her breath catch in her throat. “You deserve a man who desires you. A man who will treat you right. A man who will teach you about passion and that you are his.

Cherie's throat was so dry. She wanted to speak, but she couldn't. Rochford didn't seem to need her to respond. He stood, then reached out and took her hand.

"I could show you passion, Your Grace. I could show you what it means to be adored. To be worshiped." He reached out and touched her cheek, and she shuddered. His fingers were so cold, and she could feel disgust throughout her whole body. Every part of her wanted to push him away, but somehow, she couldn't.

Because part of me does want to know what it means to be worshiped. Part of me does want to be desired, to be treated right.

But not by him. Not by this disgusting man.

I want to be treated right by Thomas.

Rochford brushed a lock of hair away from her cheek. "Just because we didn't marry doesn't mean we can't still be together," he whispered. He was moving closer to her, his mouth looming closer. "Isn't this what you have always told people you wanted? A passionate affair? Well, I can give you that, Cherie. There is nothing more exciting, more thrilling. It would fulfill every single one of your desires. And then you would finally have revenge against the man who forced you into marriage against your will."

How does he know that?

So many emotions were coursing through her. She hated this man, his vile words, his presumption, the way he tried to manipulate her to avenge himself against her husband.

But she also knew that this might be the only chance she would ever get to be treated as a woman and a wife. The thought was so depressing that it made her want to wail.

Rochford was even closer now. Far too close. And in his cold eyes, there was a look of triumph. “Perhaps,” he murmured, “I could even give you the child you so desire.”

And suddenly all of her instincts kicked in at once.

She snatched her hand away and took a step back. “Do not touch me,” she hissed. “And kindly refrain from saying such intimate things to me. I am married to the Duke of Wheaton, not to you, and it is an affront to both me and my husband for you to speak to me in such a manner.”

Rochford’s expression immediately soured, and he stood up straighter, his cold eyes glaring into hers.

“So, you are loyal to your husband?”

“Of course I am! He might not be perfect, but he is ten times the man you will ever be.”

A sneer began to creep across Rochford’s face. “Then you are even more foolish than I thought. And when I finally have accomplished my goals, you will realize that trusting the duke was the biggest mistake of your life.”

Before Cherie could respond, the door to the parlor opened, and Thomas strode in, a surprisingly serene look on his face.

“Ahh, Lord Rochford,” he said, smiling at the earl. “I heard that you had graced us with your presence.”

There was a tense silence, during which Cherie couldn’t look at her husband. Her heart was beating so wildly that she was sure he could hear it. Did he hear anything? Does he know what Lord Rochford proposed?

“Yes,” Rochford said at last. He glanced at Cherie one last time, and she looked away quickly, before turning to face the duke. “But I was just leaving.”

“Well then, let me show you out,” Thomas said. “There is some business concerning the estate I’d like to speak with you about anyway. Duchess, please excuse us.”

The two gentlemen left the room. The moment they were gone, Cherie felt her legs give way, and she collapsed onto the sofa, a million questions racing through her mind: What did Rochford mean about regretting trusting the duke? What were his insinuations about the duke not wanting to pass on his line? Did he really want to have an affair with her, or was that just revenge against the duke?

And then, of course, there was the question most pressing on Cherie’s mind: How can I really live the rest of my life not knowing the passion of a real marriage?

Fourteen

“What business do you have with me, Your Grace?” Lord Rochford asked, as they walked along the hallway that led to the front door. His tone was clipped and businesslike, even bored. “I was under the impression that ever since you decided to close down your father’s business, we have nothing more to discuss.”

“You will be compensated for your shares in the company,” Thomas said. “So you have nothing to worry about.”

He was speaking automatically, not really thinking through his words. This was not what he actually wanted to discuss with Rochford. But he couldn’t say anything until he knew they were out of earshot of his wife.

Rochford’s words were still burning in his ears: Isn’t this what you have always told people you wanted? A passionate affair? Well, I can give you that, Cherie.

And while Thomas was relieved his wife had so vehemently denied the earl, he still couldn’t rid himself of the raging jealousy and fury that currently consumed every inch of him.

Rochford, however, seemed unaware of the danger he was in, because he said coldly, “I was hoping to watch the business grow and expand for many years. At the price you are buying them for now, they are hardly worth more than when I got them. Not much return for a business that should have brought profits for years to come.”

Thomas glared at his cousin. The weasel had never created anything of his own; he

had only ever wanted to profit off of Thomas's and his father's work. And now he had the audacity to be angry he could no longer reap unearned rewards from it?!

It was exactly what he'd tried to do with Cherie: steal something that didn't belong to him, because it was easier than trying to build something himself.

"You are free to invest the money you get from the shares into your own business," Thomas snapped. "But I will not keep an exploitative, unethical business afloat for years to come on the opposite side of the world, because you feel that you didn't make enough money from it."

Rochford didn't respond, but the look on his face told Thomas that the earl had many unsavory responses he would like to make to this.

"Let us not discuss this here," Thomas said, and he ushered Rochford into his study. "I do not want to bother my wife with the difficulties of our business affairs."

"You don't seem particularly interested in bothering your wife in any way," Rochford sneered, as he followed him into the study. The insinuation was not lost on Thomas.

He didn't respond right away. Instead, he walked around to the back of his desk, so that the portrait he had commissioned upon the death of his father and his ascent to the duchy was right behind him. As much as Thomas didn't always feel worthy of being the Duke of Wheaton, right now, he wanted the full power of his dukedom behind him.

"Speaking of my wife," he began, in a cold, clear voice, "from now on, you will stay away from her."

Rochford's expression clouded slightly, and he stared at Thomas for a long time, saying nothing. The tension in the room built between them, electric current

prickling, like the air before a lightning storm.

“Your wife is my relative now,” Rochford said at last. “There is no way I can stay away from her.”

“There is a way,” Thomas snarled, “and that way includes never coming to my home again, never speaking to my wife when you see her in public—in fact, never even looking at her. If you see her at a ball, you will turn and walk in the other direction. If you pass her on the street, you will look straight ahead and not make eye contact. If she tries to speak to you, you will become deaf.”

Rochford laughed. It was a cold, harsh laugh. “What are you so afraid of, Your Grace? Is my speaking to your wife really such a threat to your marriage?”

“Of course not,” Thomas said, too quickly. He knew what Rochford was doing, how he was trying to manipulate him, but he couldn’t help the fury that raged through him.

“Then why the defensiveness? If you were truly secure in the relationship, then there would be no need for any of this.”

“I HEARD YOU!” Thomas shouted. His temper, which he had been so much better at controlling ever since the death of his father, but which still lingered so close to the surface, suddenly burst from him. He slammed his fist down on his desk, knocking over one of the bottles of ink that was sitting on it. “I heard what you proposed to her! An affair?! Are you really so presumptuous, so disrespectful to me and my title, that you would try to seduce my wife in my own home?!”

Rochford didn’t look nearly as sorry as he should have. He merely raised an eyebrow.

“From what I can tell, the lady is in need of seduction. And if you will not do it,

someone should.”

“DO NOT SPEAK OF MY WIFE LIKE THAT!”

“Get control of your temper, Your Grace,” Rochford snapped. “Affairs of this nature are normal among the peerage. What is not normal is for a duke to fail in his duty to produce an heir. Or to show no interest in producing one.”

“I don’t believe I’ve shown a single sign of being uninterested in my wife,” Thomas snapped. “And my marriage is none of your business.”

“But it is my business,” Rochford said, leaning forward. “If you do not produce an heir, then I will inherit the dukedom. So, by all means, leave her to her lonely fate.”

“Why do you think I am not trying for an heir?” Thomas snarled. Then a terrible thought struck him. “Did my wife—did she say that?”

But it was the wrong thing to say. From the look of triumph that dawned on Rochford’s face, it was clear that if before he hadn’t been sure, now he was.

Comprehension also began to dawn on Thomas. He must have spoken to my father. He told Rochford something—maybe not the whole truth, but enough for Rochford to suspect that I do not want to continue my line.

Was that why he was here, speaking to Cherie? Was he trying to get information out of her to confirm his suspicions?

Although, in the end, it was Thomas who had given him the information he sought.

The earl reached into his jacket pocket and produced a pocket watch, which he glanced at.

“Unfortunately, I must go,” he said, putting away the pocket watch. “But this conversation has been most... illuminating.” He turned and went to the door. Thomas didn’t move. He was frozen by horror at what he had revealed.

When Rochford was at the door, he hesitated, then turned back around to face Thomas.

“I will do as you say,” he said, “and stay away from your wife. She’s a stubborn, tiresome woman anyway, and upon closer acquaintance, not the kind of lady I am interested in pursuing. But I should warn you, Your Grace: there will be others who are interested. Others who are more successful than I am at swaying her. Because if you are not attentive, if you leave her alone in your marriage, then she will seek out the companionship of others.”

Thomas felt as if he was going to be sick. Of course, he knew that Rochford was right. Cherie was a beautiful, intelligent, charming woman. Many men would want her, and while her loyalty to him did her credit, it would be naive to think that she would remain loyal to him forever when he could not give her a normal marriage.

She deserves a normal marriage , the voice in his head said. She deserves to be loved.

He had heard Rochford say these same words in the parlor, as he’d stood outside of it, listening to their conversation with a growing sense of anger. Now, though, he felt more dread than anything else. And while Rochford had only been saying them to manipulate Cherie, they were true. She deserved the whole world.

Far more than you can give her.

“Now you’re encouraging me to have an heir?” he spat at Rochford. “Your strategy makes no sense, my lord.”

But Rochford merely smiled. "I'm merely reminding you of what your father always knew, and what he told me shortly before he died: that you are not good enough. For anyone. Either this dukedom or your wife."

The words cut like a spear through Thomas's heart. He could hear his father, once again, rasping on his deathbed: You are a disappointment. The same words he'd been saying his whole life. And the other ones; the ones that would haunt him for the rest of his life; the ones that had made him such a disappointment to his wife.

Does Rochford know? Did Father tell him on his deathbed, like he told me?

But if Rochford knew, he wouldn't be playing with Thomas and Cherie like this. He would have brought him down by now. So, he didn't know, but perhaps he just suspected.

Either way, enough was enough.

Thomas drew himself up. Rochford had been here long enough, twisting his mind in directions he didn't want it to go, manipulating his wife.

"Get out of my house," he snarled, his voice low but deadly. "And I never want to see you here again. In future, if you have business to discuss with me, you will send a solicitor to do it for me. I never want to see you or hear your voice ever again. Is that understood?"

Rochford merely smiled. "I will get out of your house if that is what you wish. But only until it is no longer your house. Don't forget, until you produce an heir, this will be my house in due course. And by then, your wife will be free for the taking."

And he turned and left the study, leaving Thomas shaking with rage.

Fifteen

“Thomas? Are you all right?”

Cherie looked into the study where her husband was sitting in the semi-dark, his head resting in his hands. He didn't seem to hear her, so she moved deeper into the room.

“Thomas? What's wrong?”

Her husband looked up, and she almost took a step back. The look on his face was so distraught that for a moment, she almost didn't recognize him. She had never seen him look as devastated as he did now. It was probably how he had looked after his father had died.

“Cherie.” His tone was formal, clipped. It reminded her of how he had spoken to her that first night she'd seen him again, outside of the inn. “You're here.”

“Of course I'm here,” she said. “I came to check on you after the butler told me that Lord Rochford had left.”

“Ahh. Yes. The earl is truly gone, then?”

“Yes, and hopefully he stays gone.” She lingered in the doorway, waiting for an invitation to enter. When he didn't extend one, she took it upon herself to approach him.

“What happened with the earl?” she asked anxiously. “I heard raised voices...”

“I’m sorry you had to hear that,” Thomas said curtly. “It was not my intention.”

“I didn’t hear any particulars if that’s what you’re worried about,” Cherie said, gazing at his face and trying to decipher exactly what it was he was feeling. “I’m not trying to eavesdrop on the business arrangements between the two of you.”

“What?” Thomas looked confused. “Oh, right...”

Cherie licked her lips. She knew that her husband probably wanted a moment alone, but she needed so badly to talk to him, to explain. The guilt of what had happened with Lord Rochford was weighing too heavily on her. And even though she had rejected him, there had still been a few moments when she’d hesitated, and they were filling her with a sick feeling of guilt.

“Thomas...” He looked up at her sharply, and she hoped that having used his given name would make it easier to hear what she had to say. “There is something that you should know about Lord Rochford’s visit.”

Thomas sat back in his chair. The look of utter devastation had left his face, and he seemed alert now, and back to normal—if still aloof.

“I know what happened with Lord Rochford,” he said, before she could explain further. “I heard everything.”

“Everything?” her heart hammered in her chest. “You were there the whole time?”

“Or long enough to get most of it. But you needn’t fear, I heard the way you demonstrated your loyalty. And I appreciate it very much.”

But his face was still expressionless and cold, and Cherie wasn’t sure she believed him.

“If you heard everything, then you know that I have no interest in the earl,” she said. “I just want to emphasize that. I was not tempted by his offer for even a moment.”

“I am glad to hear that.” Again, though, Thomas looked anything but glad.

“I just didn’t want to keep what he said from you,” she hurried to say. “It is important to be honest in a marriage, and I would never keep from you that he came here to proposition me. I hope you can believe that.”

Thomas took a long time to respond. He watched her for what felt like a whole minute, and then he said, “I appreciate that, but you do not need to tell me about every man who propositions you.”

“I—wait, what?” Cherie stared at him. “There are no other men who are propositioning me. You must know that.”

“There aren’t any now,” Thomas said, raising an eyebrow. “But you can’t truly believe that Lord Rochford will be the last.”

She gasped. “I hope that he will be!”

“It is not uncommon for married people of the peerage to pursue ... affections... beyond the bounds of marriage,” Thomas said, although the words seemed to cost him some effort. “So, I would not be surprised, or offended, if you—a beautiful, interesting, charming young woman—were to receive other offers.”

Cherie felt as if her head was spinning. This had never even occurred to her, and she did not like the idea of it one bit.

“That is preposterous,” she said faintly. “I am a duchess. The men of the ton should show me more respect.”

“It is their way of showing respect,” he said flatly. He then stood, stretched, and walked across the room to her. Only once he was standing in front of her did he say, almost too quietly for her to hear, “I would also not be surprised, or offended if you were to accept one of these proposals.”

Cherie gasped. She could not quite believe the words that had just come out of her husband’s mouth. Her head spun, and for a moment, she thought she might faint. It was the most disrespectful, dishonorable thing anyone had ever said to her.

“Cherie?” Her husband’s hand came to her arm, and he peered closely at her. “Are you all right?”

She wrenched her arm from his grasp and glared at him. “Of course, I’m not all right! You just implied that I would betray you! And your implication goes beyond that—you are also giving me tacit permission! I have never been so insulted in my life!” Anger flared in her chest, and she had the insane urge to slap him. Her fingers twitched before she could quite suppress it.

“I am a duchess, and an honorable woman,” she said. “And never in my wildest dreams would I betray my husband. I am deeply offended that you would suggest otherwise.”

To her surprise, Thomas did not look remotely apologetic. “I understand your anger,” he said, “but you are still young and naive in the ways of the world.”

“Do not call me naive!”

“This is common practice among the aristocracy for couples that no longer live as man and wife.”

“But—”

“Husbands often look the other way, while their wives stray.”

“Thomas—”

“And furthermore, it is what you deserve!” A pained look came over her husband’s face, and he glared at her with a furious intensity. “Don’t you want to experience all the joys of romantic love, Cherie? Don’t you dream of great passion?”

“Of course I do, but?—”

“Well, you are not going to find that in me, clearly! But that doesn’t mean you have to go your whole life without it!”

Cherie felt the tears beginning to burn in her eyes. “What are you saying, Thomas?” she whispered. “Do you want me to take up with another man?”

Her husband made a face. “Of course, I don’t want it, but I accept that it is inevitable!”

“It isn’t inevitable!” Cherie shouted, stamping her foot. “I don’t want to take up with another man!” Tears were pricking Cherie’s eyes, but she brushed them angrily away. “Why are you being so cruel to me? Do you really believe that I secretly want Lord Rochford, that I encouraged his attentions? Is that why you are treating me like this?”

Thomas was very rigid, his jaw locked. “No,” he finally confessed, and his shoulders slumped slightly. “I don’t believe you encouraged his attentions.”

“Because I did hesitate...” she said, forcing herself not to look away. “But not because of him. Only because...”

“I know why you hesitated,” Thomas said quickly. “Of course, you want to know

what a real marriage feels like.”

“But I do not want that with him,” she whispered. “And I do not want to betray our marriage vows. That is not the kind of woman I am, and if that is how you see me, then you really do not know me at all!”

Thomas’s expression softened somewhat. “Of course that’s not how I see you,” he murmured. “I only wanted you to know that there are other options if you ever tire of our arrangement. Because I want the best for you, Cherie. I want you to be happy.” He took a deep breath, and she knew that whatever he was about to say was difficult for him to admit.

“I was jealous,” he said, his voice quieter than she had heard it in a long time. “When I heard the way Constantine spoke to you, I was jealous. Not because I thought you were interested in him, but because I didn’t want another man to speak to you the way I wish I could speak to you.”

His eyes met hers, and she admired that about him: that even as he confessed his true feelings, he didn’t look away.

He is brave.

Cherie’s heart was cantering in her chest, and she swore that if she looked down, she would be floating. Her husband’s words seemed to sing through her, filling her with hope and joy.

“Which words exactly?” she whispered. “Which ones do you want to speak to me?”

Thomas licked his lips but didn’t respond. She didn’t care, and she plunged recklessly on.

“Do you want to show me what it means to be adored? To be worshiped?”

Slowly, Thomas nodded.

Cherie felt as if her heart was going to explode. Goosebumps were spreading up her arms and legs. She couldn't quite believe that after everything she and Thomas had gone through, this was finally happening.

“Do you want to show me passion?” she whispered.

Again, Thomas nodded.

She was closer now, so close that she could reach out and touch him. His eyes were deep pools that she felt she could stare into for eternity, and she wanted to reach out and touch his chiseled jaw, to run her fingers through his hair.

“I want that, too,” she murmured. “I want you to show me passion.”

Thomas opened his mouth to respond, but no words came out. He was staring at her, but she couldn't understand what the look meant. It was shock, yes, but also something else: something like disbelief.

“Don't say that,” he muttered. “Don't lie to me.”

“I'm not lying,” she said, her voice choked with emotion. “I want you, Thomas. I don't want another man. I don't want you to look the other way. I want you. This marriage. Us.”

But Thomas was shaking his head, and the disbelief in his eyes was growing.

“Is that really so hard to believe?” she whispered. Whatever reticence was in him, she

knew she had to break it; to show him that she was sincere, after so long of pushing him away. “The way you saved Lady Chastity, how you stood up for me with Lord Rochford again and again... Thomas, is it really so hard to believe that of all the men I might want to experience romantic passion from, it might be the one who has always been there for me, even when I was a child?”

Her eyes were glistening with tears again, but this time they were tears of deep emotion and happiness.

“You have never wanted me,” Thomas choked out. “Growing up, you thought of me as you would an older brother. And when you were older, I was just an old friend of the family, not a serious romantic option.”

“But why would I think of you otherwise? You never presented yourself as anything other than that!” Cherie waved a hand dismissively. “You never courted me; you never flirted with me..”

“Well, I could hardly...” Thomas looked flustered and unsure of himself. “With my best friend’s sister! And what would Aidan have said? He would have called me out!”

“Thomas.” Cherie reached out her right hand and set it tentatively against her husband’s chest, right above his heart. A realization was beginning to dawn on her. “Did you have feelings for me all those years? The—the jealousy you spoke of, did it only begin recently? Please, answer me honestly. There is too much at stake for you to hide your real feelings from me any longer.”

“I—” Thomas licked his lips, and she could see the conflict that was raging behind his eyes.

But why? Why does he need to deny his feelings?

“Thomas, we are married,” she murmured, as her fingers dug into his chest. “We have an opportunity to be happy together. Why can’t we just try?”

