

Prologue

“Where have you been?” Marcus Wellston hissed.

“Trying to find some place private—my stomach hurts.” John Swenton pushed past his friend to take his seat. “Besides, what does it matter? We’ve been here for three days, and Mir has made one appearance,” he grumbled.

Wellston nodded his head toward the other table. “Well, things are about to change.”

Swenton shot a quick glance to where his friend indicated. “Please tell me Fowler isn’t going to do what I think he is.”

The third son of the Earl of Berwick groaned as he pretended to stretch, actually reaching for the pocket pistol he carried under his shirt. “It’s Fowler. You know how he is. He’s been watching that girl’s tent for over a day.”

“Damn!” Swenton cursed under his breath. “Fowler will ruin everything.”

The words no more escaped Swenton’s mouth than Brantley Fowler stood and casually walked toward the tent’s opening. Just as predictably, one of Mir’s men stepped into the Brit’s path. Wellston’s heart lurched in anticipation. They’d fight again. Within seconds, chaos reigned. Fowler raised his hands, pretending to accept the Baloch’s silent warning, and then the future Duke of Thornhill struck the warrior guard with an uppercut, sending the soldier reeling backwards, blood pouring from the man’s nose.

Wellston shot the Baloch charging toward them in the knee, incapacitating the guard, and then he turned his attention to finishing off one of the two who double-teamed Swenton. Pulling a dagger from his boot, he attacked a dark-skinned warrior, quickly bringing the man down.

The next wave of Balochs streamed through the opening as Fowler elbowed his way towards the girl’s tent. Wellston wondered from where this obsession to save the world had come. Fowler always put himself in danger to save every abused woman he’d encountered. Fowler, the would-be knight in shining armor, never learned the lesson Marcus learned long ago: Saving others didn’t make the pain go away.

“Now!” James Kerrington, Viscount Worthing, barked, and the Realm members responded in kind. Wellston delivered a lethal thrust to the throat of the man with whom he now tussled, leaving the guard gasping for air.

Joining the others, he raced toward the waiting horses. Out of his eye’s corner, Marcus saw Fowler ride off with the girl cradled before him. Wellston caught the reins of his horse, running along beside the animal before he could catch the saddle horn and physically pull himself onto the horse’s back. Settling his feet into the stirrups, Wellston kicked the horse’s flanks and galloped away from the scene. They’d meet again in three days at the Bombay safe house. As the pounding ride beat at his body, Marcus prayed that some day, he’d find his own salvation.

Chapter 1

Six Years Later

The rain sheeted everything within sight, but Marcus rode on. The creek bed he followed into the Scottish backcountry swelled from the downpour, but he had crossed it at its lowest point and was on safe ground. He had returned from Calcutta nearly two months earlier, having turned over the Sir Louis Levering affair to Viscount Lexford, Aidan Kimbolt, and he had settled into the routine of running his estate and tending to Trevor, but Shepherd had sent word of Velvet Aldridge's possible abduction, and he had left immediately. Evidently, His Grace, the Duke of Thornhill, had allowed the woman he loved to retreat to Edinburgh with her estranged family. Now, their old enemy Shaheed Mir targeted Miss Aldridge in a dangerous game of "Who Has the Emerald?"

Shepherd's message said that he'd send back up, but Marcus knew he was pretty much on his own. That was why he'd set a course across the back roads: He could save time, and he could avoid detection. He'd stopped for a few hours overnight to allow his horse to rest, but Marcus felt he could thwart Murhad Jamot's plans just the same. So, when he cut across the open field leading to Viscount Averette's land, Marcus expected to have to explain his sudden appearance to the sometimes-difficult Samuel Aldridge, but nothing he found met his expectations.

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"Aunt," Cashémere Aldridge called as she entered the room. "Have we any news of Uncle Samuel?" The household staff rushed about, trying to respond to an unknown crisis, and with no one to assume responsibility, they crisscrossed the open foyer accomplishing very little.

Alice Aldridge rocked her daughter Gwendolyn, neither having had much sleep over night. They waited for news of the family patriarch, who chased his niece across southern Scotland.

Viscount Averette had known the affection with which Velvet held Brantley Fowler, often professing that she'd loved the duke from the time they were children together. Naturally, observing her despondency at being separated from Fowler, the viscount assumed Velvet had done the unthinkable: She'd risked her life on the road to return to England. He even suspected that the duke had arranged some sort of tryst, and Averette had departed immediately to intercept the girl. He'd been gone since early yesterday afternoon.

Lady Averette glanced up from her child to give her husband's niece a brief shake of her head, but she said for the child's benefit of the child, "We shouldn't expect to hear from my husband for several days. He must follow each lead on your sister. I'm certain the rain has slowed his progress, and that's why we've heard nothing of yet."

A sharp knock at the door brought their immediate attention. "Possibly there's a message now," Cashé remarked as she stepped into the foyer. She couldn't condone her sister's actions, but Cashé knew the depth of Velvet's misery. She'd seen Velvet pine for Thornhill, and how her older sister discouraged the many suitors their uncle paraded before her. Yet, Cashé believed her uncle's actions correct: A woman's virtue was her crowning glory, and she must protect it. The duke had led Velvet astray, and then he had deserted her. In the three months Velvet had resided with them, her sister hadn't heard one word from Thornhill. He'd ignored Velvet's weekly letters, and now her sister might lose her reputation unless their uncle could stop her.

Blane hustled to answer the door. He swung it wide, expecting a messenger or even the viscount himself, but instead found a stranger. "Yes, Sir?"

An autocratic voice announced, "The Earl of Berwick to speak to Viscount Averette."

The butler stammered, "His . . . His Lordship is unavailable, Sir."

The voice pressed, "It's a matter of great importance."

Blane motioned the earl in from the rain. "I offer my apologies, Sir," the man began, but Cashé interrupted.

"Your Lordship," she rushed forward, "please come in, Sir." She wondered what brought the earl to their doorstep.

Berwick quickly dispensed with his hat and greatcoat before offering her a quick bow.

"Miss Cashémere, might I speak to your uncle?"

"As Blane just explained, Your Lordship, my uncle is away at the moment. Please join my aunt and me in the drawing room, and maybe we might be able to address the reason for this unexpected visit." Cashé turned immediately on her heels, expecting him to follow her. She'd not allow him time to protest. It pleased her that he'd trailed along behind her. She'd not seen Berwick since the day after Prinny's party. They'd celebrated Sir Louis Levering's downfall over supper at Briar House. Cashé thought she'd might learn from the earl more of Lord Lexford. With her family's quick retreat to Scotland, she'd not had the opportunity to say a proper farewell to the man.