“I want to try,” he murmured. “But you were the one who was so infuriated by the idea of marrying me.”

“I know,” she said softly. “But I don’t feel that way anymore. I’m here, Thomas, and I’m trying to tell you that my feelings have changed. I’m here. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

His right hand came to hers, covering it, so that they were both touching his heart. At the same time, his left hand slid down her arm. His fingers brushed against her skin, and then he cupped her elbow. His touch was soft, and it set her skin on fire. Then he gripped her elbow tighter and pulled her even closer to him. His face was now so close; his lips were inches from her; his eyes were burning into hers.

“I wouldn’t let you go anywhere,” he whispered.

And then he kissed her.

Sixteen

“C herie...” the whisper of her name filled Cherie’s ears like a flood. It set all of her senses on fire. It was water and fire at the same time; all the elements that rage across the earth; all the elements that control human destiny.

Because that’s what this kiss felt like: like the most powerful forces on earth raging across the world, reshaping continents and landscapes, forming new lands; reshaping the landscape of her soul.

“Cherie... ma cherie ...” His whispers came in between kisses, between moments of pure bliss, and they shivered through her. She had never really heard her name before, she realized. Not until Thomas had spoken it while he kissed her.

And she had never known herself, either. What her body was capable of feeling. Not just the physical sensations of being kissed, but the emotions that welled inside of her. This was pure bliss; pure joy; the end of thought and the beginning of pure, unadulterated, unobstructed happiness.

This was what it felt like to be a woman, alive in a body. And she wanted it to never, ever end.

“Thomas,” she whispered back, as his kisses left her lips and went to her neck. She wanted to taste his name, as well, to feel the way it felt to shiver through the air and through both of them.

He responded enthusiastically, kissing her even more deeply, and she suspected that

the sound of his name made him feel the same way hers had made her feel.

“Thomas,” she murmured again, and he pulled away for a moment and looked down at her. His eyes were shining, and a radiant smile was playing over his lips. She had never seen him look so happy, she thought, in all the years she had known him.

“I have wanted this for so long,” he murmured, and the words once more set her on fire. She grabbed him—most unladylike, but she didn’t care—and pulled him back to her lips. For a long while, they stayed like that, lost in one another’s kisses.

Sometime later, they broke apart.

Cherie wasn’t sure how much time had passed. It could have been hours, maybe even weeks. Maybe they’d passed their tenth anniversary while lost in the kiss.

The kiss had had a strange effect on her: she felt weak and powerful at the same time. Her legs seemed as if they were about to give out underneath her from how heady, delicious, and surreal it had been to kiss her husband. At the same time, she had never felt so full of energy. Thomas’s kiss had given her a strength she’d never known she had.

Thomas drew back slightly. He smiled down at her—a soft, hazy smile—and caressed her cheek with his thumb.

“You are so beautiful,” he said, his eyes raking over her face. “It astonishes me.”

Cherie felt her eyes well with tears. “You really think so?”

“I know so. I have known since the first moment I saw you.”

She laughed. “I was a child then.”

“Yes, and I didn’t think of you romantically then. But I knew you would grow into a beautiful woman.”

“When did you start to see me romantically?” she asked.

Thomas tilted his head to one side, thinking. “When you were around fifteen. My father insisted that I move to India full-time to work on the family business. I’d only just returned to England, and I was devastated to have to go back. I came to see Aidan, but when I arrived at your family estate, he was out riding. The butler showed me to the parlor, and I was waiting there when the most beautiful young lady I’d ever seen walked in.”

Cherie’s eyes went wide. “I remember that day. I’d been out riding as well, but I’d come back early because my horse had lost a shoe.”

“And you were still wearing your riding clothes.”

“I came into the parlor not knowing you were there, and you gave me quite a fright.”

They both laughed at the memory. Cherie’s mind was full of the image: a younger Thomas, standing by the French windows that led out to the terrace, his hands behind his back, holding his hat, and a very serious look on his face.

“You looked so serious,” she said, touching his cheek lightly. “I wasn’t used to seeing you so serious.”

“A preview of times to come,” he said, chuckling.

“I do remember you looking at me strangely,” she said, screwing up her eyes as she tried to remember. “I thought that I had mud all over me, for you to look at me with such a shocked expression.”

Thomas threw his head back and laughed. "I believe that is what the poets refer to as a lightning bolt. "

"A lightning bolt?"

"Of desire," he said, and his cheeks heated.

He is blushing!

"And not just desire," he amended quickly. "A lightning bolt realization that the person standing in front of you is the person you have been looking for all along. You had grown up, Cherie. I'd been in India for several years. The last time I'd seen you, you had been just a girl. And of course, I'd always been fond of you. You were my favorite person to spend time with. I used to tell your brother that he was lucky to have a sister like you. He used to tease me that I preferred spending time with you than with him."

He laughed again, and she giggled as well. "I never knew that."

"Yes, I think sometimes he was a bit jealous. I'd bring you gifts and spend time playing with you instead of shooting and riding with him. But you were still just a girl. And then suddenly, you were a woman."

His finger slid up her cheek and touched a lock of her hair. The sensation sent another shiver down her spine. "And I saw you walk in, flushed from riding, happy, your eyes sparkling, and I almost didn't recognize you. Because the little girl I had known was gone. And it hit me so suddenly and so powerfully: the realization that you were the woman of my dreams."

Cherie felt as if her head was spinning. She had never felt so happy in all her life.

“I don’t know why it took me so long to realize I felt this way,” she whispered. “You were always my favorite person in the world. I looked forward to your visits so much. But I never thought of you romantically. Well, perhaps deep down, but I could never acknowledge it. To me, you were older, so smart and kind and handsome... not someone who would ever pay attention to a little girl like me!”

“I also felt certain that there were too many barriers!” He shook his head. “You were my best friend’s sister. You were still far too young to court. And I was going back to India. I didn’t know if I’d ever return to England full-time. And while your brother might eventually come around to the idea of me courting you, I knew he would never agree to the match if it meant you moving across the world.”

“And there was also your father,” she whispered.

“Yes,” Thomas said heavily. “There was also him. He had made me doubt myself so thoroughly that I was sure there was no way you would ever want me. I didn’t feel worthy of you. So, while I was miserable at the thought of parting with you and returning to India, I also thought that perhaps it was for the best: you could never want me, and I could never deserve you.”

“You do deserve me,” Cherie said, and she had never meant anything more. “You deserve happiness, Thomas. And I think we could be happy together.” His fingers tightened in her hair, and the look in his eyes intensified.

“I know we both made mistakes. You were cold and forceful about our marriage, and I was deeply opposed to it. I wanted a love match, and I was sure love could only blossom in a very specific way.” She shook her head with a rueful smile. “I was wrong.” She looked deep into his eyes and willed him, with everything she was, to say yes. “Can we try again?”

Seventeen

“Y ou will find the Duke of Vaston in the kitchen, Your Grace.”

“The kitchen?” Thomas stared at the butler as he stood in the hallway of his best friend’s London townhouse, unbuttoning his coat. “The Duke of Vaston is in the kitchen?”

“Yes,” the butler sniffed. “I told him that it wasn’t necessary, that the servants could see to the duchess’s needs, but he insisted upon doing it himself.” The butler looked decidedly unhappy about this. “Perhaps you could mention to him, Your Grace, how undignified it is for a duke to spend time in his own kitchen? It will give the servants a bad impression.”

Thomas had to hide his laugh. Aidan’s butler had always been even more of a snob than the duke himself.

A few hours had passed since the conversation and kiss with Cherie, and Thomas had ridden to Vaston Manor this afternoon to seek out his oldest friend’s advice. He hadn’t spoken to Aidan in a while, since the wedding breakfast. Ever since that day, he had been afraid to reach out to him. Being married to his sister was awkward enough; when one added the strange circumstances of the wedding, it was downright uncomfortable.

But Thomas needed someone to speak to; someone who had known him for a long time and who would give him honest advice; someone who wouldn’t sugarcoat things but also wouldn’t catastrophize. Otherwise, he didn’t know what to do: should he

follow his heart and live with Cherie as husband and wife, or should he keep the distance between them that she deserved?

Hopefully, Aidan can still give me good advice , he thought dubiously. Although based on this strange behavior, he may have lost his mind on his honeymoon.

“Well, take me to him, I suppose,” Thomas said, shaking his head in amusement and surprise.

The butler led him across the hall, and then through a door that Thomas had never been through before. One of the servants’ stairs. They descended the narrow staircase, which opened up into a neat, simple hallway, through which was wafting the smells of delicious cooking.

“All my years coming here, and I’ve never been to the kitchen,” Thomas marveled.

“Well, it’s hardly an appropriate place for a duke to go,” the butler said disapprovingly.

They walked down the corridor, then into a warm, spacious kitchen that was alive with the hustle and bustle of servants. Kitchen maids were cutting vegetables, sharpening knives, and cleaning pans, while at the large fire, the cook was ladling something from a large pot into a small glass bottle. Next to her stood the Duke of Vaston.

“Your Grace,” the butler said, bowing low. “The Duke of Wheaton is here to see you.”

Aidan turned, and his face broke into a smile as he saw Thomas.

“Wheaton!” Aidan boomed, holding out his hands. “How wonderful it is to you see!

How long has it been—three weeks?”

“I think four,” Thomas said, grinning as he came forward and shook his friend’s hand.

“Well, either way, far too long,” Aidan said. “The duchess and I were just saying how much we would like to have you and Cherie over for dinner. But of course, we aren’t hosting yet.”

“Yes, it would be unusual for a duke and duchess to cut short their honeymoon to host a dinner,” Thomas said. “Especially since the Italian portion of the honeymoon was already cut short...”

“We shall not speak of that,” Aidan said, his lip twitching in amusement. “As far as I remember, you and Cherie married in an entirely un-scandalous way, after an appropriately long courtship, and that is what I shall tell anyone who inquires about it.”

“If only,” Thomas said, trying to force himself to laugh.

“Your Grace,” the cook interrupted, and she handed the glass bottle to Aidan. “It’s ready.”

Aidan turned to her at once and took the bottle. Holding it as delicately as one would a child, he brought it to his nose and sniffed.

“And this has the ginger root in it?” he inquired. “And the motherwort?”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

He made a face. “It doesn’t smell very appetizing.”

His cook gave him a reproving look. “Nor did I say it would. But it will have Her Grace feeling better in no time.”

“Hmm.” Aidan gave the mixture in the bottle one more sniff, then nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Trench. Your apothecary skills are second only to your cooking. I appreciate this very much.”

“Anything for Her Grace,” Mrs. Trench, curtsying clumsily. “And please do tell her that we all hope she is feeling better in no time.”

“Thank you, I will.”

Aidan took the piece of cork Mrs. Trench handed him and stopped up the top of the bottle. He then smiled at Thomas and motioned for him to follow him.

The two of them left the kitchen, traipsed back along the corridor, and headed up the narrow staircase. Only when they were out in the hall again did Thomas turn to Aidan with concern and curiosity.

“What is that?” he asked, nodding at the potion in his friend’s hand. “Is Her Grace unwell?”

“She has been feeling under the weather of late,” Aidan said, a mysterious smile curling his lips.

“Then shouldn’t you fetch a doctor?” Thomas asked. “Why would you rely on a potion brewed by your cook when it comes to the duchess’s health?”

Aidan chuckled, and Thomas got the distinct impression that he was missing something.

“This potion isn’t just for making the duchess feel better,” Aidan explained. “She also has very particular tastes these days and doesn’t like to eat or drink much. This drink is something that Mrs. Trench’s family have used for generations to appease the particular appetites of women in the duchess’s condition.”

“The duchess’s condition...?” Thomas frowned, not understanding.

Aidan laughed and shook his head. “Cassandra is with child, Thomas.”

“Oh my—” Thomas’s eyes went wide, and he stopped in his tracks. “Aidan! Why didn’t you say so at once? Congratulations, my old friend! You are going to be a father!”

“Yes,” Aidan said, and his eyes grew moist. “I’m going to be a father.”

Both men had stopped walking, and Thomas suddenly found himself unable to speak. Tears choked his throat, and his eyes burned. Next to him, Aidan looked equally as emotional.

“I couldn’t quite believe it,” Aidan said after a moment. His voice was hoarse, so he coughed and cleared his throat. “It was all so sudden. We only married two months ago...”

“Sometimes that’s all it takes,” Thomas said with a wink, and Aidan burst out laughing.

“We were rather... enthusiastic,” Aidan admitted, resuming his walk across the hall. “On the honeymoon, I mean.”

“You two are deeply in love,” Thomas said, and his heart seemed to clench with sadness and longing at the same time. “And I know that you will both be excellent

parents.”

They reached the stairs, and Aidan began to mount them. “Do you mind if I drop this off at the duchess’s room?” Aidan asked. “I could give it to a servant, but ever since I found out about her condition, I have found myself eager to attend to all her needs personally.”

“So that’s why you were in the kitchen? You had to personally oversee the concoction of this mysterious, magical drink?”

Aidan laughed. “It’s an old folk remedy that is supposed to bring long-term health to both the mother and the baby.”

“Ahh, I see. Well, your butler was very disapproving of your need to oversee its preparation.”

“Yes, he thinks I am rather undignified these days,” Aidan said with a chuckle. “But then, he has never had children. So, he does not understand the urge that has overtaken me of late.” He smiled to himself, a far-away look in his eyes.

“I just want to take care of her, Thomas,” he burst out as if this were some tawdry secret. “I want to make sure every one of her needs are satisfied, that she’s comfortable and happy all the time, that she’s rested and feels well. She is giving me the greatest gift on earth, after all: she is giving me a child and an heir. Not to mention she already gave me the greatest gift by marrying her. And now I want to be of service to her. Give back as much as she is giving me.”

“It’s not as if she did it on her own,” Thomas pointed out. “You also contributed to the making of this child.”

“Yes, but she is the one that will have to carry it. It’s an awesome burden, my friend.

The female body goes through so much during pregnancy and labor. So, I just want to make her as comfortable as possible.”

They reached the duchess’s room, and Aidan knocked softly.

“Come in,” the duchess called from within, and Aidan pushed open the door.

“Thomas is with me, my dear,” he said, poking his head around the door. “May he come in?”

“Of course!”

Thomas followed Aidan into the room. Cassandra, the Duchess of Vaston, was sitting up in bed, a book in her hand. She looked remarkably well, her round cheeks ruddy and her eyes alight in a way Thomas hadn’t seen before. And as her husband approached, she smiled radiantly at him. He kissed her cheek and set the bottle down on the table next to the bed.

“Mrs. Trench’s finest concoction yet,” Aidan said, gesturing at it. “She assures me it will cure you of your morning sickness.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful!” Cassandra gushed. “I am sick of being confined to bed, and once the nausea passes, I think I’ll feel up to getting out of bed.”

“Just take it easy for now,” Aidan said. “There is no rush.”

Cassandra nodded, and the look of trust in her eyes as she looked at her husband nearly broke Thomas’s heart. She then looked past Aidan at Thomas.

“Your Grace!” She beamed. “It’s wonderful to see you again! And my dear Cherie, how is she?”

“She is well,” Aidan said truthfully. “And will be delighted to learn of your condition.”

“Oh, please do tell her,” Cassandra said. “I meant to write to her, but I have been feeling so poorly since we discovered the news that I haven’t been up for it.”

“I’m very pleased for you,” Thomas said. “You and Aidan will make wonderful parents.”

“Thank you,” she said, and her cheeks flushed even more. She and Aidan shared a long look, and again, it struck Thomas to the heart. The love between the duke and duchess was so powerful that he felt almost embarrassed to witness it.

“Well, we should let you rest,” Aidan said at last. “Make sure you drink up. Mrs. Trench will never forgive me if I spend half an hour looking over her shoulder and then don’t ensure you drink all of it.”

Cassandra laughed. “Of course, I will. It was nice to see you, Thomas. Please give Cherie my love.”

Thomas bowed to the duchess, and then he and Aidan left the room. Once the door had closed behind him, his friend let out a long sigh.

“She looks remarkably well, doesn’t she?” he asked Thomas. “Despite feeling nauseous.”

“She really does.” Thomas peered at his friend. Aidan didn’t seem able to stop smiling. “And you, my old friend? How do you feel?”

Aidan chuckled, then threw his arm around Thomas. “In truth, I’m terrified,” he said to Thomas’s surprise.

“Terrified? You don’t look it!”

“Well, I’m happy also. Maybe the happiest I’ve ever been in my life. But it’s a huge responsibility, parenthood. I don’t take that lightly. I will be a father soon, Thomas! This means that from the day my child is born, I will have to make sure he or she is safe, happy, fed, and loved unconditionally. I want to do it well. I want my child to grow up feeling more loved than any child ever has. But I know it will be hard and that there will be moments of exhaustion, doubt, anger, frustration, and every other negative emotion. So, I will have to be stronger and braver than I ever have been, in order to be the best I can be for this child.”

Aidan shook his head. “So yes, my old friend, I’m terrified. I’m terrified I won’t be worthy of this child or the perfect woman I married. But I’m also sure that there is nothing else in this world I want more than to be good enough for both of them.”

Thomas was once more overcome with emotion. He found it difficult to speak, but he forced himself to. “That’s a concept I’ve never considered before,” he said, his voice hoarse. “That a father should worry about not being good enough for his child. I was always made to believe that it was the other way around: that the child had to prove he was good enough for the father.”

“Not at all,” Aidan said, shaking his head. “And you’ll see soon enough. I’m sure that you and Cherie will have a child before long. And then, when you know she’s with child, you’ll know what I know now: that you love this woman, and the child on its way, more than life itself: that you’d do anything to protect them and make them happy. And then you’ll know that there is nothing that child could ever do to make it unworthy of your love. Because your love is unconditional.”

Aidan’s grip tightened on his arm. “You’ll see soon enough,” he repeated. “Just you wait.”

And with these words, Thomas knew exactly what he had to do.

“Was there a reason you stopped by, though?” Aidan asked. “Was there something you wanted to discuss?”

“No no,” Thomas lied. “I just wanted to see you.”

And you already answered my question.

### Eighteen

“ I think it’s going to become a real marriage,” Cherie gushed, as she and Minerva walked arm-in-arm down the Serpentine. “I know it, Minerva! It’s going to become everything my mother wanted for me.”

It was a beautiful day, and the clear skies and bright sun seemed to match Cherie’s mood perfectly. She hadn’t felt this optimistic in a long time, and she hadn’t been able to contain herself, which is why the moment she’d awoken she had sent a note to Minerva to meet her for a promenade.

“I just can’t believe that this whole time you weren’t in a real marriage,” Minerva said, her expression still a bit perplexed, as it had been ever since Cherie had confessed everything to her about her marriage and the kiss the night before that had changed everything. “And I truly can’t believe that you didn’t tell me.”

“I’m sorry, dearest,” Cherie said, squeezing her friend’s arm and drawing her closer. “But it wasn’t anything to do with not trusting you. I was just ashamed. I’d been forced to marry a man who didn’t love me, and on top of that, who didn’t want to have children with me.”

“Oh, Cherie...” Minerva gave her a long, searching look. “I’m so very sorry. I can only imagine how awful that must have been, to think that the rest of your life would be without children, without love.” She trailed off, her expression growing even darker.

“I am surprised, though,” she said after a moment. “From the way that the duke

behaves with you, I was sure that he was very much in love with you.”

“I wonder now,” Cherie said. She thought back over everything that had happened since Thomas had caught her outside of the inn “There were definitely signs that his feelings were growing, I suppose.”

“Like when he came to Chastity’s rescue,” Minerva pointed out. “I had never seen a man so willing to go to bat for a friend of his wife’s. And when I saw how he defended you when Lord Dawson tried to attack you, I was convinced he was madly in love with you.”

“The more I know about Thomas, the more sure I am that he would have helped any young lady in Chastity’s position,” Cherie said. “But I also think back to how he reacted when Lord Dawson came at me and can see now that his feelings for me were not as platonic as he let on. And it isn’t just that. Minerva, he had feelings for me for years! He told me that he’d fallen for me when I was fifteen!”

“Yes, you mentioned that,” Minerva said, laughing slightly. “And to be honest, I always suspected as much. I didn’t meet him many times when we were children, but the few times I did, it was always clear to me that he was enamored with you.”

“Really?” Cherie gaped at her. “You never said anything!”

Minerva shrugged. “It never seemed important to mention.”

Cherie shook her head. This was one of those times when she felt as if she truly couldn’t understand her best friend’s brain. Minerva had never been the kind of person to moon after men or gossip about handsome gentlemen. Of course, she wouldn’t mention if she thought one was in love with Cherie. But Cherie wasn’t sure she minded this. If she had suspected Thomas’s feelings earlier, everything might have turned out differently.

Or maybe you would have been happily married to him much earlier .

“I always knew he was attentive,” she said slowly, “but I never suspected a thing. He was like an older brother to me, although even then, I knew that I was partial to him above all others. Whenever he visited I could hardly contain myself with joy. And after last night, it all makes sense. I think I may have had feelings for him all along and simply buried them deep down within me.”

Minerva raised an eyebrow. “And one kiss was enough to bring them to the surface?”

“It wasn’t an ordinary kiss,” Cherie said, then paused. “Not that I know what an ordinary kiss is.”

Both ladies laughed, then Minerva sobered.

“I’m truly happy for you, Cherie, if this means that things will change in your marriage for the better. But I just don’t want you to get your hopes up too much.”

“What do you mean?” Cherie asked swiftly, her body tensing with dread.

“I only mean that there was a reason the duke didn’t want a real marriage with you, or children, and that reason might not have changed.”

“But it has!” Cherie insisted. “He thought I didn’t have any feelings for him, that’s why he was distant with me. But now that he knows I feel the same way, things will be different.”

“Did he say that exactly, though?” Minerva asked thoughtfully. “Did you ask him exactly why he said he didn’t want children? Did he say, after your kiss, that he has changed his mind on this issue? On any of it?”

“Well, no,” Cherie said, biting her lip. She felt unfairly annoyed at Minerva for her words. Although she knew her friend was just trying to protect her, it still irritated her. “But Thomas and I shared the most magical kiss,” she insisted. “Of course, he has changed his mind about children and... all that.”

“Perhaps,” Minerva said, “but I think you should speak with him as soon as possible and make sure before you get your hopes crushed.”

Cherie felt so angry at her friend’s lack of support that she didn’t know what to say. They passed a group of debutantes they knew, politely nodding to them, and she took this as an excuse not to respond right away.

Minerva saw her set face and laid a hand on her arm. “I’m sorry if this isn’t what you want to hear,” Minerva said after the group of debutantes had passed. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Cherie sighed and forced herself to think rationally. “I know,” she said at last. “And the fact that you always want to protect me is one of my favorite things about you.”

“That’s what we wallflowers are all about: protecting one another. And we will help you no matter what.” Minerva hesitated. “If the duke does continue to want to live apart, and you desire an annulment, I know that we would also help you with that.”

“I don’t want an annulment,” Cherie said sharply. Even the thought of one brought a searing pain to her chest. “I want to be with Thomas. As his wife. And I am sure, after our kiss, that’s what he wants as well.”

“I’m sure you are right,” Minerva said, inclining her head. “Just make sure, Cherie. Because I cannot bear to think of you getting even more hurt by this man who has always caused you so much pain.”

Cherie couldn't argue with that. And at her friend's words, a tiny seed of doubt felt as if it had been planted in her chest. She had to make sure now before Thomas hurt her all over again.

"Is the duke home?" Cherie asked the butler the moment she arrived back home.

"Yes, Your Grace. He is in the library."

Cherie removed her gloves, handed her cloak to the butler, and then made her way slowly across the hall to the library. She'd never known her husband to be in there before, and for a moment, she allowed herself to fantasize what it would feel like to be kissed in the library, amongst all the books. It made her heart stir, and her pace quickened.

When she arrived at the library, she knocked lightly, and Thomas's voice sounded from inside: "Enter."

She pushed open the door and squinted into the gloom of the library. At first, she couldn't make out much, but as she moved into the room and closed the door behind her, her eyes began to adjust.

"Thomas?" she murmured. "Where are you?"

"I'm here." He appeared out of the darkness holding a book. At once, she could tell that something was wrong. There was a cold, reserved look on his face, and there was no warmth or laughter in his eyes. She felt her throat go dry, and she was sure it had nothing to do with all the dust in the library.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked. "I never see you in the library."

"I was looking for some old diaries from when my mother was young," he said,

shrugging. "I was missing her and wondered if it might be possible to find some of the thoughts that she put down when she was around my age."

"That's very beautiful," she murmured. "You don't talk much about your mother. Were you close to her?"

"Very close," he said. "But she died when I was still a boy, only thirteen. My father always said I was more like her than like him, and although I knew he meant that as an insult, I always took it as a compliment. After all, she was my favorite person in the world."

"I think it's nice you're like her," Cherie said, smiling slightly. "Better her than him."

"Yes." Thomas gave a short, mirthless bark of laughter. "I suppose that's true."

She considered him for a long moment. "What's going on, Thomas?" she asked at last. "You seem much changed since yesterday."

After their kiss the previous day, they'd enjoyed a simple meal together and had talked as old friends might. There had been laughter, even flirting. And while they hadn't discussed exactly what they wanted to happen in their marriage, and had slept separately, Cherie had gone to bed hopeful.

"I'm sorry if I seem different," Thomas said, his voice wooden. "I finally got a chance to think things over. Yesterday I acted on instinct. I was rash and hot-blooded. But that is not the way to make decisions, especially important ones."

"I suppose not," she said cautiously, "but I appreciated you acting on instinct, instead of holding yourself back. What happened between us yesterday was, in my opinion, beautiful. I have not been able to stop thinking about it."

Thomas stared at her; his expression inscrutable.

When he said nothing, she moved towards him, unable to disguise the hopeful, eager look on her face.

“I am excited to finally live as husband and wife,” she said, “and I know, after that kiss we shared yesterday, that is what you want as well.”

“Cherie, wait?—”

“Please, let me speak. I vowed to my mother that I would have a love match, Thomas, you know this. And after yesterday, I feel the happiest I have in a long time because I feel that I am finally on my way to making my mother’s dream come true.”

“Cherie—”

“But my mother is gone,” she continued doggedly. “This is about me and you. I’m not saying that ours is now a love match. I know there is still so much we have to learn. Trust needs to be rebuilt on both sides. But I know what I felt in that kiss, and I heard what you said to me about your feelings, and I am now sure that we could be truly happy, Thomas. And I want to try.”

She reached out and took his hand. It was cold, but she still held it firmly. “I want to live as man and wife. And I want to have children with you. I know that you would be a great father.”

Thomas backed away from her, shaking his head.

“It was a mistake,” he said, his voice as harsh and cold as a winter storm.

Cherie felt as if the rug had been pulled out from under her feet. She felt dizzy and

confused, and she had to reach out and touch a nearby bookcase to keep from stumbling.

“Why would you say that?” she whispered, looking back up at him. “It was not a mistake!”

“It was,” he insisted. “I told you from the very beginning: I cannot have children. And I cannot be married to you as your husband.”

“Please don’t do this!” Cherie said. She could feel the nausea rising in her stomach, the panic beginning to course through her. “Please, Thomas, don’t push me away!”

“I’m not pushing you away,” he said coldly, “I’m telling you how it is with me: despite what we shared yesterday, I am still not able to give you a real marriage.”

“But why?” Cherie cried desperately. “Why won’t you have children? And why can’t we just be happy together?”

Thomas opened his mouth, but no words came out. He looked as if he were holding himself back from saying something important.

“Please just tell me,” she begged. “I am sick of the silence and the secrets. Tell me why you can’t be my husband, and we can work through it together.”

“There’s nothing for you to work on,” he said at last. “None of this is your fault, Cherie. I am the one who is unworthy of being your husband. And the more you get to know me, the more you will realize that.”

“How can you say?—”

“Believe me, I am saving you from a lifetime of disappointment by cutting this short

now,” he interrupted. “If we were to try and be happy, I would only hurt you again and again by being unable to be the man you need.”

“Is this about your father again?” she asked, peering into her husband’s eyes, which were so much more dead than they usually looked. “Because he made you feel worthless and unworthy? Because I’m here to tell you: he was wrong. Anyone who knows you would tell you he was wrong.”

“You didn’t know my father,” Thomas snapped, and for the first time, he sounded truly angry at her. His eyes blazed and his voice rang. “Nor do you understand the complexity of the relationship between fathers and sons. There is no way for you to know if he was right about me. Only I can know that!”

Cherie stepped back, fear and sadness overtaking her. When she spoke again, it was in a dull, lifeless voice. “You’re right, I didn’t know your father. And I have no way of knowing if the things he told you about yourself were true. But I do know that every day you choose to believe him and not me is a day you let him win.”

Thomas scoffed and turned away. He moved deeper into the shadow, until all she could see was the outline of his body, like some sort of dark angel.

“He has already won,” he said, and his voice scraped against her like a claw. “There is nothing that you or I can do about it. Now go, Cherie. Leave me before I infect you even more.”

She turned and fled, but not because he had told her to; she didn’t want him to hear her sob.

Nineteen

“ I don’t know what happened,” Cherie sobbed into Cassandra’s lap. “One day, he was kissing me and telling me that he has cared for me for years, and then the next day, he was telling me that it could never happen between us, that he wasn’t worthy, and that I would be better off without him.”

Her tears wouldn’t stop falling down her cheeks. All Cherie wanted was to stop crying, but ever since her conversation with Thomas, she hadn’t been able to stem the flow.

Cassandra patted her head. “Oh, my dear, I’m so sorry,” she murmured, and Cherie felt the usual flush of warmth she always felt for her kind, sweet friend.

Minerva, who was sitting on the edge of Cassandra’s bed, sighed. “It sounds as if this is his issue, not yours,” she said, and Cherie could practically feel her shrugging. It was also a very typical Minerva response, but it didn’t bother Cherie at all. She was grateful to have all her friends’ different perspectives.

Samantha, of course, could always be relied on to get up in arms for her friends, and she was now pacing around the bedroom. When she spoke, she didn’t sound resigned at all. “What did he say, exactly?” she asked. “He didn’t say that he doesn’t love you, right?”

“R-right,” Cherie hiccupped, “but he also d-didn’t say that he loved me.”

“But he said he had strong feelings for you two days ago,” Samantha clarified.

“That’s right.”

“Hmm.” Samantha stopped pacing and turned to look at her. “So, his feelings haven’t changed. The problem is not that he doesn’t want to be married to you in a traditional way. The problem is that for whatever reason, he feels as if he is unworthy to be married to you.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Cherie said. “But it amounts to the same thing: he does not want to be properly married to me.”

“But one of those things you can’t change, and the other you can,” Samantha pointed out. “For instance, you could not convince a man to love you who doesn’t. But you might be able to convince him that he is worthy of being your husband.”

“But should she?” Minerva asked, and all three of them turned to look at her. “I just mean, is it really her job to talk the duke into believing he’s worthy of love? That sounds exhausting, and he is a grown man. He should be able to do that for himself.”

“Even grown men often need support,” Cassandra said wisely. “As do grown women! We are none of us islands unto ourselves, and we all sometimes need a loved one to reassure us.”

“That would be fine if the duke were asking for reassurance,” Minerva said, frowning. “But instead, he is just pushing Cherie away. And personally, I don’t think Cherie should have to convince her husband to treat her as she deserves.”

“I thought you liked the duke,” Cassandra said, “after how he helped out your sister.”

“I do like the duke!” Minerva looked surprised by the question. “I like him very much. I’m approaching this from a purely rational point of view. As Cherie’s friend, I can’t encourage her to try and save him from his own problems just because I happen

to like the man.”

“But you can’t approach love from a purely rational point of view,” Cassandra argued. “Love is not rational. Humans are not rational! And sometimes we have to sacrifice for those we love. Sometimes we have to do things we don’t want to do. But it’s worth it when it’s for the right person.”

“If that’s what love is, then I want no part of it,” Minerva said, shaking her head. “I want to be able to make rational decisions about what is right for me and not be swayed by my feelings.”

“You’re both forgetting that I don’t really have any choice in this matter,” Cherie said. She sat up and looked between her friends. “He doesn’t want to try. I can’t just talk him into changing his mind.”

“Well, there we disagree,” Samantha said. She flopped down on the bed and looked at Cherie very seriously. “Do you love him?”

The word reverberated through Cherie, and she felt as if all the air had been sucked from her lungs.

Memories suddenly came back to her: Thomas, bursting into the clearing where Lord Dawson was trying to compromise Chastity; Thomas, fighting Lord Dawson, his hair wild and his eyes full of fury; Thomas, standing in front of her at the inn, looking like a knight in shining armor (albeit one she didn’t think she needed); Thomas, explaining that he was insisting that they marry because of his regard for her, because he didn’t want to see her ruined.

And then even more memories came back to her, memories from long ago: him playing with her when her brother and his friends visited her; him giving her gifts of books and strange specimens that he’d gathered on his visits to India; him kissing her

hand that time in the parlor when she had been out riding and when she walked in on him, he looked as if he'd been struck by lightning.

“Lady Cherie,” he'd said, and it was the first time he'd ever used her title ahead of her name. “You look...” His eyes had swept over her, and she'd felt a strange mixture of flattery but also annoyance. She wanted him to find her beautiful—she wanted all young men to find her beautiful when she was that age and just coming into her feminine power—but she also didn't want him to treat her any differently. And part of her had been annoyed to find that all men were the same: they only saw her one way.

But instead of saying something saccharine, he'd said the most perfect words imaginable.

“You know, the first time he realized he desired me was after he returned from India when I was fifteen,” she said aloud to her friends. “He told me this yesterday. He was waiting for Aidan in the parlor, and I walked in wearing my riding clothes. It had been a year or more since I'd seen him, and in that time, I'd become a woman. And in that moment, he no longer saw the little girl he'd been playing with, but the woman I was becoming.”

“When you were fifteen?” Minerva said, frowning slightly. “So right after your mother died?”

“Yes.” Cherie swallowed the lump that was rising in her throat. “She had died six months previously, while Thomas was in India. I'd written to him about her death, and he'd sent me the kindest letter, but otherwise, we hadn't talked much. I was so busy missing my mother that I didn't have room in my heart to miss him as well. And I missed my mother so much. She was beautiful, you know, and the life of every party.”

“I remember,” Minerva said softly.

“I wish I’d known her,” Cassandra sighed. “Aidan also speaks of her with such reverence.”

“And she died at such a hard age for me,” Cherie continued. “My body was changing, going from a little girl to a woman. I had so many questions I wanted to ask her. And I felt so uncomfortable in my skin. But that day, when I walked into the parlor and saw Thomas standing there, he didn’t tell me I looked beautiful or grown-up. He didn’t make me feel even more uncomfortable.”

“What did he say?” Samantha asked, leaning toward her.

“He said I looked like my mother.”

They were all silent as they thought about this. Out of the corner of her eye, Cherie was even sure she saw Cassandra brush away a tear.

“So yes,” she said, drawing herself up. “I do think I love him. It wasn’t a lightning bolt for me like it was for him. I loved him for all those years when I was a child, but only as a brother. And then when we grew up, he was in India, and I longed for him but couldn’t understand my feelings. But when he said we had to marry, all of that shut down inside of me.” She laughed. “I suppose I’m always like that when a man tries to tell me what to do.”

“As you should be,” Samantha said, with a small wink.

“But he has always been there for me. He has always tried to protect me and those I love. And he has always said the right thing.”

“Until now,” Minerva said.

“Yes, until now.”

“If you really love him, then I think you need to fight for him,” Samantha said. “You have no other choice. I know Minerva thinks you shouldn’t, but this is your life and your marriage. And if you don’t fight for it, then you will wonder for the rest of your life if you could have done more.”

“I agree with Samantha,” Cassandra said. “I think love is worth fighting for. And you’re in this marriage: what other option do you have?”

“There is always annulment,” Minerva pointed out. Again, everyone turned to look at her.

“When did you become so unromantic?” Samantha asked, frowning and crossing her arms.

“Maybe around the time that my sister’s suitor assaulted her,” Minerva said, shrugging. “Or maybe I just think women should have more options in life other than begging a man to love them or staying unhappily married.”

“Well, as much as I agree with you on that,” Cherie said, “I don’t want to have an annulment. The whole reason I got married in the first place was because otherwise there would have been a huge scandal. An annulment would be an even worse scandal! It is not done. And it would tarnish my friends’ reputations as much as it would tarnish my own.”

“We would survive if it’s what you want,” Minerva said.

“That’s true,” Cassandra said bracingly. “We are here for you no matter what you choose.”

“But it’s not what I want,” Cherie said. “I want to live with him! I want to love him! I want to... to grow old with him.” The words were cheesy, but she forced herself to say them. Again, she was sure she saw Cassandra’s eyes fill with tears.

“Then you have to fight,” Cassandra said, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Either that, or...”

“What?”

“Or live separately.”

There was a long silence as all of them considered this as an option.

“It is not unheard of, in the ton,” Samantha said after a moment. “Not ideal, for some women, but for others, it is exactly the kind of freedom they have always wanted.”

“I don’t want to live separately from him,” Cherie said. “I don’t want to do these things the ton deems appropriate for married couples that aren’t in love. I want love with my husband!”

“I know, darling,” Cassandra said, stroking her gently, “but we cannot control other people. Perhaps living separately can be a backup plan, in case all else fails. It will allow you to at least lead an independent life that you are proud of without being constantly reminded of how your husband has disappointed you.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Cherie bit her lip. She wasn’t sure what to do. Thomas had sounded so adamant earlier that nothing more could come of them, and while she wanted to agree with Cassandra that she should fight for her marriage, she wasn’t sure she had it in her. It felt like she had been fighting with Thomas for so long now.

Anyway, Cassandra was happily married. Just because things had worked out for her

didn't mean they would work out for Cherie.

"I just wish I knew what had happened," she said, sighing and leaning back on the bed. "He seemed so happy and at peace the other day when we kissed, and then the next day... everything had changed."

"Well, what happened yesterday?" Samantha inquired. "Maybe we can go back over his day and discover what it is that changed his mind. It might tell us how we can fix it."

"Nothing happened," Cherie said slowly. "The duke was out when I was having breakfast, and when I asked where he'd gone, I was told he went for a morning ride. Then I went out promenading with Minerva. And when I got back, he was in the library, and his whole demeanor had changed."

"He wasn't out for a ride," Cassandra said suddenly. "The duke was visiting with Aidan yesterday."

All three women stared at her.

"Why didn't you say this before?" Cherie asked.

"I don't know, I didn't think it was relevant," Cassandra said, her eyes wide. "He wasn't here long, but he and Aidan spoke for a while, and then they came up here to visit me. After that, he left rather quickly."

"Well, do you know what Aidan said to him?" Cherie asked eagerly. "Did they speak about me?"

"Aidan didn't mention anything. When I asked what he and the duke had spoken about, he said they mostly talked about me and my?—"

She cut herself off, her cheeks flushing. She bit her lip coyly, and Cherie, Samantha, and Minerva all looked at one another, then back at their friend.

“What is it?” Samantha asked.

Cassandra looked up at them, and a wide smile broke across her face. “I’m with child,” she said. “The doctor just told me last week that I am.”

“Oh, my goodness!” Samantha shrieked, and she threw herself forward, grabbing Cassandra and hugging her tight. “Congratulations!”

“Don’t grab her like that, Samantha!” Minerva protested. “She’s in a delicate condition.”

“Oh, posh, it’s not so delicate.” But Samantha released Cassandra and sat back, beaming. “I’m so pleased! I know this is what you wanted more than anything.”

Cherie, meanwhile, was so filled with emotion that she could hardly speak. She sat up and placed a hand on Cassandra’s.

“I’m so happy for you,” she whispered. “For you and Aidan. And myself, now that I think of it. I’m going to be an aunt!”