"Aunt," Cashé called, obviously nervous, "the Earl of Berwick has come to pay his compliments." She rushed forward to take Gwendolyn from the woman. "Let Edana put our dear Gwen to bed for awhile." She lifted the child to her. "Excuse me, my Lord. My young cousin had a rough evening." She handed off the sleeping child to a waiting maid, before closing the door behind him.

Lady Averette belatedly stood to greet Wellston, who remained stolidly by the door.

"Your Lordship," the woman gestured Marcus forward, "please come join us. I apologize for my husband's absence."

Wellston glanced about the room, obviously unsure how to handle the situation. The man crossed to the chair her aunt had indicated. "Might I ask, Ma'am, when His Lordship will return. I've urgent business."

The viscountess shot a quick glance at Cashé. Her aunt had depended on Uncle Samuel in social situations; she knew not how to respond. Therefore, Cashé answered instead. "It may be some time, Your Lordship."

"Then might I speak with Miss Aldridge? My business concerns your sister."

Cashé stood behind her aunt, resting her hands on the back of the chair. "That too is impossible, Your Lordship." She smiled politely at the man.

"Miss Cashémere," Marcus beseeched, "I have been sent to Scotland to offer your sister my . . ."

Cashé cut him off. "We're quite aware of why you've been sent to our home!"

Berwick looked aghast. "And why might that be?" he asked incredulously.

"You're an intimate friend of the Duke of Thornhill," she asserted.

"I am," he hissed. "Yet, even with that . . ."

Again, Cashé interrupted. "My uncle will foil Thornhill's plans and save my sister."

"Cashémere!" her aunt warned.

The girl's words had brought Marcus to his feet. He advanced on her. "You need to explain," he demanded.

"You're in my home, Sir. I don't have to obey you." Her hands fisted at her waist.

Marcus loomed over the girl. From behind him, Lady Averette gasped, but he had no time to practice his manners. "You'll do as I say if you wish to guard your sister's safety. I'm here to protect Miss Aldridge." According to Shepherd's information, Jamot planned his attack for today.

"You're here at the duke's bequest, but you're too late!" she charged.

Marcus's temper flamed. "What do you mean 'too late'?"

Cashé raised her chin in defiance. "As if you didn't know, my Lord."

Marcus thought of turning her over his knee to teach the girl about respect, but he'd no time. He caught Cashé by the arm and dragged her to a nearby chair, shoving her to a seated position. He saw Lady Averette take a step toward the bell cord, but he stayed her with a deathly stare. He seethed with anger. "Now, Miss Cashémere, you'll answer my questions."

The girl rubbed her arm where he grabbed her. "I'll do no such thing!" she declared.

Marcus glanced at the cowering viscountess. "I'm certain your aunt will see things differently." He strode angrily toward the woman, but before he took three steps, the girl jumped onto his back and began to kick and punch.

Marcus's hands protected his face as she swung indiscriminately, landing blows along his chin and ears. "Bloody hell!" he cursed, catching the girl's arms and whipping her before him and effectively clamping the girl's arms to her side. She plastered his chest with her warmth, although she still tried to kick him. He finally shoved her into a second chair. "Stay!" he growled, pointing his finger at her as if she were a dog.

His roughness brought tears to the girl's eyes, but she started to attack him again; however, her aunt stepped before her niece, effectively cutting off the exchange. "What is it you want, my Lord?" Lady Averette spoke softly.

Marcus glared at Miss Cashé, before taking a stilling breath. "Could you please explain, Viscountess, where I might find your husband or Miss Aldridge?"

The woman turned first to Cashé, indicating the girl should sit. "Neither my husband's niece or I know the answer to that question," Lady Averette said calmly.

Marcus thought this the most bizarre mission Shepherd had ever assigned him. He ran his fingers through his hair. Taking another calming breath, he said, "What might you tell me, Ma'am? I give you my word as a gentleman . . ." He heard the girl snort, and Marcus leveled a warning glare on her before he continued. "As a gentleman . . . that it's not my intention to bring shame upon your household."

The viscountess again motioned Marcus to a chair. She sat beside Cashé, taking the girl's hand. "Are you telling us, Your Lordship, that the Duke of Thornhill didn't send you to Edinburgh?"

Marcus wondered how much he might honestly share with Averette's family, but these were also Fowler's family so he tried for a version of the truth. "Although His Grace now knows of my mission to your home, I didn't come at his bidding."

"Then who sent you?" the girl demanded before her aunt placed a calming hand on Cashé's sleeve.

"That I'm not at liberty to say, Miss Cashémere, but I'll tell you that I received word that a former enemy of the men you met at Briar House after the Prince's party had planned to exact

revenge on Fowler by hurting your older sister. As I live in Northumberland, I was dispatched to intercept the attack.”

The viscountess’s hands trembled. “Velvet didn’t leave to meet His Grace?”

Marcus quickly put together what she said. “Miss Aldridge left this house?”

“Yes.” The woman whispered.

“When?” The word exploded in the room.

“Yesterday morning.”

“Oh, my God!” Marcus was on his feet and pacing. “Tell me the rest.”

The viscountess reluctantly obliged. “A servant observed my husband’s niece in the orchard. The man went on about his duties, but within a quarter hour, he saw a carriage racing from the area. When Gillis reported what he’d seen to my Samuel, we conducted a search. Unfortunately, we weren’t successful in locating our niece. My husband, Sir, believes his family has left our home to meet Thornhill. He gives chase.”

Marcus had heard from Carter Lowery how distraught Fowler had been at Miss Aldridge’s departure, but he knew Bran would never lure Velvet from her uncle’s home. Fowler might “storm the castle,” so to speak, to claim the woman he loved, but he’d never set up a secret betrayal. It wasn’t Fowler’s style. “Lord Averette won’t find your niece with His Grace.”

“How can you be so sure, Your Lordship?” Miss Cashé charged.

“Because Shaheed Mir has other plans for your sister.”

“Such as?” she demanded, but a slight shake of his head said she’d not want to know.

Before he could say more, she stood before him. “You have to help her,” she asserted.

Marcus wanted to remind her that was why he’d ridden all night through a rainstorm. She stated the obvious. “We must determine whether Mir’s agents have your sister. Have either of you noticed strangers in the area?”

“We ran a foreigner from the stable,” Lady Averette shared.

“When was that?”

“A week or so ago. He claimed to be seeking work. Samuel didn’t like his looks so he sent the man packing.”

The girl caught Marcus’s arm. “A dark man followed Velvet and me when we shopped two days ago. We noticed because he asked Edana if he might buy her a butter tart. When she refused, he continued to ask about the household.”

“Damn!” Marcus grumbled.

“Your Lordship, I must insist that you not curse in my uncle’s house,” Miss Cashé reprimanded.

Marcus blinked in confusion, unaware he’d uttered an expletive before a lady. “I apologize, Miss Cashémere.” He walked away toward the window, taking up a position to see the gardens. “Did you see this man?”

“No, Sir, but we might bring in Edana to describe him.”

Marcus considered it, but he suspected it would be a waste of time. “I’m assuming that Miss Aldridge had at least a two-hour head start on Lord Averette,” he said to the expanse before the house.

“Closer to three,” Lady Averette shared.

“So, we’re not certain whether His Lordship actually followed Miss Aldridge.”

Miss Cashé asked, “What do you mean, Sir?”

Marcus turned to look at her. "My informant says that Mir's man plans to go to Liverpool and wait for a ship. Could Lord Averette have known that? I'm certain the rain will eliminate any chance of his actually following the coach in which the man has Miss Aldridge."

"I doubt it." The girl appeared very nervous.

"Explain." Marcus waited for more information.

Cashé looked about sheepishly. "I heard Uncle Samuel order his driver to set a course for Derbyshire. My uncle assumed that the duke would lure Velvet to Eleanor's home at Linton Park. It wouldn't be that long of a journey—not like going all the way to Kent, and Uncle realized Viscount Worthing and Eleanor would be happy to give both Velvet and Fowler refuge."

"So, your uncle chases his prejudice while your sister is in real danger?" Marcus couldn't resist this bit of censure.

"My uncle protects my sister!" she defended the man.

"Actually, Miss Cashémere, I suspect His Grace, as well as several other of our acquaintances protect Miss Aldridge."

"I thought you said His Grace had nothing to do with your being here!" Again, the girl was on the offensive.

"*I said,*" he emphasized the words, "that His Grace knew nothing of this when I began my journey, but I'm certain he's received notification; and knowing Thornhill's affection for your sister, he must be on his way to Liverpool."

Miss Cashé looked to her aunt for confirmation. "Then we must find my uncle and see him to Liverpool as well."

"Surely, you jest, Miss Cashémere?"

Again, her fists came to her waist. "I do not, Your Lordship! We must find my sister before His Grace can ruin her."

"Miss Cashémere," Marcus mocked, "your sister's reputation is already ruined: She travels alone with a foreigner. However, it's her life of which you should be concerned."

Lady Averette finally reacted. "But if Samuel can aid in Velvet's release, we might still hush up her absence. No one knows other than our servants, and they're a loyal lot." Marcus doubted that the Averettes could control the gossip, but he kept his opinions to himself. "We'll spread the rumor that Samuel and his niece have traveled to Derby because Lady Worthing has taken ill. If my husband can return with Velvet, no one will be the wiser. Lord Averette is most concerned for propriety."

"I could go," Cashé declared. "I could go after Uncle Samuel."

Lady Averette reached for the girl. "It's a great responsibility."

"We'll tell everyone that the earl came to escort me to Linton Park. Lady Eleanor, obviously, is my family also."

Marcus suddenly realized what they planned. "I beg your pardon. I must follow Miss Aldridge's trail."

"Then I'll go alone," Cashé declared.

"Miss Cashémere, that's foolish. The roads are too dangerous for a woman alone."

"We can trust no one else, Your Lordship." Lady Averette turned her eyes on him in supplication. "If we're to save Velvet's reputation, my husband must be involved."

Marcus realized their determination. "Then I'll go after Lord Averette."

Miss Cashé stood before him, her damnable chin lifting again. "Uncle Samuel will never believe you. He's aware of your relationship with His Grace. You must take me if you expect him to accept your words."

Wellston wished he could curse again. The exclamations seemed to clear his thinking when he felt the frustrations. He tried to analyze what he might achieve if he went toward Liverpool first. Miss Aldridge and Murhad Jamot had, at least, a four and twenty hour advantage. “Might Lord Averette have access to his bank if we must ransom Miss Aldridge?” he asked.

“I’ll give my niece a blank draft to take to her uncle,” Lady Averette assured him.

“Might your maid accompany us?” he needed to clarify what he should expect.

“I’ll take Edana with me,” Cashé declared.

“I go,” Lady Averette excused herself, “but Gwendolyn would be devastated. Plus, we must keep up appearances.” Marcus didn’t understand that type of attitude. He’d give away every thread of propriety to have Maggie back. He’d stare down society for the pleasure of Maggie’s laugh.

Marcus now planned their departure. “We must be on the road immediately. We’ve much time to make up. Is there a coach the ladies might use or should I see to renting one?”

“You may take my husband’s small coach,” Lady Averette declared. “We’ve another that the servants might use if we need supplies or for emergencies.”

“And a driver?” Marcus pressed.

“I’ll see to it, Your Lordship.” Lady Averette caught her niece’s hand. “You must hurry, my Dear. I’ll send up the maids to help you pack.”

Cashé started for the door. “Miss Cashémere,” the earl called, “do you recall what your sister wore yesterday?”

“A light blue gown.”

“Are you certain.”

“Absolutely, my Lord.”

Marcus nodded. “Might you bring an item belonging to Miss Aldridge among your things? If we must use the hounds, it would be helpful if we need to track your sister.”

Thankfully, the girl acknowledged the sensibility of what he’d said before excusing herself. “I’ll see to my horse and assure myself of the coach’s soundness. I hope to use some of the back roads to save time.”

“I understand, Your Lordship.” Lady Averette led him to the door. “We’ll be ready within the hour.”

The rain had stopped, but the earlier downpour washed away some of the trails he might have chosen, but Marcus figured they could reach the border by nightfall. He’d hoped by using the lesser-traveled roads that they could make up a half day or more on Lord Averette’s pursuit. Marcus had traveled this part of Scotland many times in his youth, although he was admittedly often inebriated and traveling with a pack of rabble-rousers. He’d tried to kill the pain of losing Maggie, but Shepherd had pulled him from that life and slammed him smack into the middle of political intrigue. Thank God for Shepherd’s insights. Otherwise, Marcus would be dead, and there would be no one to see to Trevor.