“And I know you will be the best aunt in the world,” Cassandra whispered, her eyes filling once more with tears. “I’m so glad we get to be a family like this, Cherie. And I know that whatever happens with the duke?—”

“Hush, let us not talk of the duke,” Cherie said, placing a finger over his friend’s lips. “This moment is about you and my brother. And I have never been so happy as I am for you right now. Our little circle of wallflowers is expanding!”

She looked around at her three friends, and the four of them wrapped their arms around one another in a many-armed hug.

“To think, when we made that pact to help each other get married, that there would soon be a baby on the way!” Cherie said, shaking her head. “We are so lucky.”

“Indeed, we are,” Cassandra said, squeezing her hand. “And no matter what happens—to all of us—we will always have each other.”

Later, after the rest of the wallflowers had left, Cherie found her brother downstairs in his study. The door was open, and she watched him for a few minutes as he wrote something in his ledger, unaware of her presence.

Then she knocked lightly on the door.

Aidan looked up and smiled when he saw her.

“Come in, come in,” he said, standing and coming around the desk. “How are you, Cherie?”

“I’m good,” she whispered, burying her head in his chest. “Cherie told me. Congratulations, Aidan. You’re going to be a father.”

She heard her brother’s laugh rumble against her chest. “So, my wife let the cat out of the bag, did she?”

Cherie laughed and released Aidan. “She let it slip out, really. I don’t think she meant to tell us.”

“Oh, I’m sure she meant to tell you,” Aidan said with a chuckle. “She’s been dying to tell her friends ever since she found out.”

“Are you happy?” she asked, peering up at him.

“The happiest I have ever been in my life.” He paused, then laughed. “Although, as I told your husband, it is also the most terrified I’ve ever been.”

“You said that to Thomas?” Cherie asked, surprised and intrigued. “Why?”

“Well, because it is alarming! Being a parent is an awesome responsibility, and it’s not one I take lightly. But I also welcome that responsibility because I love the duchess so dearly and want to build a family with her.”

“That’s beautiful,” Cherie said quietly. She paused, wondering how much more she could ask him, and then inquired, “Was there anything else he said, or you said to him, that might account for why Thomas has become colder than usual the past day?”

“Has he?” Her brother frowned at her. “I’m surprised to hear that.”

“Are you? He has been cold ever since he inherited the duchy.”

“Yes, but I was under the impression that things had improved. And he seemed well enough when he called upon us yesterday. Although a bit distracted, perhaps.”

Cherie tried to keep herself from leaping to conclusions at this tidbit of information. “Things had improved, but they got worse again, and I think it might have something to do with his visit to you yesterday. I suspect that finding out about Cassandra’s condition might have triggered the change in him.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Well, he was very defensive about his father. And when I found him yesterday, he was in the library looking for his mother’s diaries. He seems to have a preoccupation

with parenthood right now. And I'm wondering if that has something to do with why... Well, why he isn't sure he wants to have children."

Aidan raised his eyebrows. "He said he didn't want children? Really? But what about heirs?"

Cherie waved a hand as if trying to downplay what she had said. "Of course he wants children, I just feel a certain reticence from him whenever I broach the subject."

"I'm sure he just wants more time with you," Aidan said bracingly.

"Perhaps." Cherie didn't like keeping the whole truth from her brother, but she also didn't want to go into everything with him now, when he was so happy about the news of the baby. "I'd just like to figure out how to help make children an event he can look forward to."

Aidan nodded slowly as if he understood this. "He did say this strange thing to me, about how he always believed children should have to be worthy of their parents. But I told him it's the other way around: it's on a father to prove his worth to his son."

"Has he said this kind of thing before?" she asked.

"Not that I remember. But he did have a difficult relationship with his father, Cherie. That much I know, although he did try to hide the worst parts of it from me."

Cherie sighed. "What you told me makes sense. He feels unworthy of his father, and it's part of what is making him think he is unworthy of me and the life I want to build with him."

"I'm sure he will come around," Aidan said. "He won't feel unworthy forever, he just needs to see himself through your eyes. And maybe once you have children of your

own, he will see what a joy being a father can be. I'm sure he just associates it with the painful memories of his own father. But he will change his mind, once he has his own."

Cherie forced herself to nod, then changed the subject back to Cassandra's baby.

"So, have you come up with any names yet?"

Aidan laughed. "Not yet. But I look forward to sitting down with the duchess and coming up with a list together."

His eyes were shining with love and excitement, and Cherie realized that this was what she wanted more than anything on earth: a man she didn't have to convince to be happy at the thought of having a child with her.

She wasn't like Cassandra, so sweet and forgiving. Nor was she like Samantha, always scheming and angry. Minerva was practical and logical, and she wasn't like that either. What she was though was a strong, independent woman who knew her own worth.

And I'm certainly worth a man who believes himself worthy of me.

She hugged her brother goodbye, then made her way out of her childhood home and back towards her married home—although she now knew that it wouldn't be her home for long.

Twenty

“Thomas? Are you there?”

Cherie knocked on the door of her husband’s study firmly and decisively. She had considered calling him by his title, but in the end, had decided that it was better if she did not resort to petty recriminations. She’d agreed to call him Thomas, and she didn’t want to go back now, just because she was angry at him.

And really, the feeling that was currently coursing through her was far more complex than anger. There was anger, yes, but also grief and fear. And it wasn’t anger that had brought her to this moment now, when she was finally ready to confront him. It was belief and faith in herself and the life she wanted.

“Hello?” she called again, knocking once more. But there was no reply, and after another pause, she pushed open the study door.

Inside, the study was empty. It was also dark, as none of the candles had been lit, and the fire wasn’t on.

Cherie sighed, then moved further into the room. She hadn’t been expecting her husband to be out at this time of day. He rarely went to his club; usually, he was locked up in his study working on getting the duchy in order, which she knew still overwhelmed him since his father’s death.

“I guess you’re out drinking your sorrows away,” she said, staring around the study. “Probably because you know that our marriage is over as well.”

Emotion swelled inside of her, and for a moment, she thought she was going to cry. But then she steeled herself.

You're not here to cry, you're here to tell him you've decided that, for your own happiness, you want to live separately.

It wasn't an easy decision to make. For the past several days, she had been mulling it over, ever since Cassandra had put the thought in her mind.

"It's the perfect solution," she'd told Minerva the day before when the two of them had promenaded along the Serpentine. "I can have my own life without causing the scandal of an annulment."

"But you won't be able to remarry and have children," Minerva pointed out.

"But I also won't ruin your prospects for marriage by association," Cherie had said, with determination she didn't feel. "If I do that, then what was all this for? No, I gave up on the idea of marrying for love when I agreed to marry the duke. I've resigned myself to that fate. And as for children, well, I think I shall love being an aunt. That will just have to be enough for me."

"Very well," her friend had said, taking her arm. "As long as you're sure."

As long as you're sure. Even now, Cherie wasn't sure that she was sure. And a small part of her was afraid that the reason she was choosing separation, as opposed to annulment, was because she still believed that Thomas might come around.

No, you're doing it for your friends. Just them.

Still, as Cherie stood in the study, she had the feeling that she was about to end her marriage. It might not be as serious as an annulment, but it was still a major break.

Thomas might never forgive her for it. He probably expected her to live with him and manage his household, host events for him, and play the part of the dutiful wife.

But she had to do this for herself.

She glanced up at the portrait of Thomas that hung above the desk. The likeness was good, and she felt as if she were staring up into the eyes of her husband.

“Well, I guess you get a few more hours of not knowing,” she said out loud to it. “Lucky you.”

As she looked away, her eyes were caught by the bottle of cognac that Lord Rochford had brought for her and Thomas as a gift on their wedding day. It was sitting behind her husband’s desk, unopened.

Moving forward, she picked up the bottle and turned it over in her hands. Just as the earl had said, it looked like an extremely precious and rare cognac.

Holding the bottle, Cherie felt herself starting to grow angry. This cognac symbolized everything bad that had happened in the last few months of her life: first, the earl’s attempt to buy her as a bride; then the failed escape that had ended in her marriage to Thomas; and the whole marriage itself, which was a farce of epic proportions.

“This isn’t a marriage,” she muttered out loud, “and I’m not a wife, I’m a glorified housekeeper. Not someone for him to cherish and love and treat as an equal, but just a woman to do his bidding and manage his household.”

All of a sudden, a reckless rage came over her, and she decided to open the cognac. She pulled at the cork until it began to budge, and then finally it came out of the bottle with a loud pop.

Immediately, a rich, heady smell filled the room. Cherie breathed in deeply. She'd never had cognac before, and she felt like a naughty schoolchild as she poured herself a glass. She then picked it up, swirled it around under her nose—trying not to gag as the smell of alcohol hit her—and then took a sip.

It tasted... good. Although very strong. The alcohol was astringent, which made her cough and her eyes water, but there was also a sweetness to the liquor that she liked. Underneath it, she also detected something bitter. She didn't think she liked the aftertaste, but she assumed she just didn't know much about alcohol.

She raised the glass again in the direction of Thomas's portrait. "Here's to our charade of a marriage!" she said, raising the glass high. Then she took another swig.

This time it tasted worse. The bitter taste was even stronger, and she gagged. Some of the liquid must have gone down the wrong way, because it suddenly got harder to breathe, and she began to cough.

"This—is—so—strong," she gasped, thumping her chest to try and get the alcohol to clear out of her lungs.

But nothing cleared. If anything, it was getting harder to breathe, and suddenly, Cherie began to feel afraid. She was starting to fight for breath, and everything around her was starting to blur. Dizziness overcame her, as did tiredness. Her body felt very heavy and cold. Far too cold.

This was not what a small amount of cognac was supposed to do to a person. And all of a sudden, it became clear.

It's poison! Lord Rochford poisoned it!

She released the bottle, and it rolled away from her across the floor, emptying out

most of its contents into the rug. Everything was spinning, and she grabbed the edge of the desk and tried to keep herself from falling over. She thought she was going to cast up her crumpets; nausea was seizing her.

Keep fighting! The words blazed through her as she tried to force herself to remain standing. You have to warn Thomas that Lord Rochford is trying to kill him—to kill us!

But then the nausea passed, and something far worse replaced it: the feeling that her heart was slowing. That it was going to stop beating at any moment.

She tried to take a breath but couldn't. Everything was going dark. A rushing sound filled her ears. And then she felt herself falling to the ground. Her knees must have hit it hard, but she couldn't feel anything. She fell onto her side, then rolled onto her back.

The last thing she saw was Thomas's portrait, her husband's face staring down at her, worry and concern etching his face, and then his voice... Cherie, stay with me.

But portraits couldn't talk, and she already knew it was too late.

"I don't want to hear any more conspiracy theories about Lord Rochford," Thomas snapped, as she walked down the stairs, followed closely by his wife's cousin, Mr. Charles Norton, who he was starting to think was the most simple-minded fellow he had ever had the misfortune to meet.

"It's not a conspiracy theory, Your Grace!" Mr. Norton insisted, his face going pale with horror at such a suggestion. "You know already he is an herbalist, but there are rumors that his hobby has taken a more sinister turn, that he knows how to administer cyanide in the right doses to?"

“That’s enough,” Thomas interrupted. “I have enough things to worry about without it being suggested that my cousin is walking around trying to off members of the ton! Honestly, it’s preposterous.”

“Is it, though?” Mr. Norton asked. “You saw what he tried to do with your wife.”

“Forcing a woman to marry you isn’t the same as murder,” Thomas said.

“I think many women would disagree about that!” Mr. Norton exclaimed, and Thomas paused. This might have been the first truly wise thing his wife’s cousin had said.

Thomas stopped on the third stair from the bottom and looked Mr. Norton over, this time with a shade more interest than he usually afforded the man.

“You have really heard this?” he inquired. “From reliable sources?”

“Indeed, I have! There is an apothecary in South London who swears that the earl came in looking for cyanide. I talked to him myself because I had to know.”

“Are you really so worried that the earl will try to off you?” Thomas asked, with some interest.

Mr. Norton reddened. “I owe him a great deal of money...”

Thomas frowned at him. “I settled those debts for you.”

“And that was so very generous of you, Your Grace. But you see, since then, the temptations of the card tables have lured me back, and I am but a weak man...”

Thomas turned away in disgust, no longer afraid that he’d made a mistake in

misjudging the man. Mr. Norton's weakness for gambling had almost condemned Cherie to a life as the Countess of Rochford, and for that, he could never forgive him.

"Are you here to ask for another loan?" Thomas asked.

"N-no! Of course not!" Mr. Norton spluttered, his cheeks burning even more brightly. "I came here to warn you of what I heard about Lord Rochford! It isn't only me that he has designs to ruin, after all. He is also your sworn enemy, as well as the enemy of the duchess."

"He is not the duchess's enemy," Thomas said. "In fact, if anything, he is quite taken with her. He'd love nothing better than to get me out of the picture so that—" Thomas stopped talking, a terrifying thought suddenly overtaking him. Constantine would like him out of the picture, especially before he produced an heir. That would leave him free to ascend to the dukedom and to marry Cherie, which seemed as much about revenge against Thomas as it was desire for her.

Is there any way that the earl could have tried to poison me? But no, it isn't possible. He hasn't had me drink anything, except...

He looked at Mr. Norton, and they both seemed to have the same thought at the same time.

"The bottle of cognac he gave you for your wedding!" Mr. Norton exclaimed.

"But that is too risky! We could have opened it and drank it at the wedding!"

"Perhaps he knew you would snub him. Perhaps he hoped you would drink it later, once you were alone."

"But everyone at the wedding saw him give it to us."

“People can take ill from so many causes,” Mr. Norton pointed out. “And it would be rude to drink a single bottle among guests who could not sample it. Perhaps he felt it was worth the risk.”

“We need to get it out of the house—now!” Thomas said, and he leapt down the last few stairs on the staircase.

“I can test it!” Norton shouted after him. “That’s the other thing I was going to tell you! The apothecary gave me a solution to put in liquids to see if they have been poisoned with cyanide.”

“Well then hurry!” Thomas shouted. “Before?—”

But at that very moment, there was a thud from the study, and Thomas felt his whole body go cold. Because that thud had sounded eerily similar to a body hitting the ground.

“Hurry!” he shouted. He sprinted across the hallway and wrenched open the door of his study. A terrifying sight met his eyes: Cherie was motionless on the ground, right below his desk, her skin very red and her face lifeless and swollen. Next to her lay the bottle of cognac, while an empty glass sat on the top of the desk.

“No!” The shout was wrenched from Thomas’s throat like a tooth from the mouth of a sick patient. It filled the room, reverberating throughout, shaking the windows. “Cherie, no!”

He bounded across the room, flung himself around the side of the desk, and bent down to grab his wife. Her body was cold already and stiff, and for one wild, unimaginable moment, Thomas thought she was already dead.

“Cherie!” he shouted, lifting her up. “Stay with me!”

He wanted to shake her, as if that would wake her up, or bring her back to him, but he knew it was pointless. Tears were on his cheeks, he realized. “Please, Cherie, don’t leave me!”

“What’s going on in here?” Thomas turned to see Aidan standing in the doorway, a puzzled and concerned look on his face. The moment he took in his lifeless sister in Thomas’s arms, he went as pale as snow. “What happened to her?”

“W-we think she drank cyanide,” Norton stammered.

“WELL THEN FETCH A DOCTOR!” Aidan roared, and Norton nearly jumped out of his skin in fright.

“Of course! Right away!”

“And then come back!” Thomas shouted after him. “We have to test the bottle.” He motioned at Aidan. “Quick, pick it up before any more of it leaks out over the rug!”

Aidan moved forward with lightning speed. He didn’t wait for an explanation, just jumped into action, and Thomas appreciated that. His old friend grabbed the bottle of cognac and righted it. There was still a finger of liquid at the bottom of it, and for that at least, Thomas was grateful.

We have to prove Rochford did this!

But even revenge was far from his mind as he gazed down at his wife, who was still lying in his arms, too still for comfort. He raised a finger and held it to her neck, feeling for a pulse.

“Is she... is she dead?” Aidan’s voice sounded through the sudden quiet of the study, and it sounded nothing like Thomas had ever heard before. The fear in that voice

chilled him to the core.

“I don’t think so,” Thomas said. “I can feel a pulse. It’s slow, but I can feel it.”

“She isn’t breathing,” Aidan said. “Her chest isn’t moving.”

“She’s breathing,” Thomas said. “But it’s very faint.” An idea suddenly struck him, and he pushed Cherie onto her side, still in his arms, and began to undo the buttons on the back of her dress.

“What are you doing?” Aidan asked sharply.

“Getting her out of her corset,” Thomas growled. He didn’t care if it was scandalous to undress his wife here in his study, with other men present. If it saved her life, then nothing mattered.

He shrugged off her dress and then began to pull up her petticoat as quickly as possible. The delicate fabric tore under his shaking hands, but that was the least of his concerns. Finally, it was off, and then Thomas was faced with a truly daunting task: trying to get off her corset.

“How do these things work?” he growled, as he pawed at the laces.

“Don’t ask me,” Aidan said, his voice heavy with panic. “Her Grace usually has it already removed when?—”

“All right, I don’t want to know more.” Thomas tried to pull at the laces, but they were only getting tired. Letting out a furious, frustrated cry, he reached for the desk and felt around until he found his letter opener. Then he brought it to the laces of the corset and slashed as forcefully as he could.

The knife ripped through the laces, and the corset loosened at once. At the same time, Cherie gave a small, rattling gasp, and Thomas and Aidan exchanged hopeful glances. Thomas pulled the corset off of her and then cradled her in his arms, watching with fevered hope as some of the color seemed to come back into her cheeks.

“That helped, but if it was poison, then she doesn’t have long,” Thomas whispered, and behind him, he heard Aidan begin to pray.

Soon, Aidan’s whispered prayers became the only sound in the room other than Thomas’s uneven breaths. Time seemed to tick so slowly as they waited for the physician. And with every passing second, Thomas was sure that his wife was slipping away. He could feel her pulse growing fainter, her breathing slow, the color draining away from her cheeks...

And then, at last, the sound of footsteps on the drive outside filled their ears, then they heard the front door of the house burst open.

“They’re in here!” Mr. Norton shouted, and then the door to the study flew open and Mr. Norton entered, followed by a physician. If either of them were startled by the state of undress they found Cherie in, they had the good graces not to say anything. At once, the doctor bent over his charge and began to feel her pulse and check her breath.

Mr. Norton, meanwhile, was tipping a clear substance from a small vial into the bottle of cognac.

“This will turn the cognac blue if there is cyanide in it.”

Thomas didn’t know where to look or what to feel. On the one hand, he wanted the liquor to turn blue so that he could know for sure what had happened to Cherie. On

the other hand, if it was cyanide, that could mean she wouldn't survive.

And all the while, the doctor was poking and prodding Cherie. It all seemed to be taking far too much time. Didn't they know she had already been poisoned for minutes?

And then the cognac in the bottle shifted color. The moment Thomas saw it, he felt as if his heart had been torn out of his chest.

"It's blue!" Aidan shouted.

"Cyanide," Norton confirmed, his jaw set. "That bastard..."

"What bastard? Who gave you..." and then Aidan's expression became stoney. "Rochford. He gave them this bottle at the wedding breakfast. We were all there; we all saw it."

"And he will pay for what he has done!" Norton cried, but Thomas wasn't looking at them anymore, or even at the bottle of blue cognac. He was staring at the doctor, whose brow had begun to sweat, and whose expression looked like that of someone about to deliver bad news.

"What is it, doctor?" Thomas whispered. "Can you save her?"

The physician looked up at him. "I can try. But at this point, Your Grace, it is up to God whether or not she survives."

Twenty-One

“C herie, you’re doing so well.”

“You’re going to make it, my dear.”

“Just hold on. Just keep holding on.”

“Another spoonful, Your Grace. I know it tastes bad, but...”

“I’m sorry, Cherie. I wish so badly...”

“... I’d do anything...”

“...please forgive me...”

“I’m so, so sorry.”