“Your Lordship,” Miss Cashé’s head appeared at the coach’s window, “when might we be stopping?”

Marcus maneuvered his horse closer to the carriage. “At dark, Miss Cashé.”

“Could we not stop earlier?” She snarled her nose as she glanced at her maid. “Edana is not feeling well.”

Marcus ducked his head to see inside the coach. The maid appeared embarrassed by the attention, but he noted no discomfort on the woman’s face. “There’ll be no place to stay before

then.” He directed his statement to Cashémere, who, obviously, placed her own discomfort on the maid. “Hopefully, your maid will be able to withstand the rough road a bit longer.”

“Your Lordship, I insist,” she began, but a glare from Marcus stopped her short.

“When it’s safe, Miss Cashé, we’ll stop and not before then.” Marcus nudged the horse ahead, ignoring her orders. He wasn’t often rude to anyone, but something about this girl set against his nature. His friend Aidan Kimbolt, Lord Lexford, affected Cashémere Aldridge. The viscount had been absolutely intolerable after Miss Cashé’s withdrawal from London. On the Calcutta trip, Kimbolt snapped at everyone and was often angry for no reason, but Marcus couldn’t see it. She was pretty enough—coal black, silky hair and mesmerizing emerald eyes, but she ruined every kind thought with her shrewish tongue. He certainly wasn’t about to take orders from some immature chit.

Cashé watched him ride away; she found the Earl of Berwick to be the most infuriating of men—his rudeness irritated her beyond belief. However, she couldn’t forget his body’s heat when he caught her before him or his strength when he clasped her arms to her side. His strong, muscular arms had held her tightly in place, and Cashé still flushed with the remembrance of her back pressed against his chest.

She couldn’t help but notice his dark, deep-set eyes or his aristocratic nose nor his powerful chin line. He resembled a Roman orator; she could easily picture the earl in a toga and addressing the Roman Senate, but those thoughts brought on images of an improperly clad Marcus Wellston, and that bothered her more than she understood.

Never once had Cashé had such a thought. In fact, her Uncle Samuel would’ve had her doing some sort of penitence if he knew. So, Cashé tried to force her musings away, but each time she’d turned her head to glance out the window at the countryside, she’d see Berwick and be reminded of her errant thoughts, or she’d not see him and be reminded.

Cashé had only accepted the attentions of two men in her life: Lachlan Charters and Aidan Kimbolt. Charters, her uncle’s preference as a suitor, had called often at The Ridge to sit with her. Everyone assumed Charters would make his intentions known when she turned nineteen in four months. If Uncle Samuel and the church approved, they’d marry before she reached her twentieth birthday. Charters was nearly twice Cashé’s age, having lost his first wife some four years prior. She’d have a ready-made family as Charters had two children.

The man certainly didn’t possess either the earl’s or Lord Lexford’s physique, but Charters was a pleasant-enough looking man, and, more importantly, Charters was a leader in their parish. Cashé had thought it best to choose someone with the same religious beliefs.

When she’d traveled to London in the late spring, Cashé had met the earl’s friend Viscount Lexford. The viscount, like the earl, held a previous acquaintance with both her cousin Brantley Fowler and with Eleanor’s husband, Lord Worthing. Uncle Samuel didn’t totally approve of her keeping company with the viscount, but her aunt had convinced him that Cashé would be more willing to choose Charters if she’d an opportunity to enjoy other men’s attentions. Besides, they’d chaperoned her every encounter with Lexford. Only once, at the infamous Vauxhall Gardens, had she come close to being alone with the main, if one can consider himself alone in a crowd.

And although Cashé had found Lord Lexford exceedingly handsome, she’d never once pictured the viscount as anything more than what she had Charters. She’d missed the viscount’s company when her family suddenly left London to bring Velvet to Edinburgh, but, in reality, Cashé realized she’d missed the excitement of the London Season more than she had the

viscount—a fact she couldn't share with anyone. The viscount's coffee brown eyes didn't have the smoldering passion she observed in the earl's slate gray ones.

The small carriage rolled into the hard-earthen drive before The Square Bow Inn on the British side of the border. The yard was well on its way to being full, probably because of the storm, which had moved from north to south. Berwick had dismounted and had come to open the carriage door to help her and her maid to the ground. "It might be best," The earl whispered close to her ear, "if we register as brother and sister. Even with your maid in tow, it would be unseemly of us to travel together."

Cashé's eyes grew in size. "I'm not of the habit of offering an untruth, Your Lordship," she hissed.

He casually adjusted the angle of her bonnet, and Cashé felt the air rush from her lungs. He murmured, "I understand, Miss Cashémere; yet, I only make the suggestion to protect you."

Cashé searched his countenance for the truth of what he said. Finally, she reached to straighten his cravat. It was an intimate moment, although she told herself it was all for show. "I'll agree to being your cousin, Your Lordship."

The earl smiled deviously. "Yardley."

"I beg your pardon?" Cashé glanced to where Edana waited for her.

He leaned closer—assuring others couldn't hear. "My cousin would know my name. I'm Marcus Wellston, Lord Yardley."

Cashé ducked her head in embarrassment. "Of course." She bit her bottom lip. "Thank you, Lord Yardley."

He placed her hand on his arm and led her into the inn. Recognizing quality, the innkeeper rushed forward. "Yes, Sir."

"My cousin and I need rooms for the evening." She observed how Lord Yardley's eyes surveyed the common room. She supposed that he searched for acquaintances.

"I've only two small rooms available, Your Lordship. I'll be happy to serve you, but I must warn you one is off the kitchen and is a bit noisy." The innkeeper smiled a toothless grin.

"Yardley, this is unacceptable," Cashé began, but he recognized the difference in her tone from when she chastised him. "I cannot sleep off the kitchen, and I certainly cannot condone the Earl of Berwick doing so."

The innkeeper dropped his smile. "The Earl of Berwick? My Lord, I'll personally see to your accommodations. We'll make the necessary adjustments. Might you and your cousin step into the private room? I'll send in some of my wife's best while I have my man bring in your trunks. There are two other gentlemen in the parlor, but I'm certain they'd welcome your company."

"Thank you. My *cousin* and I appreciate your solicitous service."

He returned her hand to his sleeve, and her heart skipped several beats. "I thought you refused to twist the truth," he mocked.

"I didn't offer a prevarication," she declared. "I said I couldn't condone my sleeping in such a room nor would I see you do so. If the innkeeper read something into my words, then that isn't my fault."

The earl laughed. "I suppose it isn't." He held the door for her, and they stepped into the shadows. Before her eyes could adjust to the darkened room, someone called out, "Wellston!"

Chapter 2

Marcus's head snapped around, searching for the source of the sound when his eyes fell on Lucas Sampson, a former colleague. Marcus strode toward the man, leaving Cashé by the door. "Sampson!" he slapped his former friend on the back and shook his hand rather than to offer a proper bow. "My God, Man, it must've been nearly eight years!"

Sampson gave Marcus a shy grin. "More than that. One day we were riding Northumberland's back roads, reeking havoc, and the next you were gone, with no word to anyone."

Marcus ignored the probe into his past. "It was time to do something besides carouse with you," he mocked, trying to divert the man's attention.

Sampson took on a serious mien. "I was sorry to hear of your father's passing."

Marcus glanced away as if seeing something the others did not. "His Lordship expected as much. The earl planned for all contingencies."

"And you've assumed the title?" Sampson joined Marcus where Cashé waited a bit impatiently.

"I serve as Trevor's regent." Again, Marcus declined making additional comments.

Sampson now stood before Cashémere. "Would you care to introduce me, Wellston?" Marcus didn't appreciate Sampson's close assessment of Miss Cashé's ample bust line. His fists tightened in response.

Marcus quickly noted his former friend's interest and easily interpreted Sampson's assumption that Marcus planned an assignation. "Lucas Sampson, may I present my cousin, Miss Aldridge." He possessively returned Cashé to his arm, conveying his protection of the girl.

Sampson smiled cheekily. "I never knew you possessed such attractive relatives, Wellston." The bouncer bowed properly to Cashé before giving Marcus a knowing look.

Marcus realized the man still thought Cashé might be his mistress or a local girl upon whom he practiced an affair. To allay Sampson saying something inappropriate, Marcus shared, "My cousin's family has been summoned to Linton Park. Unfortunately, her uncle with whom she resides was unable to accompany her; therefore, I've taken on the task." Marcus liked the way he'd worded the remark; except for the cousin part, he'd told the truth. It was very much as it had been earlier with Miss Cashémere.

Sampson stammered, assuming Marcus spoke the whole truth. "Linton . . . Linton Park? You're related to Linworth, Miss Aldridge?" His lecherous gaze switched to respectability.

Cashé had carefully observed the spoken and the unspoken interplay between Berwick and his friend. The earl hadn't approved of Mr. Sampson's tone any more than did she. She easily recognized Yardley's reproach; Cashé had heard it directed toward her several times earlier today. "Yes, Mr. Sampson. Lady Worthing's mother and mine were first cousins. My older sister resided with Thornhill after our parents' untimely deaths." She raised her chin defiantly, daring the man to question her further.

It was one of the few times that day that Marcus had admired the girl. She'd effectively placed Sampson in his social strata by mentioning both the earldom and the dukedom in her explanation. Cashé Aldridge had announced quite clearly that she held powerful connections. Marcus took pleasure in seeing Sampson take a step backwards, literally, increasing his distance between himself and the girl.

“Then I did hear correctly,” Sampson spoke again to Marcus, “that Lord Worthing took the Thornhill daughter for his wife?”

“You did.”

“Did you not serve with both men?” Sampson kept probing. “I’d heard you served together in the East.”

The continual questioning began to wear thin on Marcus. “It appears, Sampson, that you have an excellent source of information. If only the British government had had such connections during the war, we could’ve shortened the struggle by several years.” Before the man could respond, Marcus brought the conversation to an end. “You’ll excuse us, Sampson. My cousin and I are quite famished, and the innkeeper has brought us our meal.”

“Of course, Wellston.” Former friends were no longer equals so the man bowed out.

The lady accepted the seat to which Marcus guided her. “I apologize, Lord Yardley, if my presence keeps you from your friends,” she whispered as he bent to adjust her chair.

“Believe me, Miss Cashémere, it’s of no significance.” He glanced to where Sampson rejoined his companion. “I chose to leave behind what Mr. Sampson regards as important. I’ve no regrets.”

She nodded her agreement. “At least, we didn’t tell the innkeeper that we were siblings. I assume Mr. Sampson knows your family. I heard him mention your father. I was unaware of your loss.”

Marcus stiffened. A very private man, he swallowed his comment. “My father was ill for some time.”

“But it was only a few months since his passing. Surely you must still be grieving,” she declared.

Marcus bit back his instant anger. The girl had no idea of what his life consisted before the earl died. “How I honor the earl’s passing is my own accord.”

She helped herself to some of the shepherd’s pie. “Yet, you don’t wear a black armband.”

“The earl is aware of my breaking with propriety.” Marcus took a piece of bread and some cheese.

She characteristically put down her spoon with a huff. “You’re the earl, Lord Yardley,” she insisted.

“I’m a minor son, Miss Cashémere, and I’m a fake.”

She began to protest, but one of his deadly stares stopped her cold. Cashé didn’t understand, but it really made little difference. After they reached Linton Park, she’d never see him again so trying to solve this irascible man’s mystery seemed an effort in futility. Instead, she concentrated on the meal and on making plans to find her Uncle Samuel. She’d not end the evening the way the day had started with an argument with Lord Yardley.

Within an hour, Edana helped her to undress in the larger of the two rooms assigned to them for the evening. Earlier, she’d looked on as Lord Yardley had hired a man to ride to his estate and to bring back a small trunk. His Lordship had brought little with him and would need a change of clothes if they were to travel far. She noted that he paid the man very well to ride through the night. From what she could surmise, if they’d hugged the eastern coastline, they would’ve come across his estate shortly after entering into England, but they’d traveled west across the central border counties toward Harwick to save time.

Observing him carefully, it had amazed her how efficient Yardley appeared when he’d organized things, but how impersonal he became in his social interactions. The man didn’t even

openly grieve for his own father. Cashé couldn't comprehend such a thing. She'd give anything to have had her parents until she'd reached Yardley's age—an additional five and twenty years with her parents. She'd grieve for them, not as she did at age three when all she did was cleave to her grandmother's skirt tail and cry. Not only had she lost her parents, Cashé had also lost her sisters in one fell swoop. Satiné had gone to Uncle Charles in Cheshire and Velvet to the Fowlers. They'd both thrived in their respective households. They'd left her all alone to learn to survive in a home where love had taken a permanent holiday.