The voices blurred together, overlapping with one another in harmonies and discordant tones that she couldn’t tell apart, like trying to pick out individual instruments in an orchestra. She was still asleep, she thought. Otherwise, she didn’t understand why she couldn’t reach out and touch these people, who seemed to crowd around, press against her, trying to reassure her that everything would be okay.

But why am I asleep? Are you supposed to sleep this long? How long has it even been?

She couldn't answer these questions, and every time they drifted too long through her mind, she pushed them away again. Stay asleep , another voice seemed to whisper in her ear, and this one sounded remarkably like her mother's. Stay with me.

Mother! She wanted to shout, and then she was chasing the ghost of her mother through the hallways of her father's estate in the countryside. Her mother was laughing, running ahead of her, always out of reach. She turned a corner, and there was Thomas, standing in the parlor, a look on his face like he'd been struck by lightning.

"You look like your mother," he said, bowing low over her hand. He lingered there, seemingly unsure if he should continue, and then he let his lips graze along her bare skin. It was the first time a man had kissed her, and she was stunned into speechlessness. When she looked up, he was smiling at her tentatively. "I never noticed it before, but you are her spitting image."

"I miss her," she blurted out, and whereas, moments before she'd felt like a young lady, now she felt like a child again, crying out for her mother. But Thomas didn't look annoyed. He merely nodded.

"I miss my mother too."

"I miss you, Cherie." This voice was closer, louder. It didn't seem to be coming from a dream. It was coming from much closer, and although she knew instinctively it belonged to someone she loved, she also knew that with this voice came pain, uncertainty, and doubt.

No, she thought desperately. I want to stay here, in this dream.

Her mother was back, laughing with her. Her father was there, too, filling the drawing room with the sound of his hearty laughter.

“Every day without you feels like an eternity,” the voice said. “And it makes me remember all the days I have spent in your presence. I shouldn’t have wasted a single one of them. From the moment you came back into my life, and especially from the moment you came to live in my home, I should have spent every second of every day with you, appreciating your humor, your laughter, your stubbornness... all of it.”

Cherie’s heart seemed to speed up. Who was this person, and why did he sound so sad? She wanted to comfort him, to tell him that she was sure he had appreciated her, but she couldn’t speak.

“But now I know what I could lose, I will never take it for granted again,” the voice continued. “I only hope it’s not too late, and that you will wake up and be able to forgive me. Please, Cherie. Please, forgive me.”

There was pressure somewhere around her side, and Cherie realized that whoever was speaking had also taken her hand. He seemed to be squeezing it.

“I have to go now, but I’ll be back. I’m going to make sure he can’t hurt anyone ever again. You don’t have to worry about that. I’ll see him behind bars. It won’t be hard. He made it easy for us.”

Don’t go! She wanted to shout, but her mouth wasn’t working. Or at least, her mouth outside of the dream world wasn’t working. Inside, her words reverberated, bouncing off the walls of her head.

“Goodbye, Cherie,” the voice said, and she felt a soft, cool pressure on her forehead. A kiss. The same kiss on the hand! The same kiss from the parlor!

So, it was Thomas. Thomas was talking to her. And he was sorry for something. But why was he sorry? She wanted to shout out to him, to beg him to stay, to tell him he had nothing to apologize for, but then she felt his presence move away, and she knew

he was gone.

I love you , she shouted inside her head. I think I have always loved you. And she promised herself that when she woke from this dream, she would say it out loud, as well.

“Are we ready?” Thomas asked the captain of the Bow Street Runners as the carriage holding them all trundled along the street toward Lord Rochford’s London mansion. “Do we have everything we need?”

“We’re ready, Your Grace,” the captain responded briskly. He was a no-nonsense kind of man with a thick gray mustache and steely eyes, and Thomas couldn’t help but trust him. He was exactly the kind of person he wanted on his side for arresting the earl.

Nor was he the only Bow Street Runner in the carriage. There were three of them sitting across from Thomas. Meanwhile, on his right sat Aidan, looking stoney-faced. To his left was Mr. Norton, who could attest to the cognac having cyanide in it. This wasn’t a trial, of course, and they wouldn’t be presenting evidence, but Thomas had wanted them all assembled to confront the earl and make sure he knew exactly how cornered he really was.

“Don’t worry,” Aidan said, laying a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “We’re going to get him.”

Seconds later, the carriage pulled up in front of Rochford House, and they dismounted from the carriage and made their way up to the house. Thomas walked surely but calmly as he approached the front door of his cousin’s house. There was no need to run. He wasn’t here to make a scene. Only to make sure that Lord Rochford was behind bars.

He knocked decisively on the door. When it opened, the butler blinked at him.

“Your Grace?” he said, clearly surprised by the late-night visit.

“Tell the earl that I am here to see him,” Thomas boomed. “And make sure he knows I am not alone.”

“Y-yes, Your Grace,” the butler stammered. “But you can tell him yourself. Despite the late hour, he is still awake in his study, having a?—”

“Good. Take us to him.”

They followed the butler into the house, then down the hall, until they reached the study. Thomas didn’t wait to knock or to be announced. He flung open the door and swept inside, his black coat billowing behind him.

Lord Rochford was sitting at his desk, drinking a whiskey and smoking a cheroot. When he saw Thomas, his eyes narrowed, and he slowly and deliberately stood up.

“Your Grace,” he began, bowing. “To what do I owe this—” He stopped mid-sentence as Aidan, Norton, and the four Bow Street Runners entered the study behind Thomas. “—pleasant surprise,” he finished, his cool gaze flickering over them all with interest and even a little concern.

“The cognac you gave me for my wedding to the duchess,” Thomas said, speaking loudly and clearly before anyone could say anything else. “The duchess drank it.”

Rochford’s gaze remained neutral. “As I expected her to,” he said. “It was a gift, after all.”

“Don’t play dumb,” Thomas snapped. “The bottle was poisoned. You know it, and

we obviously know it, which is why we are here.”

“The bottle was poisoned?” Rochford tilted his head to one side. “What makes you say that?”

“Because Her Grace nearly died!” Aidan shouted. His temper was much closer to the edge than Thomas’s, and Thomas laid a steady hand on his friend’s shoulder. He was angry, too, but he also didn’t need to shout. He knew they had the man cornered.

“And because Mr. Norton here knows a clever trick for revealing the presence of cyanide in a substance,” Thomas said. “And he used it on the cognac. Norton, bring forth the bottle.”

Norton stepped forward and pulled the bottle out from under his cloak. It was still blue.

“And what does that prove?” Rochford asked, eyeing the bottle. “All I see is a blue liquid.”

“My lord, you gave this bottle to the duke and duchess,” the captain said, moving forward. “It remained sealed in the duke’s office until yesterday when Her Grace opened it and drunk it. She immediately fell ill and is now on death’s door. Meanwhile, both Mr. Norton here and the apothecary who claims he sold you the cyanide tested this bottle. There is no point in denying it. We have all the facts.”

Thomas smiled as the look of incredulity on Rochford’s face gave way to one of fear. “Did you hear that, Rochford? he murmured. We have all the facts. You are done for.”

His eyes met the earl’s, and in them, he saw the pure hatred that he had always come to expect from his cousin.

“The only question I can ask is: why?” Thomas shook his head. “You suspected I would not try to have an heir. You had only to wait to assume your place as the next Duke of Wheaton. Why would you poison me now with a bottle you gave me? Why take that risk?”

A long silence passed, during which the earl continued to glare at Thomas. Then his face broke into a furious, twisted look, and he spat, “ Because it should have been mine! It is mine, by right! By law and by right! You were nothing but a disappointment to him, Wheaton! He hated you from the moment you were born because he always suspected what you were. I was his favorite; I was the one he picked; the one he wanted to follow in his footsteps. And if your mother hadn’t been the tramp that she was, it would have been me!”

“How dare you speak of the late duchess like that!” Aidan roared.

“No, it’s okay,” Thomas said, holding up a hand. “Let the earl make his accusations. There is no proof.”

“You are a bastard!” The earl shouted, spit flying from his mouth. “Your loose mother was desperate for an heir, so she allowed herself to be... sullied... I cannot even think of it! But your father knew! He always knew! And if he could have proved it, he would have had me as his rightful heir all along!”

A ringing silence followed this pronouncement, and Thomas felt himself grow cold. Even though he had allowed it to happen, he still felt a profound unease as he imagined what Aidan and Mr. Norton were thinking. Even the Bow Street Runners were staring in shock at him.

Shame crept up his spine and heated his face. But now was not the time for shame.

“So, my father told you, did he?” Thomas asked, as calmly as he could. “May I ask

when?”

“He told me right before he died,” Rochford spat. “During the same conversation when he told me I should find any way possible to marry Lady Cherie, because she was the woman you had always secretly loved.”

Next to him, Thomas felt Aidan stiffen.

“Is that true?” his friend asked him, and Thomas forced himself to turn and meet his friend’s gaze. “You were in love with Cherie before you married her?”

Thomas’s mouth felt dry, but it wasn’t just nervousness and shame that were currently coursing through his body. There was also relief. At last, he was coming clean about all the secrets that he had carried alone for far too long.

“Aidan, I have loved your sister for many years. And from the moment I met her, I knew she was someone I wanted in my life forever. I’m sorry I never told you. I should have—but I was afraid of ruining our friendship by telling you of the feelings I harbored for Cherie. When we were forced to marry because of circumstances, I also felt a profound shame that I had somehow ended up with the woman of my dreams without ever coming clean to you about my feelings.”

“You have nothing to feel ashamed of,” Aidan said at once. “You married my sister to save her honor and knowing that you loved her all those years only makes me happier. I want my sister to be loved, Thomas. I want her to be adored the way I adore the duchess.”

Thomas felt a lump rise in his throat. He hadn’t realized how much he had been hoping for Aidan’s approval, and how much he had been fearing telling him of his feelings, until this moment.

“Thank you, my old friend,” Thomas said.

Aidan looked as if he wanted to say more about this, but instead, he grunted, “Let us return to this subject later. For now, we need to deal with Lord Rochford.” He turned to face the earl, who was watching this exchange with narrow eyes.

“Your attempt to buy my sister into marriage was disgusting,” Aidan spat. “And it is made even more disgusting to learn that it was born out of the late Duke of Wheaton’s revenge against his son for some perceived and unproved crime of his mother. I don’t care what may or may not have happened between the late duchess and her husband. I don’t care if Thomas is his father’s trueborn son or not. The late duke acknowledged Thomas as his, and that is all the proof I need.”

Lord Rochford started to say something, but Aidan cut him off.

“And even if Thomas wasn’t his father’s trueborn son—even if there was definite proof that he wasn’t the true heir to the dukedom—I would still be proud to call him my best friend.” Aidan looked at Thomas, and Thomas felt his heart swell.

“He is the best man I’ve ever met,” Aidan said simply. “Whereas you...” He looked back at the earl, and his expression became thunderous. “You are scum.”

“I was only doing what the late duke asked me to do!” Rochford shouted. “He wanted his ‘son’ out of the picture! He wanted me to be the real heir! When we spoke on his deathbed, the things he told me...” He glared at Thomas. “He told me he had never stopped thinking of me as his true son, that he was sorry for abandoning me, and that I must marry Lady Cherie and assume the dukedom, no matter what it took. He made me promise him, on his deathbed, that I would do that!”

But Thomas was already shaking his head.

“The truth, Lord Rochford, is that my father used you. He used you to fit his own agenda. He treated you like his heir when he thought he couldn’t have a son, and then he used you again, once I had disappointed him. You know, he also told me something on his deathbed. He also told me I was a bastard, and he might be right; I’ll never know. But what I do know is that if I had truly followed in his footsteps, if I had shown the cruelty and craftiness that he had, if I had been happy to keep his business going despite the damage it was causing to the people who worked there and the land around it, then he never would have told me I was a bastard. Maybe he still would have hated me, but he wouldn’t have tried to ruin me. Because the man cared about one thing only: his profits. And the worst part about me, to him, wasn’t my ancestry, but my values.”

Thomas drew himself up to his full height, squared his shoulders, and looked around at all those assembled.

“But I’m proud to be the kind of man who shuts down a business that cared nothing for the lives of the people who worked there. I’m proud to be different from my father. And I’m proud to be the Duke of Wheaton because it means I can build a new legacy for the duchy, instead of the one my father left behind.”

“But he wasn’t your father!” Rochford shouted. There was something desperate in his expression now, and if Thomas hadn’t been so angry at what he’d done to Cherie, he might have even felt a little sorry for him. But while Thomas might have sympathy for how terribly his father had treated the earl, his sympathy ended there. Rochford was a grown man, and he should have chosen to not let his anger and resentment make him a monster.

Thomas took a step forward. “He might not have been my father, but he wasn’t yours either. I know you tried to replace your father with mine, but you never could, because my father wasn’t capable of love. And that’s what a father does: he loves his children.”

Thomas glanced at Aidan, and suddenly he knew one thing with utter clarity: if Cherie ever woke up, if she survived this, then he wanted to live as husband and wife with her. And he wanted to have a child with her.

And with this realization burning through him, he turned back to the earl. “Maybe you are my father’s true son,” he said suddenly, “because you are no more capable than he was of understanding love. And maybe I’ve let him influence me too much as well because I have also been trying to deny love. But no more. No more will I deny the love I have for my wife, and no more will the hatred you and my father spread ever affect me, my friends, or my family. You’re done, Lord Rochford.”

The earl slumped back at these words, stumbling a little, and the captain of the Bow Street Runners stepped forward.

“Lord Rochford, you are under arrest for the attempted murder of the Duchess of Wheaton,” he said. He signaled to his men, and the three of them surrounded Rochford, then moved forward as one. They grabbed him and turned him around, then put handcuffs on his wrists. Rochford didn’t protest or struggle. All the fight seemed to have gone out of him.

The Bow Street Runners led him forward and out of the study, and Thomas, Aidan, and Mr. Norton followed. Out in the hall, all of the servants seemed to have gathered, undoubtedly alerted to what was happening by the butler. They stood in the hall, watching silently, their expressions grave, as Rochford was led out of the front door, down the drive, and into the carriage.

“Finally, they got him,” Thomas heard one of them mutter, and a profound sense of relief washed over him. Rochford was behind bars, and who knew how much harm he had caused beyond the poisoning of Cherie? He would direct the Bow Street Runners to interview the staff and try to discover more of his crimes, as there were surely too many to count. But for now, Thomas was just glad that Rochford could no longer hurt

Cherie any more than he already had.

He stepped outside, where Aidan joined him. Together, the two men watched as Rochford was loaded into the carriage. Before he followed the earl inside, the captain turned back to them.

“We will book him in tonight and keep him there until the trial,” he told the two dukes. “We will be in touch shortly to have you both bring your evidence forward. But I don’t anticipate that it will be a lengthy trial. The earl was not particularly clever, and the evidence against him is overwhelming.”

“Thank you for your help,” Thomas said, and he shook the captain’s hand.

“Not at all,” the captain said. “Please accept my well wishes for the duchess and her speedy recovery.”

Then he climbed up into the carriage, the driver flicked the reins, and the carriage set off down the street.

Thomas let out a long, slow breath. “Well, at least that’s done.”

“I have never been so relieved to see a person behind bars,” Aidan agreed. There was a short silence, and then Aidan turned to look directly at him. “Thomas... about my sister.”

Thomas’s heart hitched. He’s angry about how I kept this secret all these years.

But Aidan didn’t look angry. In fact, he looked the opposite. “The things you said earlier, about how you loved her for years, does she know that?”

“She knows I first had feelings for her many years ago.”

“But does she know you fell in love with her then?” Aidan’s tone was urgent. “Does she know you love her now?”

Thomas swallowed. “No, she doesn’t.”

“Then you have to tell her,” Aidan insisted. “You have to tell her right now.”

“But she isn’t conscious.”

“And she might never be again. But you still have to say it. Before it’s too late. Otherwise, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

“You’re right,” Thomas said. It suddenly seemed like the most obvious, simple thing in the world: he loved his wife, and he wanted to tell her that. The confrontation with Rochford had suddenly made everything so clear.

“About the other thing...” Aidan said. “I hope you know I meant what I said to Lord Rochford: I don’t care whether or not you’re your father’s legitimate son. You are still a great man, my best friend, and the Duke of Wheaton.”

“Thank you,” Thomas said. He held out his hand to shake, but Aidan shook his head and pulled Thomas into a tight hug.

“Don’t be silly,” Aidan said. “We are brothers. And we’ve been forged in fire at this point.” He released Thomas, then stepped back to look at him, and his eyes filled with tears. “Now go tell my sister you love her, while you still can.”

Twenty-Two

“Y our Grace, you’re awake!”

A face was hovering above her, and it took Cherie several moments to realize it was her lady’s maid, Emily. The girl’s expression was overjoyed, and her eyes were full of tears.

“How do you feel? Do you remember what happened?”

“I—” Cherie was still disoriented and unsure of what was happening. She blinked and tried to sit up, but Emily put a hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t try to sit up,” she said. “Just rest.”

“What happened?” Cherie asked. “Did I—where is Thomas? I saw him here; he was speaking to me.”

“The duke is out, Your Grace, but I believe he will be back shortly.”

“I drank poison,” Cherie muttered, as pieces of what had happened began to come back to her. She stared at Emily. “That’s what happened, isn’t it? The bottle was poisoned.”

“That’s what the inspector and the duke think, yes,” Emily said, nodding her head. “The doctor has been attending to you night and day, and His Grace has hardly left your side.”

“How long have I been out of it?”

“Three days, Your Grace.”

“It was Lord Rochford! He gave us the poisoned bottle of cognac. We must get a message to His Grace at once, so that he can have him arrested!”

“That’s where they’ve gone, from what I was able to glean,” Emily said. “His Grace figured it out as well and is on his way to have Lord Rochford arrested.”

“Good. Good.” Cherie relaxed against her pillow, closing her eyes briefly. When she opened them, Emily was watching her nervously.

“Shall I fetch the doctor, Your Grace?” she asked. “He will want to check you, now that you’re awake, to make sure the poison has left your body.”

“Yes, please do,” Cherie said. “And I’d like to know the moment my husband returns.”

“I’m sure he will be up here the moment he comes back,” Emily said, smiling shyly. “He has been most attentive.”

Cherie felt her chest tighten, and she was sure this had nothing to do with the poison.

I was about to leave him. I was about to tell him that we had to live separately.

“There is also a great deal of correspondence for you,” Emily said, motioning at a stack of letters on the nightstand. “Your friends have been visiting every day and writing you letters of support, although the doctor told them you wouldn’t be able to read them.”

“They wanted me to wake up to messages of love,” Cherie said, smiling slightly.  
“Those are the kind of friends they are.”

“Would you like to read them?” Emily asked.

“First, I’d like to send them letters telling them I’ve woken up. They must have been worried sick.”

“I’ll fetch you some paper and ink.”

“No, go get the doctor,” Cherie said, “that’s more important. I’ll find some paper in here.”

“Should you get up?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

Emily left the room, and Cherie sat up. Gingerly, she pushed back the covers and swung her feet out of the bed. Once she was sure of her strength, she stood up. Her legs shook slightly, but after a moment or two, she was steady. Then she looked around. There was a desk in the corner of the former duchess’s room, and she walked toward this. Surely there was paper and ink inside.

Sitting down at the desk, she opened it and began to root around in the drawers. She found paper quickly enough, but ink and quills took a bit longer. There was a small door right in the center of the desk that opened up to a small compartment where ink was usually kept, but it was empty. After several minutes of searching, she reached into it again, although she knew it was empty. This time, however, she felt a small knob near the back.

What the...?

Cherie pulled the knob upwards, and to her shock, the floor of the compartment popped up.

It's a secret compartment!

Her heart hammering, Cherie reached down into the secret compartment and felt a small book. Her fingers curled around the edges, and she pulled it out.

It was a small leather book, tied with a string to keep it shut. Frowning, Cherie untied the string and opened the book.

But it wasn't a book. It was a diary. Written in perfect, beautiful cursive, the kind of penmanship that betrayed the high education of the writer. Cherie read the first few words, and she knew at once whose diary this was.

The late duchess! Thomas's mother's diary! This is the diary he was searching for in the library.

Cherie knew she probably shouldn't read it, but she couldn't help herself. This was maybe her one chance to learn about Thomas when he was a child, to discover parts of him that he hadn't told her, and which might explain why he was the way he was.

She began to read, and as she did, her astonishment only increased. Astonishment—and understanding. She began to skim ahead to relevant passages, to turn the pages of the diary feverishly, looking for more information. Her palms began to sweat, and her heart began to race.

This explains everything! But he doesn't know the truth! I have to tell him!

She wasn't sure how much time passed while she read the diary, but all at once she was startled out of her reading by hurried footsteps coming towards her down the corridor.

Then suddenly the door of her room was wrenched open. She turned quickly, covering herself as she was only in her shift, but it wasn't the doctor who strode through the doors. It was Thomas.

There were no words to describe how Thomas felt the moment he burst through the door of his wife's bedchamber and saw her, alive and well, sitting at his mother's desk. Emotion welled inside of him, and for a moment, he swayed on the spot, not sure if he was about to burst into tears or run straight to her.

He chose the latter.

In a few long strides, he had crossed the room, and then he was pulling her gently up from the seat and wrapping his arms around her. Tears springing from his eyes—all right, he chose both—he buried his head in her shoulder.

"You're alive," he whispered. "I thought I had lost you forever. But you're alive."

"Thomas," his wife murmured, and she returned his hug with fervor. For several minutes, the two of them stood there, hugging one another, tears pouring down Thomas's cheeks. He wasn't sure if she could hear him crying, but he suspected that she could feel the wetness through the thin fabric of her night shift.

But he didn't care. She was alive, and he would cry about it if he wanted to.

At last, he released her, and then he held her at arm's length to get a good look at her.

"You look well," he said, taking in her ruddy cheeks and sparkling eyes. "Not at all

as if you were just poisoned.”

“I feel well,” she said. “A little unsteady still, but otherwise fine.” Her stomach rumbled, and she laughed and put a hand over it. “And ravenous, apparently.”

“Well, you’ve been eating nothing but spoon-fed broth for the last few days, so that makes sense,” he said, laughing. “But don’t worry, I’ve already had Cook begin preparing some food. It will be up shortly.”

“You’re so thoughtful,” she said, smiling.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you woke up,” he said. “I promise you I barely left your side before today. But Aidan and I were at Lord Rochford’s house. He was just arrested, Cherie. For putting cyanide in the cognac you drank. It was him?—”

“Yes, I assumed so.”

“Well, he won’t be able to harm you ever again. He is behind bars, and he won’t be hurting us ever again.”

Cherie nodded. She looked suddenly very tired, and her legs began to tremble, so he led her over to the bed and sat her down.

“Tell me truly,” Cherie said, once she was leaning back against the pillows. “How bad was it? ”

Thomas swallowed the lump that had once more risen in his throat, and then he nodded. “Things were touch and go for a while,” he said. “I was terrified we were going to lose you.”

The tears once more sprang to his eyes, and he reached out and took her hand.

“There’s something I have to tell you,” he said, and even though fear of her rejection fluttered in his chest, he also felt resolute and brave. There was no way he wasn’t going to say what he had to say, now that they had been given a second chance. “I love you, Cherie.”

Her reaction was swift and touching, she gasped, then clapped a hand over her mouth, and her eyes filled with tears. He squeezed her hand tighter, fighting the tears that threatened to spill from his eyes as well.

“I have loved you ever since that morning in the parlor when you walked in wearing your riding clothes. I have loved you every day since then, and probably every day before, although in a different way. There is no woman on earth I could love like I love you.” He reached forward and brushed a lock of her hair back from her face. “I love your stubbornness,” he murmured. “I love your fierceness. Your loyalty to your friends and family. I love that you devised a plan and ran away from home rather than marry Lord Rochford.”

“You were furious about that!” Cherie cried, lowering her hand from her lips.

“I was worried you would be ruined,” he said, “but I love that you are so brave and spirited. I have always loved that about you. And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I should have told you that day in the parlor, and I should have kept telling you, every day since then. I should have courted you properly. I should have proposed to you in the most romantic way possible, and I should have married you in the happiest, most loving ceremony imaginable. I should have done everything differently. But I didn’t, because I was sure I wasn’t good enough for you.”

He took a deep breath. “I’ve told you already how my father made me feel unworthy of love. But what I didn’t tell you, and which I should have told you right away, is that on his deathbed, my father told me I was a bastard.”

The word rang out through the room, but to Thomas's surprise, Cherie didn't look that shocked. She continued to stare at him with a calm, understanding expression, so he took another deep breath and kept going.

"My mother died when I was young, so I could not ask her if it was true. What my father said was that she had never admitted it, but that he had always known. He said he wished he could have proven it so that he could have disinherited me and taken away my dukedom. And his confession confirmed everything I'd always felt that he had never loved me. That I was unworthy of the dukedom. And that I was unworthy to love and have children who would share in my shame of being illegitimate."

"That's why you didn't want to have children," Cherie breathed. "You thought you didn't deserve the duchy or to pass it on to your heirs."

Thomas nodded. "But Cherie, I don't care about any of that anymore. After Lord Rochford poisoned you, and I thought you were going to—" his voice broke, and he cleared his throat. "When I thought you were going to die, I realized that none of that matters. I have loved only one woman all my life, and she is mine. What was I doing, wasting that love and pushing her away? I realized that I had been a fool. My father is gone, and with him, all evidence of my birth. I don't want to let the shadow of that stop me from loving you and building a happy life with you."

He paused, then shook his head. "I don't even care anymore if it's true or not that I'm a bastard. I am more than what my father thinks of me. I am more than an affair my mother might or might not have had. I am your husband. That is the most important identity I have ever had. And I would do anything to make up to you for all the pain I've caused you. I'd do anything to start over and show you that I am worthy of you. I would do anything to live as your husband, to give you children, and to shower you with love and adoration for the rest of our lives."

Cherie's eyes were shining with tears. Her hands came to his shoulders, and she

pulled him towards her. Once their noses were touching, she smiled softly.

“I love you, Thomas. I think I may have always loved you, even when I was a child, but was too stubborn to realize it. And I want all that as well. I want to start over. I want to live as your wife, to have children with you, and to grow old with you.”

Thomas’s heart felt as if it was going to burst. He couldn’t wait a moment longer. Pulling Cherie to him, he kissed her with all the passion that he had ever felt for her. His arms circled her, and hers circled him, and they held one another for a long time, their kisses burning through him and consuming every remaining doubt and lingering fear.

At last, they broke apart. Cherie looked half-dazed, and she couldn’t stop smiling. Thomas couldn’t believe the happiness coursing through him. He hadn’t known it was possible to be this happy.

“There’s something I have to tell you as well,” Cherie said. She pointed towards his mother’s desk, and he turned to see a small leather diary sitting on top of it. “I found your mother’s diary. And I hope you forgive me, but I read it.” She smiled broadly. “In it, she talks about your father’s accusations, and she swears that they aren’t true. She is adamant, Thomas, that his accusations came from a place of deep insecurity because he was sure it was his fault that she couldn’t conceive for many years. And it’s a private diary, Thomas. She didn’t leave it for you to read, she hid it away in the desk. So, I think she’s telling the truth.”

Thomas’s heart was in his throat. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying... I think you were your father’s legitimate son. He hates you because of his insecurities about himself and his inability to produce an heir. But your mother was faithful. And you are your father’s trueborn son.”

Thomas laughed. He couldn't help it. It was all too perfect.

“Well, that's good to know,” he said, shrugging. “But honestly, I no longer care.” He reached out again and touched her cheek, and they both smiled radiantly at each other. “Nor does it matter if I'm his trueborn son, because in all the ways that matter, I am nothing like him, and I never will be. From now on, you are my family, Cherie. You, and all the many, many children we have.”

And he kissed her again. Hopefully, he thought, as she kissed him back, the doctor wouldn't arrive too soon.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:07 am*

“It’s quite amusing to me that the duke was reluctant to have a single heir, only to end up with two!” Minerva said, looking down at the two baby boys that were asleep in the cradle and shaking her head. “Now that’s what I call irony!”

“Technically, it isn’t two heirs,” Samantha pointed out. “It’s an heir and a spare.”

“Don’t call little Edward a spare!” Cassandra gasped. “He’s far, far more important than that!”

“It’s not an insult,” Samantha said. “He’s still a boy, and he’ll grow up with far more rights and claim to the family title than any girl would!”

“Samantha, now isn’t the time for making an impassioned speech about the plight of women,” Cassandra lectured. “We’re here to meet the twins and gush over them as aunts should! And of course, to support Cherie during this tremendous change. Not lament the sad fate of the world!”

All three ladies looked over to where Cherie was resting in the rocking chair, watching them coo and bicker over her babies. She laughed as she took in their looks of concern.

“Oh, please, give impassioned speeches on the plight of women!” she said. “Those two are going to need to hear them, lest they grow up to be chauvinists like our dear Lord Rochford.”

“Do not even speak that name in front of them!” Cassandra exclaimed, but Samantha rolled her eyes.

“I like your thinking,” she said, grinning at Cherie. “We will thoroughly educate them so that by the time they’re grown and looking for wives of their own, they will have the highest respect for women.”

Cherie immediately felt a shock of dread go through her. “Okay, don’t speak about them growing up and getting married!” she exclaimed, half-laughing. “They’re so small and perfect and I never want them to grow up and move away and start families of their own.”

“Oh dear, are you going to be one of those mothers, are you?” Thomas had just entered the nursery, and all the ladies immediately began to talk at once, congratulating him and lavishing praise on the little lordlings.

“Gareth is so sweet already!”

“And Edward already has his mother’s stubborn spirit!”

“They’re so perfectly healthy and strong!”

“Theodora will love them,” Cassandra said this last line, referring to her daughter, who had been born six months previously. “I know the three of them will be best of friends,” she said, smiling brightly.

“I have no doubt about it,” Thomas said. “And I appreciate all of you coming to see us so soon after the birth. Cherie was threatening to go to all of you if you didn’t come here!”

“Cherie!” Cassandra looked at her sharply. “You must convalesce! You have just had two babies!”

“I know, but I was bored,” Cherie complained. “And I’ve been convalescing for nine

months. I'm ready to do something else!"

Cassandra and Thomas both looked disapproving, but Minerva lit up.

"Why don't I throw a party for you?" she suggested. "To welcome the twins!"

"I don't know..." Cherie shared a glance with her husband. They had promised each other a long time ago that they wouldn't let Minerva throw them a party. She was famously the worst party planner of the ton and somehow had never discovered it about herself. "A party might be a bit much. I really shouldn't over-exert myself."

Cassandra hid a smile behind her hand, and Cherie had to work hard not to laugh. Cassie was one of the original members of their wallflower group to declare she'd never let Minerva plan her another party.

"Hmm, what about a board game night?" Samantha suggested. "We haven't done one of those in ages! And it would allow you to stay here in your home and rest, but you'd still be able to have a little fun—outside of the babies, of course."

"Yes, since it's been so much fun taking care of them," Cherie said, rolling her eyes.

"It has!" Thomas protested now, nudging his wife playfully.

"Oh yes! The late nights... the screaming babies... the spit-up and nappies!"

"Don't the nannies and wet nurses do that?" Samantha asked curiously.

"Well, yes, but I like to do as much as I can. They're my children, after all."

"Don't scare your friends off from having children of their own," Thomas warned, and Cherie laughed. She leaned forward and looked down at her sleeping sons. They

were currently wrapped around one another, Edward spooning his older brother, while Gareth had his thumb in his mouth.

As she gazed down at them, she felt such a complete fullness of love that she felt tears prick her eyes.

Oh no. Not again. Ever since the beginning of her confinement, she'd been unable to stop crying. It was starting to irritate her to no end.

She looked back up at her husband, and a secret, knowing smile passed between them. They both knew what it said: Despite all the late nights, screaming babies, spit-up, and nappies, this is the best thing that's ever happened to us.

"You won't be scaring anyone away from having children if you keep looking at each other like that," Minerva commented, and Cherie blushed and looked away. Her friend's eyes were sparkling.

"You two make having twins look like the most beautiful and rewarding pinnacle of your love."

"It really is," Thomas said, and Cherie knew she could no longer hold in the tears. They began to spill down her cheeks, but instead of laughing at her, Cassandra leaned over and hugged her.

"I can't stop crying!" Cherie moaned as she set her head on her friend's shoulder.

"I was like that, too," Cassandra reassured her.

It struck Cherie then, not for the first time, how lucky she was to have these three women in her life. Each was so different from the other and brought such unique perspectives into her life. There were moments when she wanted Minerva's

pragmatism, other times when she needed Samantha's fiery opinions, and many more when all she craved was Cassandra's gentle warmth.

"Parenting will be hard," she said out loud to the room, as Cassandra hugged her close. "But I know that I will be able to do it, and do it well, with you three, and my husband, by my side."

"We'll be here filling your children's heads with reformist ideas," Samantha assured her.

"And love," Cassandra added.

"I think Edward just pinched his brother!" Minerva exclaimed, and Gareth's loud wail filled the room, breaking the spell of the moment—although not before Cherie was sure she'd seen each of her friend's eyes grow bright with tears.

Much later, after the girls had gone home, Cherie and Thomas sat together in the nursery, once more watching their sons sleep. The twins were only a few weeks old and still so small that Cherie couldn't believe they would one day grow into adults. They were so fragile, so tiny, so vulnerable, and yet, she didn't feel as afraid as she'd thought she would. Perhaps it was because she had Thomas by her side, and she knew he would always keep them safe.

She looked at him. In the moonlight that shone in through the window, he looked so peaceful she almost didn't want to disturb him. But there were things she needed to ask him, so she reached out and took his hand.

He looked at her at once.

"They're so perfect, aren't they?" he breathed.

“Yes. Absolutely perfect.” She hesitated. “And how does it feel so far, being a father?”

“It feels wonderful,” he said at once. “Other than being your husband, it is the best role I’ve ever taken on in my life.”

“Do you really mean that?” She looked deeply into his eyes, trying to see some kind of hesitancy or doubt. “It would be okay if there was still some lingering worry about all this, after all that time of telling yourself you wouldn’t have children.”

Thomas smiled and shook his head. “I know you would support me even if I were struggling, but I assure you, I’m not. All my anger at my father and my shame at not being a trueborn son--or so I thought at the time--evaporated when I confronted Rochford last year. Knowing you were in danger like that, it taught me what really matters. And it isn’t allowing the ghost of a dead man to haunt me and prevent me from being happy in life.”

“I know,” Cherie said, squeezing his hand. “But I also know that sometimes these feelings can come back.”

“Not for me. I have never been as happy in all my days as I am now, Cherie, as your husband; as Gareth and Edward’s father; as part of this family.”

“Stop, or you’re going to make me cry again!” Cherie laughed.

Thomas chuckled, then grew serious again. “You know, I was thinking earlier about something your brother once said to me when he first learned that the duchess was expecting. He said that when you and I had a child, I would realize I’d do anything on earth to protect you both and make you happy. And he said... you’ll know that there is nothing that child could ever do to make it unworthy of your love. Because your love is unconditional.”

“That’s very beautiful,” Cherie murmured.

“Yes. But I wasn’t sure if he was right. Of course, back then I thought you and I would never have children. But now that we have, I realize he was completely and utterly right.” He squeezed her hand back. “I spent so long feeling unworthy of my father. He truly made me feel that I was unworthy. But I would never make our sons feel that way. There is nothing they could do to ever make me treat them like that.”

“I know,” Cherie said, once more choking up. “And you know, my brother told me a little bit about that conversation you two had. He said that you wouldn’t always feel unworthy, once you learned to see yourself through my eyes.”

“And he was right again,” Thomas said, laughing. “I had to stop trying to be the man my father wanted me to be and start being the man you wanted me to be, which, coincidentally, is also the man I wanted to be.”

“And so here we are,” Cherie said. “Safe from your father’s disapproval. Safe from Rochford’s nefariousness, now that he’s behind bars. And safe from ever pushing each other away again.”

“Yes.” Thomas smiled and shook his head. “In fact, I’m sure it’s the opposite: you can’t get rid of me now.”

She laid her head on his shoulder and stared down at the sleeping boys. “No, I can’t get rid of you now,” she murmured.

And she never wanted to.

The End?

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:07 am*

“Well at least it isn't Italy,” Cherie said uncertainly, glancing around at the room with its moth-eaten curtains, chipped tub, dusty vanity, and peeling, faded wallpaper. She hadn't been expecting her honeymoon to be as glamorous as Cassandra's Italian one, but she hadn't been expecting it to be quite this bad, either.

“It certainly is not Italy,” her husband agreed, looking around the shabby room with a pained expression on his face. “I'm starting to think that I shouldn't have let you pick our honeymoon spot.”

“Don't say that!” Cherie smiled in what she hoped was a winning manner. “It's romantic! Isn't it?”

He must have heard the insecurity in her voice, because he smiled, crossed the room, and wrapped his arms around her.

“Yes, it is romantic,” he agreed. “Anywhere that I went with you would be romantic.” Cherie set her head on her husband's shoulder and breathed in his scent. For several glorious moments, it seemed as if it was just the two of them, alone in all the world, holding one another.

Then the person in the room next door shouted something indecipherable and banged on the wall. The room shuddered, and Cherie was sure another blow would knock it over.

Thomas looked alarmed. “But please, can you remind me why you didn't want to go to Italy?”

“Because everyone goes to Italy!” she cried, exasperated. “I wanted to do something original. Something that actually says something about our marriage and our love story.”

“But who are you saying this to?” Thomas asked. “No one cares where we go on Honeymoon!”

Cherie bit her lip. He had a point about this.

“Come, let’s change for dinner,” she said. “Perhaps we will like what they have to serve!”

And while Cherie could say with certainty that the dinner they were served half an hour later was not nearly as bad as their room had been, it still wasn’t exactly the royal treatment that most women expected on their honeymoons.

“The wine isn’t bad,” Thomas said, sampling it with a hopeful gleam in his eye. “So at least there's that.”

“We shall have to drink lots of it,” she said, “if we are to get through this whole week here.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow. “Now that you’re here, you really want to stay a whole week?”

“Well...” Cherie was caught between wanting to be right and desperately wanting to get away from the inn, but she also knew her husband would love for her to admit her defeat, and she wasn’t going to give that to him. He was smiling at her now with a knowing look, and she primly smirked back at him. “Of course I do, dear.”

Thomas laughed. “You really are stubborn sometimes.”

“In that regard, we are alike.” They grinned at each other, and Cherie’s heart picked up speed. Even after more than two years of marriage, her husband’s wicked grin could still make her feel weak-kneed.

“Well, no matter where we end up, we have to enjoy it,” Thomas said. “This might be our one chance to get away, what with how big the twins are getting. It’s hard enough to be away from them for a week!”

“To be honest, I missed them on the carriage ride here,” Cherie said with a sigh. “I understand now why you are supposed to have your honeymoon before you have children. Because once you have little ones, not only do you have no time for romantic getaways, but you also miss them terribly!”

“I think honeymoons are supposed to be when you make children,” Thomas pointed out, winking at her.

Cherie flushed. “Just promise me that you won’t attempt such a thing on our honeymoon. Two is more than enough for now.”

Thomas’s eyes glinted mischievously. “I can’t make that promise.”

She laughed, then raised her glass of wine in the air. “To us,” she said. “And to everything we have fought through to make this marriage work.”

“To the next adventure, whatever it might be,” Thomas agreed, raising his glass and clinking it against hers. “Although I sincerely hope it doesn’t involve any more poisonings, false accusations of illegitimacy, or runaway ladies trying to escape a forced marriage.”

“What are you saying?” Cherie asked, pretending to look concerned. “Do you want our lives to become boring and conventional?”

“With the wallflowers around, that will never happen. But yes, I wouldn’t mind a conventional few years. I’ve had enough unconventionality to last a lifetime.”