Although Cashé always assumed Lady Averette had loved her, if for no other reason but the fact that she was Edward Aldridge's daughter, her paternal grandmother hadn't believed in showing affection. Cashé's grandmother had loved her eldest son to distraction. Kentigerna Aldridge lived up to her name. *Kentigerna* means "ruler" or "great lord," and Cashé had experienced how the woman had *ruled* her household with an iron hand. Even Uncle Samuel had suffered under Kentigerna's reign; he hadn't married Aunt Alice until after his mother's passing. Cashé always assumed her uncle hadn't wished to subject anyone else to Lady Averette's bitterness. Yet, however hard the woman, Cashé had spent a year wearing black in remembrance. She'd grieved for a woman who never once showed her love, while Yardley had offered no such honor for a man he obviously respected. She couldn't conceive of such stubbornness!

Marcus attended to his own ablutions, but that wasn't what had upset him this evening. Being reminded by both Sampson and the girl of how he'd stumbled into the earldom did not set well with him. Every day at Tweed Hall reminded him of how he'd come into the position—how he hadn't deserve one "Your Lordship" or one point of deference. Like Sampson, he should simply be a "Mister," not "Master of the Estate," the highest-ranking aristocrat in the area. He smiled from the irony of how God had dealt him a hand he'd never expected—a hand where the youngest of four children became an earl."

* * *

"It appears, Miss Cashémere, that your uncle has taken the main roads across Northumberland, meaning Lord Averette will cross Nottingham and maybe even part of Lincolnshire." Marcus escorted her to the coach. They'd not broken their fast together; he purposely sent a tray to her room, assuring that she'd not lie abed half the day. He wanted an early start to their journey.

"And how can you be so sure, Lord Yardley?" Cashé asked sarcastically, a bit perturbed by his underhanded maneuver with the breakfast tray.

Marcus taunted, "It's my business to know such details, Miss Cashémere."

"I thought your *business* was the earldom, Sir," she hissed, stressing her words.

"Berwick is my title, but I've other interests." He glanced over his shoulder to where the driver helped the maid to the coach. "Do you suppose I might make a comment," he whispered, "without your correcting or censoring it?"

"I don't . . ." she began, but quickly clamped her mouth shut. Through gritted teeth, she whispered, "Explain, Lord Yardley."

Marcus's hold on her arm tightened. "I'll protect you and see you safely to Linton Park, but I'll do so without an argument centering around every interaction between us." He paused and waited for the girl's response, but when none came, he continued, "I questioned your uncle's staff before we departed, and I've done the same at each stop we've made. No one has seen Viscount Averette or the livery, which means His Lordship travels by a different route."

She nodded before grudgingly saying, “Thank you, Your Lordship.” Marcus assumed that was the closest he’d receive in apology. “Should we be able to overtake my uncle?”

“I doubt it,” he leaned closer where he might speak only to her. “Yet, by taking a more direct route, although a bit slower, we should arrive in Derbyshire within a few hours of your family.”

“Shall we reach Linton Park today?”

“Tomorrow.” He braced her entrance into the coach.

Cashé looked deeply into the earl’s noncommittal eyes. “Then we remain cousins a bit longer, Lord Yardley.”

“A bit, Miss Cashémere.” He closed the carriage door and walked purposely away.

Cashé watched him move, entranced by his maleness. She’d been in his presence only three times prior to this journey. He’d come to Linton Park to celebrate Viscount Worthing’s marriage to Eleanor Fowler and then at the Prince Regent’s party, along with the follow up celebration at Briar House. But at each, she’d entertained Viscount Lexford’s attentions and had had very little discourse with the earl. Obviously, Lord Yardley didn’t have Lexford’s affability, but she had to admit he held a hidden intensity that she found quite intriguing.

Marcus rode casually beside the carriage. Occasionally, he’d caught a glimpse of the girl, sitting very prim and proper on the forward facing seat. Her alabaster skin made the silky black of her hair more apparent, and he’d never seen such beautiful eyes, but her attitude and her caustic tongue ruined every kind thought he had of her. Now, if he could find a woman with Miss Cashémere’s looks, but possessing a milder temper, he might become as besotted as his friend Aidan Kimbolt. Marcus realized his duty to the title—understood that he must marry and set up his nursery, but he’d like to have that responsibility to be Trevor’s or even Myles’s. It was never his destiny to hold the earldom. Only by a fluke of nature and an unexplained tragedy had Marcus received the title. Even after four months of holding the position and the previous six months preparing for it, the earldom still felt foreign—felt as if he’d committed highway robbery.

True to her resolve, Cashé Aldridge offered him no censure throughout the day. At least, not directly. She criticized the rough terrain, the many holes in Northumberland roads, the lack of proper springs in her uncle’s carriage; the weak tea served at the afternoon’s inn, and the lack of conversation to pass the time. Very little pleased her. Marcus considered riding in the coach, rather than on horseback, but he didn’t trust his patience with the girl. It was safer if he remained on horseback.

“This isn’t much of an inn,” Cashé wrinkled her nose in disgust as Marcus helped her to the ground.

“It is nearly twenty miles to the next one if you care to continue on, Miss Cashémere.” He fought hard to keep the smirk from both his face and his tone.

She reluctantly took his arm. “No, *Cousin*, I think not.” She smiled through tight lips.

“Then let’s make the best of it,” he cautioned. “Despite the roads’ poor conditions, we’ve made excellent time. We should reach Linton Park late tomorrow morning.”

“Do you instruct everyone in how he should act and what he should know, Your Lordship, or am I a pet project?” the girl hissed.

Marcus looked askance. “I assure you, Miss Cashémere, that I offer no offense.”

“Somehow, I don’t believe that’s so.” Cashé turned her head so he couldn’t observe her need for his approval. It was foolish: this need to please a man she didn’t even like or respect. The innkeeper rushed forward to greet them. Not as crowded as last evening’s stop, the proprietor quickly showed them to his best rooms. As Yardley held the door for her, Cashé hid how his finding fault in her affected her. Admittedly, she didn’t totally understand it; no one else’s recognition of her worth had ever mattered. “I believe I’ll take my meal in my room, Lord Yardley. I’d prefer to turn in early.”