Cherie had to agree with that. She was thankful she’d made a full recovery from Rochford’s poisoning, but whenever she became even slightly short of breath, she would suddenly feel as if she was back in Thomas’s study, gasping for air, and it would leave her shaken for days after. Fortunately, this hadn’t happened in a long time. Her sons kept her so busy that she didn’t have much time to remember that horrible night.

Thomas reached across the table and took her hand, as if sensing what she was thinking about. “I love you,” he said, stroking his finger across her ungloved hand.

“I love you,” she said, and her heart swelled. She and James stared at each other for a long moment, both grinning like idiots, until a voice interrupted them.

“The champagne you ordered, Your Grace.” They turned to see a young maid carrying a bottle of champagne and an ice bucket, and Cherie gasped with delight.

“You ordered this for us?”

“They had to go to London to get it, but yes, I did,” Thomas teased, and Cherie rolled her eyes. He took the bottle of champagne and expertly popped it open. Bubbles frothed out the top, and Cherie squealed with delight.

Thomas was pouring them each a glass when the maid, who had lingered to watch, tentatively asked, “Are you celebrating something, Your Grace?”

“Indeed,” Thomas said. “It is our honeymoon!”

“Oh how lovely!” The maid gushed, her eyes lighting up. “Congratulations! You do

have the air of newlyweds, I thought perhaps that you were.”

“Thank you,” Cherie said, feeling that it was unnecessary to explain they’d actually been married for two years.

“And where is the final destination of your honeymoon?” the maid asked.

“Oh, we’re spending it here,” Thomas explained, winking at Cherie.

The maid looked confused. “Oh... but... I thought you were just passing through, that you are here to catch a boat.”

“No, we wanted to spend our honeymoon here,” Thomas said, and now his tone was becoming amused. He clearly found the situation as ludicrous as the maid did.

“In this city?” she clarified.

“At this inn,” Cherie said.

The maid bit her lip, clearly desperate to ask the question she was dying to but afraid it was too presumptuous. At last, it burst from her, as if she couldn’t hold it in for a second longer: “But why? You’re the Duke and Duchess of Wheaton. You could go anywhere in the world!”

Cherie grinned, reached across the table, and took her husband’s hand. “Yes, but this is where our love story began. In fact,” and Cherie couldn’t help but laugh at how mad it all seemed, “The Carleton Inn is where the Duke proposed. So to us, it’s the most romantic place on earth.”

And in that moment, she really meant it.

The End.

One

“Will she never give up?!” Aidan Norton, the Duke of Vaston, muttered as he weaved his way through the crowd.

The crush of revelers, all dressed in their most extravagant finery, was sure to cover him. Which was lucky, because just moments before, he had almost walked in on a group of ladies that included his ex-fiancée, who had been grilling the lot of them on his whereabouts.

“If she continues like this, she’ll run me out of town,” he muttered once more to himself.

“Tell me, Your Grace,” a voice in front of him said, “who could be so menacing that she has the Duke of Vaston on the run?”

Aidan looked up to see his old university friend, Lord Casserly, smiling at him, his hand extended in greeting. “It’s good to see you again, Vaston!”

“Casserly!” Aidan was instantly flooded with relief at the sight of the Viscount, and he grinned as he took his old friend’s hand and shook it warmly. “How long has it been? Four years? Five?”

“Six. Ever since I left for India.”

“Ah, yes... of course. And how was Bombay? Were you able to save your father’s businesses?”

Casserly laughed. “I don’t know if I saved them, but I certainly tried. They are, at least, running smoothly, which is why I have returned to England. The heat, it turns out, does not agree with me. Besides, I’ve missed this place!”

Aidan laughed as he clapped a hand on his old friend’s back. “What, the dreary weather and the endless Society balls?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve grown weary of Society balls,” Casserly said with a wink. “You always used to love charming the young debutantes. That is who you’re on the run from, I’m assuming? Them or your fiancée, who I can’t imagine enjoys being engaged to the most sought-after Duke in the country.”

At the mention of his former fiancée, Aidan’s mood soured. Some of what he was feeling must have shown on his face, because Casserly’s smile faltered, and his eyebrows knitted together in concern.

“What’s wrong? Have I hit a nerve?”

Aidan tried to think of what to say. It seemed improbable to him that there was anyone in the world who didn’t know about the disastrous ending of his engagement and the scandal that had precipitated it.

The story had been splashed across the front pages of every scandal sheet in London, gossiped about at every Society event, and had plagued Aidan everywhere he’d gone for the last two months. Casserly, it seemed, was the one person in London who had not heard the news, undoubtedly because he had only just returned.

However, Casserly was now watching him with such worry that Aidan knew he had to tell him the truth.

“Lady Natalie and I are no longer engaged,” he revealed at last.

Casserly's surprise was immediate. "No longer engaged?!" He gaped at Aidan. "But you two were Society's power couple. And you'd been engaged since you were, what, two years old?!"

"Intended for one another since before our births," Aidan corrected. "Formally engaged when she turned eighteen two years ago."

Casserly shook his head. "What happened?"

Aidan exhaled. "Lady Natalie decided that someone else was better suited for her attentions."

"She broke off the engagement?" Casserly looked incredulous. "I'm shocked her father would let her bow out of becoming a duchess! He is a textbook social climber."

"She didn't break it off," Aidan rushed to say. "She?—"

"Have you seen the Duke of Vaston? I could have sworn I just saw him pass this way..." a voice sounded from just behind them, and Aidan froze.

He would recognize that sharp voice anywhere. His ex-fiancée always spoke thus when she was angry and trying to conceal it. No one else but him, and perhaps the closest of her friends and family, would be able to recognize it. But it meant that she was furious—and far too close for comfort.

She's found me.

Seizing Casserly's arm, Aidan ducked to the left around a group of rowdy gentlemen, pulling his friend with him.

"Quick, this way!" Aidan breathed as Casserly yelped in protest at being dragged so

roughly away.

“What’s happened?” his friend hissed.

“Lady Natalie,” Aidan said darkly. “You were right, I am trying to escape her.”

Casserly nodded and quickened his pace, and Aidan felt a deep rush of gratitude towards his friend. At Oxford, Casserly had been his closest friend. They’d even been planning a Grand Tour of Europe together, before Casserly’s father had recalled him to India to take up the family business. Life had happened instead, including Aidan’s engagement to Lady Natalie Laurens, the daughter of the Marquess of Reelvain.

For all the good that had come of it.

Aidan reached the edge of the crowd, ducked behind a woman with a particularly large plumage of feathers, and then darted left until he reached one of the Corinthian columns that characterized Lord and Lady Merryweather’s London mansion. Here, he finally straightened and let out a sigh of relief.

Casserly, meanwhile, was straightening his cravat and looking distinctly ruffled. “I never imagined the day would come when I’d be slinking through a ballroom trying to avoid a beautiful woman,” he muttered, more to himself than to Aidan.

Aidan peeked out from behind the column to assess the situation. Lady Natalie was still on the opposite side of the ballroom. He could see her ink-black hair twisted in her signature cone-like updo. He could spot her easily, even through all the elaborate coiffures and headdresses of the other ladies, turning back and forth as she searched the ballroom for him.

“I think we’re safe,” Aidan murmured. “She didn’t see us.”

“Well, that was a narrow escape,” Casserly drawled. He gave his friend a piercing look. “Now, I think you need to tell me exactly what happened between yourself and the lady.”

Aidan sighed again and leaned back against the column. “It was two months ago,” he explained. “We were at Lord and Lady Harmon’s Spring Equinox ball when I caught her... in a compromising position with Lord Berbrooke. Of course, almost no one else knows of this detail, only that something happened and suddenly she had a new fiancé. So I hope I can count on your discretion!”

Casserly didn’t bother trying to disguise his shock. “I can hardly believe it,” he said faintly. “Lady Natalie?! But she is the epitome of propriety. Or, well, that is the reputation she always cultivated around herself. Of course, I won’t breathe a word of it to anyone, but I never thought this would be the reason behind the end of your engagement.”

“I believe she thought that her engagement gave her certain... liberties.”

Casserly shook his head. “And with Lord Berbrooke? The man is handsome, to be sure, but penniless. And a touch...”

“Conceited?” Aidan supplied.

“I was going to say arrogant,” Casserly replied with a smirk.

Aidan shrugged. “I don’t like to speak ill of him,” he said. “The man did the right thing after I broke our engagement. He asked for her hand before any gossip could spread, and she accepted. Of course, gossip still did spread... But at least the worst of it was mitigated.”

Casserly put a bracing hand on Aidan’s arm. “This all must have been very taxing for

you. Unless you have changed very much in the past six years, I know that you avoid scandal like the plague. Of course, with looks and charm like yours, scandal was always bound to follow you, but I know you don't seek it out."

"Indeed," Aidan said. "It has been... a difficult time."

Casserly's gaze softened. "And to lose your fiancée as well... I can only imagine what a blow that must have been."

Aidan nodded and looked away, unsure of what to say. Even after two months, he still wasn't entirely certain how to explain the simultaneous and sometimes contradictory feelings that the end of his engagement had brought him.

There was grief, yes, and embarrassment. Even anger. But also... something else. Something that felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders—like he'd just unclenched his jaw after years of biting down hard, like he could finally think about the future without an impending sense of doom hanging over him.

"Still, I'm not surprised the gossip columns jumped on this," Casserly mused, interrupting Aidan's thoughts. "A duke doesn't end an engagement with the daughter of the Marquess of Reelvain without arousing suspicion. Such things are not generally done."

"And generally not by the gentleman," Aidan said with a sigh. "The honorable thing to do would have been to allow her to be the one to bow out. But I must admit, I was so shocked when I discovered them that the last thing on my mind was how to safeguard her reputation."

"I would not feel bad about that if I were you," Casserly scoffed indignantly. "You were the wronged party."

“Still...” Aidan grimaced. “I do not like to cause scandal, and I hate to think what might have become of Lady Natalie’s reputation had Berbrooke not immediately offered her marriage.”

Casserly snorted. “Well, why wouldn’t he? He’s a baron, and now he’s marrying the daughter of a marquess!”

“If the marriage goes through,” Aidan said dryly. “From what I’ve heard, she is intent on getting me back. That’s why I’m avoiding her.”

This seemed to rattle Casserly. His eyes went wide, and his mouth fell open slightly. “Get you back?! She can’t be serious. After what she did?”

“It seems so,” Aidan sighed heavily. “From what my sister has been able to glean, Lady Natalie has been harassing every single woman I’ve spoken to over the last two months. She has been telling them they are wasting their efforts and that it is only a matter of time before she and I are once more engaged.”

“I’m surprised her fiancé allows her to speak that way,” Casserly said. “If a woman I’d offered for was going around telling ladies that she would soon be engaged to someone else...”

“Well, it’s as you said. Lord Berbrooke is so thrilled with the match that he gives her free rein. But from what Cherie tells me, he is trying everything within his power to plan the wedding as quickly as possible. Lady Natalie, however, is resisting a short engagement.”

Casserly nodded. His expression was slightly tense as he looked over Aidan’s shoulder, as if he couldn’t quite make eye contact with him.

“And how is Lady Cherie?” he asked slowly. “I have been meaning to call ever since

I returned, but—” He cut himself off, his expression clouding. Then his eyes snapped to Aidan’s. They were wide with horror.

“What is it?” Aidan asked, his stomach lurching.

“Lady Natalie is heading right in this direction,” Casserly murmured. “And I believe she has spotted me.”

If he’d thought his stomach had lurched before, it was nothing compared to what Aidan felt now. His whole body had gone cold. In the two months since their engagement had fallen apart, Aidan had managed to avoid speaking to his ex-fiancée. But now, he was trapped in the back of the ballroom, behind a column with no easy escape.

The only hope he had would be to start a conversation with someone that Lady Natalie would rather not speak to. Someone like?—

His eyes fell on a group of women standing close by, several of whom he recognized. At once, his heart leapt. Here, at last, was his escape.

Someone like the very wallflowers she so detested.

Two

“ And there went my last hope of one of my daughters marrying well.” The Marchioness of Manton sighed as she raised a small glass of champagne to her lips. “If Helen couldn’t manage it, then there’s no chance that...” she trailed off and shrugged delicately in what Cassandra knew was meant to be a self-deprecating way.

Then there’s no chance that Cassandra will , Cassandra inwardly finished for her mother. It wasn’t hard for any of the other listeners to guess the end of the sentence either. The Marchioness only had one other daughter, and she was within earshot.

“Lady Cassandra still could marry well,” Lady Carleton, who was on the board of Almack’s, said sympathetically. She smiled at Cassandra. “Not every man wants a beautiful wife. They can be such trouble...”

Cassandra knew her face was turning red, but she didn’t dare look away. These ladies weren’t purposefully trying to humiliate her in front of the ton’s most powerful matrons. It was just that no one ever really considered her feelings when speaking about her. A matter that was only made worse by the fact that Cassandra never objected to any of their criticisms.

“We were all surprised by Lady Helen’s choice in husband,” Lady Davenport, another Almack board member whose twin daughters were due to come out in Society next year, added. “It was the love match of the Season! Both my daughters were green with envy to be featured so often, and so adoringly, in the Tatler. ”

Cassandra had to smile at that. London’s most infamous gossip rag had been very

fond of her sister's love match with Frederick Carter, a mere Baron whom the most snobbish of the peers seemed to think was reaching far above his station by marrying the eldest daughter of a marquess.

Meanwhile, her mother was wrinkling her nose at the words love match.

"Your daughters would do well to remember that love fades, Lady Davenport," the Marchioness advised. "Position, however, is forever."

The other ladies nodded in agreement, and Lady Manton sighed dramatically. "Helen was the Diamond of the Season. And now... I have to listen to Lady Grayson's constant boasting that her daughter married a marquess. My own daughter took away my last chance to quash Lady Grayson's sense of superiority once and for all."

The other women made sympathetic sounds, but Cassandra had to turn away to roll her eyes.

Lady Grayson was Lady Manton's closest friend, and while the former did rather boast about her daughter's marriage, Cassandra knew her mother would feel worse if she were left out of the boasting. The women had a relationship built on one-upmanship, from jewels to gowns and now, apparently, to daughters' marriages.

I am sick of it all—sick of Mama's criticism, sick of being compared to Helen, sick of hearing about her disappointing matches, and most of all sick of the marriage mart.

She'd been out now for a Season and a half, and so far, she had received no offers of marriage. She'd never even had a real suitor.

She knew her looks were partially to blame, but even the few men who had shown interest had soon lost patience when she'd been unable to form a coherent response to their attempts at conversation. She was far too shy, insecure, and uncomfortable in

her own skin to know what to say to them. By the beginning of this Season, she knew she'd earned the reputation of a wallflower, and all the eligible gentlemen avoided her.

I wonder if I can sneak away without Mama noticing .

Cassandra stared at Lady Manton, her eyes glazing over.

It's not as if she notices me now.

Just then, she felt a hand on her elbow, and she turned to see her best friend, Lady Samantha Canford, standing next to her.

"At last, I've found you!" Samantha squealed, beaming as she slipped her arm around Cassandra's. "I've been looking everywhere for you!"

Several of the ladies turned to look at them at the sound of Samantha's voice, which was several decibels louder than was considered polite for an unmarried young lady.

Lady Manton's expression immediately soured at the sight of her daughter's infamously unsuitable best friend. She and her friends exchanged meaningful glances and raised eyebrows.

Samantha, of course, didn't seem to notice or care.

"This ball is dreadfully dull, don't you think?" she asked Cassandra, grinning mischievously. "There aren't nearly enough gentlemen who are eager to dance."

Although both young ladies knew there were plenty of gentlemen eager to dance with ladies who weren't wallflowers, Cassandra still appreciated her friend's attempt to ease her humiliation.

“Lady Minerva and I had an idea,” Samantha continued, still smiling wickedly. “We hatched a plot to stand closer to the dance floor. That way, the men stepping off it will bump right into us and realize we are without partners. They can’t possibly feign tiredness if they’re fresh off the dance floor, and then we shall dance all night!”

“An ingenious plan,” Cassandra said sarcastically, and Samantha grinned more broadly.

Lady Manton, however, didn’t hear the sarcasm.

“That is a good plan!” she cooed. She waved her hands in the direction of the dance floor, as if shooing the two of them away. “Cassandra, go with Lady Samantha.”

Cassandra curtsied to the other ladies and wished them farewell. It was only once she was about to leave when her mother leaned close and whispered, “You know, you might have more luck with gentlemen if you had your friend’s cleverness.”

Cassandra swallowed and nodded, turning away before her mother saw the tears in her eyes.

Samantha, who had heard everything, squeezed Cassandra’s arm tighter. “She usually despises my cleverness,” she said lightly.

“That’s because you’re usually using it to outwit her,” Cassandra pointed out.

“And I have done so again,” Samantha declared, which made her friend laugh. “There is no plan to stand by the dance floor and force men to dance with us.”

“Oh, thank God!” Cassandra giggled. “I have never met a gentleman who enjoyed being cornered into a dance.”

“Indeed. And why would we care about cornering gentlemen anyway?”

Cassandra sighed. “I know that you maintain that you are happy to be relegated to spinsterhood,” she said softly, “but I would like to marry someday. If only to escape my mother and the constant comparisons to Helen...”

“I’d think Helen would no longer be the apple of your mother’s eye,” Samantha observed astutely, “after her disadvantageous marriage.”

“Truthfully, Mama doesn’t know how to behave. She is so used to venerating Helen and comparing me to her unfavorably that now she finds herself in quite the logical knot.”

Samantha snorted with laughter, and a few scandalized heads turned in their direction. Samantha, of course, ignored them.

“I’m impressed by your sister, truthfully,” she admitted. “She was brave to go against your mother’s wishes. Not every young lady would do that.”

“You would,” Cassandra pointed out.

Samantha smirked. “Well, yes. I would.”

“I’m not sure I would,” Cassandra said gloomily. “Helen is very brave, as you’ve said. Mama and Papa have made their displeasure known to everyone—including Lord Carter’s family. I’m not sure I’d have the courage to face even more disapproval from them.”

“Well, Helen is very much in love, isn’t she?” Samantha said. “Perhaps love makes people braver.”

“Yes,” Cassandra murmured thoughtfully. “And kinder, if my sister’s new personality is to be taken as a result of Lord Carter’s influence. Ever since she met him, she no longer criticizes me or points out all my flaws. She actually seems to like me, and I even look forward to her visits.”

“Perhaps that’s because she is no longer trying to keep your mother’s favor,” Samantha pointed out. “You are no longer the competition, but a commiserator.”

Cassandra mulled this over. “Or perhaps,” she suggested slowly, “she is just happy?”

Samantha raised her eyebrows. “Marriage can make one happy? Perhaps I should consider it, after all.”

Cassandra laughed, then looked around. “So where are we going? If not to pounce on gentlemen leaving the dance floor?”

“To Lady Minerva.”

Cassandra blinked. She had thought that Samantha speaking to Lady Minerva had been part of the deception. “You two are... acquainted?”

“Since last week, yes.”

“But she is so... serious.”

Lady Minerva was known as a perfectionist with a businesslike mind that was sharper than most men’s. She was another wallflower, like them, but they had never been close to her and her friend, Lady Cherie, who had just debuted but was also already known for her exacting standards.

Cassandra, who was clumsy and awkward, had thought herself not sophisticated

enough to be friends with Lady Minerva and Lady Cherie.

“She is serious,” Samantha conceded. “But she is also very funny when she wants to be. She has a dark sense of humor. We bumped into each other at the Somersby musicale last week, and I’ve been dying to introduce you since.”

Cassandra had barely had time to stammer out a response when the two of them stopped in front of Lady Minerva and Lady Cherie, who were standing together near the back of the ballroom, by the Corinthian columns, sipping lemonade.

Lady Minerva was tall and sharp-featured, with light blonde hair that had been pulled back into a severe coiffure and intelligent blue eyes. Lady Cherie, on the other hand, was smaller, pink-cheeked, and pretty, with dark wavy hair and surprisingly lively gray eyes. She was too pretty to be a wallflower, and Cassandra wondered briefly why she had been put on the shelf.