For some unexplained reason, Marcus had wished that she’d change her mind. “As you wish, Miss Cashémere.” He bowed over her hand. “I’ll see you in the morning then.”

“Good evening, Lord Yardley,” she whispered as he strode away.

Later, Marcus had sat in the chair before the empty hearth. A nip in the air had told him they’d soon need to light the fireplace nightly. Tonight, his thoughts remained on the hurt he’d observed in Cashé Aldridge’s face. He’d not realized that he’d used his “teacher” voice with her. Unfortunately, he’d done so out of habit. He regularly needed to instruct Trevor in what society would expect, and Trevor needed constant reminders. Marcus had hoped he hadn’t transferred that tone to others, but he, obviously, had done so with Lord Averette’s niece.

Maybe he needed to find a woman, or, at least, a group of friends with whom to spend some “normal” time. He’d devoured his father’s papers and ledgers for months, trying to prove himself worthy of the title thrust upon him. Perhaps if he socialized more, Miss Cashé’s immaturity wouldn’t bother him so much. As he retired, he resolved to treat the girl with more civility in the future.

Cashé stared at her reflection in the mirror. Lord Yardley’s censure had hurt. She’d met people before who didn’t approve of her usual frankness, but it had never bothered her until now. She normally would assume such people lacked her natural astuteness, but Cashé couldn’t say the same of Marcus Wellston; the earl was as intelligent as he was handsome.

“Well, you’re nothing to me, Lord Yardley,” she declared as she straightened her shoulders and turned from the foggy reflection. “Lachlan Charters doesn’t think me a misbehaving child. Mr. Charters finds me quite charming.” She crawled in the bed and blew out the candle. “After tomorrow, I’ll never see His Lordship again.”

* * *

They’d barely spoken since leaving the inn shortly after daybreak. Every time he looked at her, Miss Cashé purposely turned her head rather than to meet his eyes. Finally, he brought his horse along side the coach and leaned down to speak to her through the open window. “Linton Park’s gatehouse is just ahead.” He nodded toward the road.

“Thank you, Lord Yardley.” She busied herself with her reticule and looked away.

Marcus wondered what had happened; he couldn’t conceive how anything he’d said would bring such rancor—such a change in the girl’s attitude. Unsure what else to say, he simply touched his hat with his riding crop and nudged the horse forward to lead the coach onto the Linworth property. Three-quarters of a mile later, they’d arrived on Worthing’s doorstep.

As he led her up the entrance, her anxiousness showed. “I certainly hope my uncle is here, and we haven’t missed him.”

Marcus couldn’t resist adding, “As do I, Miss Cashé.” He felt her flinch, but before the girl could respond, the estate door swung open, and Worthing’s butler greeted them.

“Lord Yardley. Miss Cashémere.” Automatically, Mr. Lucas shot a glance over their shoulders to see if others were in the party. “Please come in.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lucas.” Marcus handed his hat and crop to the man. “Might Lord Worthing be available?”

The butler stepped back, evidently unsure how to respond. “His Lordship is out at the moment. However, I’ll send Lady Worthing to you. Please take Miss Cashémere to the blue drawing room, my Lord.”

“Certainly, Mr. Lucas.” Marcus caught Cashé’s elbow to steady her on the stairs.

“Why did you not ask after my uncle?” she demanded through tight lips.

He taunted, “Do you not believe it proper to speak to the master of the house before asking after his guests?”

“I don’t care for proper, Your Lordship. I simply want this trip to end,” she growled.

Marcus pulled her to an abrupt halt. “I didn’t take on being your escort, Miss Cashémere, for your sake. I did it for His Grace and your sister. And, by the way, you might’ve considered thanking me just once in the last three days!” He stalked away, angry with her once again. Marcus wondered how many times over the last few days that he’d lost his temper. It wasn’t like him. Normally, it took something devastating for him to react emotionally.

The girl caught her skirt tail and strode after him. “Why should I offer gratitude, Lord Yardley?” she barked to his retreating form.

Marcus turned on her. “Have you no sense of propriety? How do you call yourself a Christian and treat others so poorly?”

She breezed past him, entering the room in a huff. Then she came to an unexpected standstill, causing Marcus to curtail his chase. “How dare you question my Christian charity? At least, I worship regularly!”

Intentionally, he crossed to a cluster of chairs and sat. “And what do you learn in God’s house, Miss Cashémere?” he demanded.

However, before she could respond, Eleanor Kerrington appeared at the drawing room door. “Cashémere. Lord Yardley.”

Marcus scrambled to his feet and offered Lady Worthing a bow. “Lady Worthing, thank you for receiving us.” Marcus noted the girl came to her senses and executed a belated curtsy.

Lady Worthing gestured to the chairs. “Please be seated.” Once they were all situated, she continued, “How might I serve you?”

Wanting to stifle Miss Cashé’s tendency to speak out of turn, Marcus took the lead. “The fact that you did not ask immediately why Miss Cashémere and I traveled together tells me that you’re aware of our situation, Lady Worthing.”

Their hostess inclined her head. “I am, Lord Yardley.”

Unable to remain quiet, the girl interrupted. “Then my uncle is at Linton Park? Or my sister? I insist that you make them aware of my arrival; I’ll see my uncle immediately.” Tinges of their previous conversation, evidently, still lingered for she demanded and coerced. In response, Marcus clenched his fists at his side.

Lady Worthing leisurely poured tea, ignoring Miss Cashé’s attitude. “I’m afraid,” she graciously served the cakes, “I’ve seen neither Lord Averette or my cousin since His Lordship and I took our leave of your family in London.” She directed the last remark to her stunned relative.

Miss Cashé placed her cup down hard to emphasize her point. “That’s impossible! We trailed my uncle to Derbyshire!”

Marcus gritted his teeth in anger; yet, Lady Worthing smiled indulgently at her cousin. He admired the woman for keeping her composure. "I didn't say Lord Averette hadn't come to the neighborhood; I simply said your uncle didn't call at Linton Park."

"Go on, Lady Worthing." Marcus overrode any objections Miss Cashé planned to make. He would not allow the girl to insult the Captain's wife.

"Our day yesterday appeared quite routine, but things altered quickly. Viscount Lexford made an unexpected call." Marcus glanced at Cashé to gauge her reaction to the knowledge that her former admirer was close, but the girl showed no interest whatsoever. He thought Lexford might know another heartbreak if he continued to pursue the girl. "Then my brother arrived seeking Lord Worthing's assistance in rescuing Velvet. He'd the information you sent him, as well as some additional facts from Mr. Shepherd. Before we could organize a liberation, Lord Hellsman arrived."