“Lady Samantha!” Lady Cherie cried, her eyes lighting up at once. “How lovely to see you again.”

“Good to see you,” Lady Minerva added more somberly. She didn’t smile, but there was a warmth to her expression at seeing Samantha that Cassandra had never seen before.

“Ladies,” Samantha said, smiling and pushing Cassandra forward, “this is my closest friend, Lady Cassandra Bradton.”

Both ladies turned to look at Cassandra, and she blushed under their gazes. She always flushed under scrutiny. Being the object of attention mortified her, especially after a lifetime of being told she was less pretty, intelligent, and charming than her sister.

And Cassandra knew her mother was right. While Lady Minerva was tall and elegant, Cassandra was short and clumsy. While Lady Cherie was slim and pretty, Cassandra was chubby and plain. And as the two ladies looked at her, Cassandra felt as if they were judging every single one of these flaws.

After just a moment, however, Lady Cherie held out her hand. “It’s lovely to meet a friend of Samantha’s,” she said, much more warmly than Cassandra had been anticipating. “We just adore your friend. She has been amusing us with her acerbic take-downs of the ton’s most imperious members. And we know we will adore you too.”

“Indeed,” Lady Minerva agreed. “It seems that Lady Samantha is the only person, apart from us, who is able to see through the pretense and self-delusions of the peerage.”

“We don’t think the peerage is all pretense and self-delusions,” Lady Cherie added quickly, glancing at Cassandra as if worried she might judge them.

“Don’t we?” Lady Minerva asked skeptically.

Lady Cherie tried, and failed, to hide her smile. “But both Lady Minerva and I have been the recipients of two-faced behavior that has made us a tad more cynical than is considered fashionable.”

“You don’t have to worry that Cassandra will report you for disloyalty to the peerage,” Samantha assured them with a laugh. “She thinks as we do, that the ton can be snobbish and exclusive and hard on young ladies who are different.”

“How are you different, Lady Cassandra?” Lady Minerva asked.

The bluntness of the question caught Cassandra off guard, and she flushed again.

“Forgive my friend’s candidness,” Lady Cherie interjected, putting a friendly hand on her arm. “Lady Minerva is merely curious about people, and she doesn’t always read social cues.”

Lady Minerva nodded, and a shadow of a smile touched her lips. “I don’t like to waste time on pleasantries,” she explained. “I’d rather know upfront who a person is.”

“I can respect that,” Cassandra said, and she meant it.

There was something she liked about Lady Minerva’s no-nonsense attitude. And it paired well with Lady Cherie’s easy friendliness. She could see how the two friends, while opposite, had become so close.

“I don’t know if I’m different, though,” she added after a moment. “I simply find myself uncomfortable, often, in the social situations in which my sister excelled. And I can be a bit?—”

Before Cassandra could finish her sentence, a voice sounded behind them.

“My dear sister, how do you always know how to be in the exact right place at the exact right time?”

Cassandra was so surprised by the intrusion that her heart leapt in her chest, and she let out a small cry of surprise. At the same time, she seized Samantha’s hand in fright—at least, what she thought was Samantha’s hand. But her hand closed around thin air, and she was thrown off balance, tipping backward.

For a wild moment, she thought she was about to fall over and completely embarrass herself, until she felt strong hands grip her shoulders and halt her fall.

Cassandra blinked and looked up into the beautiful, kind gray eyes of the newcomer to their circle. It was a man, tall and handsome, with wavy black hair that fell luxuriously in front of his eyes. At once, she knew who her rescuer was. They had never met, but she knew all about him, not least of all because of the very public ending of his engagement just two months ago.

“Ahh, Aidan!” she heard Lady Cherie exclaim. “There you are! And you’re just in time to meet our new friends. Ladies, this is my brother Aidan Norton, the Duke of Vaston. Aidan, this is Lady Samantha Canford.” She nodded to Samantha, who curtsied. “And next to her, the lady you just so chivalrously rescued, is Lady Cassandra Bradton, who, coincidentally, was just telling us that she can be a bit clumsy.”

Three

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” the Duke said, his voice so low and warm that it set Cassandra’s skin on fire.

She’d seen the Duke from a distance many times, but she had never heard him speak before, and his voice reminded her of dark, melted chocolate. It fit, too, with how tall and muscular he was, with a chiseled jaw, broad shoulders, and large hands that were still wrapped firmly around her arms.

Cassandra’s breath hitched as she looked up into the Duke’s eyes. Although he was being introduced to both her and Samantha, his gaze stayed locked on hers, and she felt her mouth go dry. Usually, she considered gray eyes to be cold, but on the Duke of Vaston, they were warm and sparkling, like opals.

The Duke rightened her so that she was once more standing firmly on her feet, then released her slowly. The moment his hands left her arms, she missed them, as if in those few moments they had become a part of her.

“A pleasure,” Cassandra breathed, but her words were drowned out by Lady Cherie’s.

“Why is it I have such perfect timing, Brother?” she asked, her head tilting to one side out of curiosity.

The Duke blinked, as if he had forgotten what he’d been saying, then turned to face his sister. “Er... because you have offered me refuge.” He smiled.

Despite the kindness in the expression, Cassandra thought she detected a note of unease. And when she shifted next to him, his eyes darted to her, and then around the room, as if looking for something—or someone.

“Ahh,” Lady Cherie said, realization seeming to dawn on her. “Hiding, I see.”

“A gentleman doesn’t hide,” the Duke corrected with another smile. “He gracefully maneuvers social situations.” Then, to Cassandra’s utter astonishment, he turned to look at her. “And speaking of graceful, I can’t agree with your assessment of yourself as clumsy, Lady Cassandra. After all, I was the one who frightened you with my sudden arrival.”

He was smiling so warmly at her that Cassandra felt all ability to form words leave her brain. He was being so kind and attentive, and she had no idea why.

“I—” She tried to think of something to say but failed.

“I would be pleased to be proven right if you would agree to this next dance with me,” he continued.

Cassandra looked down to see that he was offering her his hand. She stared at it, temporarily unsure of what exactly to do with it. In the year and a half she’d been out, she had rarely been asked to dance before. And never by a duke!

She looked up, her face burning. Behind her, she felt Samantha put a hand on her back, as if pushing her forward—pushing her towards the Duke’s proffered hand.

It was the nudge she needed. At last, she lifted her hand and placed it in the Duke’s. His was so big that it seemed to eclipse her own.

Heart in her throat, Cassandra looked back up at the Duke. “I would be honored, Your Grace,” she murmured.

The music changed, and the Duke's hand closed around hers, and she felt the raw strength of him in even that small gesture. It was a restrained strength, telling that he was a man of tremendous control, but the strength was also appealing in ways she hadn't anticipated. She knew that he could protect her, should anything happen, just as he had kept her from falling over.

It was a strange feeling—comforting and exciting all at once.

The Duke led her to the dance floor, and they quickly settled into place in the long line of dancers. Although Cassandra had never been asked to partake before, she loved to dance and practiced with her dancing tutor regularly. As the music neared the moment when they could begin, her heart soared in her chest, and she risked a small, shy smile at the Duke. He smiled back. Then their hands met in the middle and they began to dance.

It was a simple quadrille, but the moment Cassandra began to move, she felt the familiar glow that dancing always brought to her. Her skin heated, and she knew that she was red-cheeked again, but this time, it wasn't from embarrassment—it was from happiness.

When they came back together, Cassandra was flushed and giddy. The Duke smiled down at her as their hands touched, and his eyes sparkled.

“You're a great dancer,” he noted lightly. “It's a joy to see a woman enjoy herself so much.”

“I think my mother would call that unladylike,” Cassandra said, surprising herself with her ability to form a full sentence.

Perhaps the dancing had given her confidence. She also suspected that the fact that the Duke was so far out of her league made her bolder. She didn't need to worry that something she said wouldn't appeal to him, as a woman like her could never possibly

appeal to a man like him.

“Well, I’d call it character,” he declared.

Cassandra blushed again, but the compliment was so genuine that she also felt emboldened.

“Unfortunately, most gentlemen tend not to like women with character,” the Duke continued thoughtfully. “It’s one of the many defaults of my sex.”

Again, Cassandra tried to think of something to say, but no words came to her. She settled for a polite smile.

The Duke laughed when he saw it.

“You might not be clumsy, Lady Cassandra, but you are shy,” he said. When she reddened further, he added quickly, “I do not mean that as an insult. Merely an observation. Tell me, is it me who makes you shy, or all gentlemen?”

Cassandra bit her lip, then decided that if there was ever a moment to speak, it was now.

“Not just gentlemen,” she replied quietly. “Everyone.”

“I see.” The Duke nodded seriously. “And what is it that you fear?”

“I...” Cassandra had never thought about it this way before, and now she considered the question seriously. “I suppose I’m afraid I shall say the wrong thing and cause offense.”

“Interesting. Well then, I think you should ask me the most inappropriate question you can think of.”

“What?” Cassandra stared at him.

His eyes were twinkling, and his smile was inviting, but she still felt confused.

“Ask me an inappropriate question,” he repeated. “Then, when an offense is caused, you will see that even the worst-case scenario is not as bad as you think it is. It will break the ice, so to speak. And from now on, you won’t worry so much about saying the wrong thing.”

Cassandra gazed at him a moment longer, then she started to smile. “Alright...” she began slowly. “Who was it you were hiding from earlier? Was it your ex-fiancée, Lady Natalie?”

The Duke’s eyes widened in surprise and delight. “That is a very inappropriate question!” he declared. “Well done, Lady Cassandra! Well done, indeed. Although I don’t know if I’d characterize it as hiding , per se. However, I was hoping to avoid?—”

“Me.”

Both Cassandra and the Duke looked up to see Lady Natalie standing beside them, having somehow made her way into the line of couples right next to where they were dancing.

Cassandra immediately felt all the confidence that the dance, the Duke’s compliments, and the boldness of asking the inappropriate question had given her fade away.

Lady Natalie was everything she wasn’t—tall, beautiful, thin, with silky black hair, an angelic face, big blue eyes, and all the elegance, charm, and wit that made her a favorite among the gentlemen of the ton . While they had never been formally introduced, Cassandra was more than aware of Lady Natalie’s reputation as

sophisticated, flirtatious, and dangerous. Dangerous because she did not suffer rivals or allow herself to not get what she desired.

The Duke, meanwhile, looked as if he had been slapped in the face. His whole body had gone rigid, and his face was stony.

“You’ve been avoiding me, Your Grace,” Lady Natalie said as she slid around them with her dance partner, a young gentleman who looked dumbfounded to have somehow landed a partner such as her.

“I have not been avoiding you,” the Duke countered, his voice stiff. “I have merely been uninterested in renewing our acquaintance.”

Lady Natalie raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I see you are seeking out other... acquaintances.” Her gaze traveled over Cassandra, and she smirked. “I admit that I did not expect your tastes to have... broadened so much in two months.”

Cassandra felt herself go red with embarrassment and anger. She was sure that Lady Natalie’s comment had been a reference to her weight, and it made her want to burst into tears.

The Duke, meanwhile, gave Lady Natalie a cold stare. “Have you met Lady Cassandra? She is an exceptionally lovely young lady.”

He smiled at Cassandra, and she lowered her eyes, embarrassed to be complimented in front of Lady Natalie.

“We have not met,” Lady Natalie sneered. “I am usually too occupied at balls to spend time along the walls with young ladies who have been unable to secure proposals.”

She’s calling me a wallflower to my face .

At that moment, Cassandra's anger was so strong that she looked up, a rush of unbridled fury overtaking her.

"You're rather free with your censure, for a woman who has already lost one proposal," she said, her voice quiet but firm. "I'd be more careful what you say about others if you hope to not lose the second one as well."

There was a shocked silence. Lady Natalie stared at her, her mouth half-open, and Cassandra wondered if she had just made the social faux pas of the year. Then the Duke burst into laughter. Both women turned to stare at him, but he had eyes only for Cassandra. Reaching out, he took her hand and squeezed it, his eyes sparkling with mirth as he continued to laugh.

More and more couples were turning in their direction at the sound of his laughter, and Cassandra felt herself flush with pleasure. Especially since Lady Natalie looked about as sour as if she'd just eaten a lemon.

"Come, Lady Cassandra, let us get you some lemonade," the Duke suggested.

Turning away from Lady Natalie without a word of farewell, he led Cassandra away from the dance floor. Once they were at a safe distance, he stopped and turned to face her.

"That was very funny," he said, his smile lopsided and so sweet that she felt her knees start to shake.

"More like foolish," she mumbled.

Now that her anger was subsiding, she was starting to feel how stupid it had been to insult one of the ton's darlings.

"More like brave," the Duke corrected.

No one had ever called Cassandra brave in her whole life, and she didn't know what to say. But the Duke didn't require a response.

He leaned in so that his lips were near her ear and murmured, "And exceedingly inappropriate."

The words sent a shiver up her spine, and when she looked into his eyes, they were glowing with admiration.

After a moment or two, his face sobered, and he once more became the model of propriety and gentlemanly behavior for which he was known.

? "Come," he said, offering her his arm, "let me escort you back to your friends."

Cassandra allowed herself to be steered by the Duke. As they passed the lords and ladies of the ton, she couldn't help but notice the envious, covetous glances that were shot in her direction. It was surreal, and she couldn't quite wrap her mind around it—she had danced with the most eligible bachelor in England. People were jealous of her!

But as they approached her friends, Cassandra didn't feel superior or as if she had won some sort of prize. She merely felt grateful for how kind the Duke had been. It wasn't often that handsome dukes took pity on wallflowers on their way towards spinsterhood, like her, and took them to the dance floor. It was even rarer for them to share private, inside jokes about their wicked behavior.

Just before they reached the group, the Duke stopped and bowed low. "Thank you again for the dance, Lady Cassandra," he murmured, and he kissed her hand so gently that she felt her heart flutter. His gray eyes flicked up to hers. "And for the laugh. I needed that."

Then he was gone, and in a half-dazed state, Cassandra rejoined her friends.

“How was the dance?” Samantha asked the moment she rejoined the group.

Cassandra shook her head. “I’ve never been the envy of so many young ladies before. It was a new experience, to say the least.”

“My brother’s dance partners always elicit envy,” Lady Cherie commented. She was watching Cassandra with a tense expression on her face. “And it is not only because he is titled and wealthy. My brother is also a kind, generous person.”

“I was left with the same impression,” Cassandra admitted, smiling slightly. “Any woman would be lucky to have him.”

“Which makes Lady Natalie’s betrayal even more astonishing,” Samantha said darkly. “I cannot believe she threw away the Duke of Vaston!”

“While I am happy that harpy is no longer marrying my brother, I am sorry for myself that he is unattached again,” Lady Cherie sighed. “Before his engagement, and now after, many women have befriended me in order to win his affection. It has been very difficult to discover that so many of my so-called friends were only interested in my friendship if it could benefit them.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” Cassandra said, aghast. “That must have been horrible.”

“Thank you.” Lady Cherie’s expression softened. “I don’t mean to sound bitter. Perhaps if I had suitors of my own, then I wouldn’t resent ladies using me to get to my brother. But as it is... my friendships are all I have.”

Her voice had become choked, and her eyes filled with tears.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered as a single tear rolled down her cheek. “It’s just that it’s the end of another ball, and once more I still have not been asked to dance.”

“It’s not just you,” Lady Samantha said quickly, pulling her dance card from her reticule. “My dance card is also empty.”

“As is mine,” Lady Minerva added gravely. “Although for this, I am grateful.”

“If your brother hadn’t asked me to dance, mine would be as well,” Cassandra said.

The four women looked at each other, and Cassandra felt a surge of affection for these old and new friends. They were all alike, all wallflowers.

“How did this happen to us?” Samantha demanded. “We are all attractive, accomplished young ladies. We should have gentlemen falling over themselves to ask us to dance!”

“Well, I know why I’m a wallflower,” Lady Cherie said. “I had many suitors at first, but I rejected them all, and now no one will approach me. But I was right to be so picky. Among the fortune hunters who came after me was Lord Gregson, who is fifty and wanted to use me as a breeding mare!”

“Well, everyone knows that I am unmarriageable after I outsmarted the man my father wanted me to marry,” Lady Minerva said, a satisfied smirk on her lips.

“Why would that make you a wallflower?” Cassandra asked curiously.

Lady Minerva’s smirk widened. “I did it in front of the entire ton at a luncheon.”

All the ladies laughed, and then Samantha said, “Well, I would rather be alone with any of the men I’ve met so far, so I suppose I am a wallflower by choice.”

They all looked at Cassandra, who flushed but took a steadying breath. If her friends were going to be open about why they were wallflowers, then she would be open as well.

“I suppose I’m a wallflower because I have no confidence,” she admitted quietly, looking down at the floor. “My sister got the looks, charm, and wit, and I got the clumsiness.”

No one said anything for a moment, then Lady Cherie looped her arm through hers.

“If you don’t feel confident, then we will be confident for you,” she declared, which made Cassandra laugh. “We will shout your many accomplishments from the rooftops until all the gentlemen of London are wildly in love with you.”

“That’s it!” Samantha said, and they all looked at her. She had an excited look on her face. “We should help one another find husbands! Defy Society’s expectations about us and show them that wallflowers can find good matches.”

Cassandra wanted to object, to say that she was far too shy for such a plan, but before she could, Lady Minerva chimed in, “That will be a very amusing experiment. I’m in.”

“So am I,” Lady Cherie said, and Cassandra was happy to see that there were no more tears in her eyes. She looked at Cassandra. “Are you, Cassie?”

No one had ever given Cassandra a nickname before. She turned the name over in her mind, weighing it, testing it out. Cassie. It fit. Cassie was the name of the kind of woman who asked inappropriate questions and had a group of friends who helped each other find husbands.

She nodded and grinned. “Alright, I’m in. But we must promise not to go after the same man or let a man come between us.”

“Yes,” Lady Minerva agreed. “Or to abandon one another once we are married.”

“And...” Lady Cherie hesitated. “I’d also like to ask that no one go after my brother.

Otherwise, it will feel like before, when my friends were simply using me. And it's not just about my feelings. Aidan might act like he's over it, but I know he's still fragile after the end of his engagement with Lady Natalie. He needs time to heal."

"Of course, we promise," Cassandra said, and while she meant it, there was still a strange hollow feeling in her stomach that she didn't quite understand. "Anyway, who would want to go after someone who still has feelings for someone else?"

"Well, of course, none of you could ever attract a man like the Duke of Vaston," a snide voice declared from the shadows.

The four ladies whipped around to see Lady Natalie emerging from behind a column.

Cassandra barely had time to wonder why Lady Natalie was always sneaking up on people when she said, with an amused expression on her face, "After all, you're all unaccomplished, ill-received wallflowers. Especially you, Lady Cassandra."

Lady Natalie's eyes glittered as they came to rest on Cassandra, who felt her heart begin to pound very painfully in her chest.

"You are far too fat, clumsy, and utterly unsuitable for a man like that."

"Leave her alone," Samantha snapped at once, her voice rising to an entirely unladylike pitch. "Cassandra is far more accomplished, kind, and worthy of a great match than you will ever be!"

"Such empty words," Lady Natalie sneered, "coming from another spinster."

"Haven't you done enough damage already, Lady Natalie?" Lady Cherie snarled. "Leave me and my friends alone. And while you're at it, leave my brother alone."

Lady Natalie shrugged. "I don't take orders from you. I can talk to whomever I want

and go wherever I want.”

“Well then, so can we,” Lady Minerva declared. “Come, ladies, let us leave this viper.”

And the four of them turned and strode away from Lady Natalie until she was lost to them in the crowd of people.

But despite the physical distance, Cassandra couldn’t shake Lady Natalie’s words.

For the rest of the night, her friends reassured her again and again that nothing Lady Natalie had said was true. Each time, Cassandra smiled and pretended that she believed them. But deep down, she knew Lady Natalie was right—she would never be worthy of a handsome, charming gentleman like the Duke of Vaston.