Marcus raised an eyebrow, but neither he nor Lady Worthing vocalized the irony of Carter Lowery's older brother Lawrence becoming involved. Lady Worthing continued, "Lord Averette had asked Lord Hellsman to intervene. As you are both aware, the viscount assumed His Grace arranged to meet our cousin at Linton Park. As we tried to convince Hellsman of the error of Lord Averette's assertions, Sir Carter arrived to add to the chaos. The baronet had tracked Bran to Derby. It seems Mir's men staged a double kidnapping. The one known as Talpur took Sonali to Cornwall; the other took Velvet toward Liverpool. Poor Brantley knew not what to do so my husband took control. Lord Worthing and Sir Carter stage Sonali's rescue. They'll set up at our brother Amstead's estate in Devon. James sent Lexford, who has connections in Cheshire, with Bran to Liverpool."

"And my uncle?" Cashé asked sarcastically.

Marcus noted Lady Worthing's controlled expression. "It's my understanding that Lord Averette continues his search. Lord Hellsman had accompanied Viscount Averette to London." Marcus quickly realized how Lowery had recruited his brother to mislead Averette.

"So, did anyone tell Uncle Samuel that Velvet has likely been kidnapped by the duke's former enemy?" the girl's sharp tone remained.

Marcus took pleasure in Lady Worthing's devious smile. "As Viscount Averette never presented himself at Linton Park, it was impossible to dissuade him from his misconceptions."

Marcus hadn't know much of Eleanor Fowler prior to Kerrington announcing that he'd make the woman his wife. All he'd known was the woman's shame—of the degradation under which she'd lived with the former duke—and of the elaborate plan executed by the Realm against her tormentor Sir Louis Levering, but he'd liked his friend Fowler's sister immediately. She possessed an innate intelligence and a willingness to take on a difficult situation. Kerrington, obviously, based his choice on more than the lady's elegance and beauty, and Marcus had considered Lady Eleanor the perfect match for his former leader. "Shall you continue to seek your uncle, Miss Cashémere? It seems that Lord Averette will find nothing in London or Kent to satisfy his anger." Marcus had turned his attention to his very spoiled traveling companion.

Miss Cashé paused, apparently considering what he said. "It seems more prudent to chase after His Grace and Viscount Lexford." Again, Marcus searched for an emotional response to her mentioning Lexford's name; yet, nothing appeared. He wondered if he should warn Lexford of his pursuit's futility. "Besides, Satiné is in Manchester."

He asked curiously, "Satiné?"

"My twin . . . the Fowlers accepted Velvet when our parents died. I stayed with Uncle Samuel, but Satiné resides with my mother's brother, Baron Ashton of Chesterfield Manor."

Marcus heard her words, but none of them registered beyond the words *my twin*. He'd known on some level that another Aldridge sister existed, but he wasn't aware that the third was Miss Cashémere's twin. Just the word *twin* brought a groan to his throat.

"I forgot about Satiné being in Manchester," Lady Worthing was saying. "I'm certain Bran won't remember. When was the last time you saw Satiné?"

The girl flinched. "Nearly three years ago."

Marcus wanted to be doing more than sitting around sipping tea. "How long has His Grace been in Cheshire?"

"Since yesterday evening."

He thought aloud. "I'm certain he and Lexford are in Liverpool by now. I doubt if Jamot arrived before today. We pressed to reach Linton Park as quickly as we did. Jamot had rougher terrain than did we. Plus, I know time-saving secondary roads."

Out of nowhere, Cashé unpredictably announced. "We'll leave for Cheshire this afternoon, my Lord."

Cashémere Aldridge might be beautiful, but she possessed the ability to set the hairs on the back of his neck on edge—and not in a good way. She was singular in her ideas, thinking very little of anyone but herself. She didn't consider what became of his estate while he escorted her across the countryside nor the danger in which she placed them by her nearsightedness. Now, she expected him to continue this escapade by seeing her to Cheshire. He'd definitely have a word with Shepherd regarding this assignment. "You wish me to continue to serve as your escort?"

Cashé wished he might be a bit pleased by her offer, but Lord Yardley, evidently, found her contemptuous. Hurt by his resentment, she retorted, "Well, Uncle Samuel wouldn't approve; yet, we've traveled this far together, and as long as I have Edana with me, it'll have to do." She presented what she thought was a just explanation for her refusal to stay. "Uncle Samuel doesn't approve of how Lady Worthing conducted her life prior to coming to Linton Park." The viscountess blustered, but Cashé persisted in repeating what she'd heard her uncle say on more than one occasion when Velvet defended the Fowlers. "Even Eleanor's aiding Lady Amsteadt in the delivery of the woman's child isn't acceptable for a woman of refined society, no matter how admirable the act might be. My uncle wouldn't agree with my staying at Linton Park without him or Aunt Alice, so it's best if I continue to seek my sister."

"You're quite misleared, Miss Cashé," the earl accused.

"Rude, my Lord? Or honest? It's a matter of perspective." She raised her chin defiantly. She saw the anger seethe beneath his composure, but Cashé no longer cared about his holier than thou opinions.

"From my perspective, rudeness is a long way from truthfulness. You accepted the hospitality of Lady Worthing at Linton Park and of her brother at Briar House, and then you repeat malicious, hurtful words spoken about their family."

The girl flushed. "I apologize, Eleanor; you're my cousin, and my family is thankful to yours for my sister's care; yet, things were quite different within our households." She mimicked her uncle by snarling her nose in distaste.

Marcus watched closely as Lady Worthing busied herself with the tea service, using it as a distraction while she took several deep breaths to steady her hand. Finally, she said flatly, "As I wouldn't judge you, I'd wish that you might offer me the same. Don't forget what the Good Book says, 'He who is without sin among you, let him throw the first stone.'"

Marcus thought Eleanor Kerrington chose her response well, but Miss Cashé looked offended. “Such misapplication of the scripture won’t silence me or my opposition to depravity. Besides, what might be said of censure for Uncle Samuel’s family?”

Lady Worthing stood suddenly. She surprised Marcus with her composure, however. How did one address the girl’s naiveté? The viscountess’s voice held a deadly warning. “As Peter warned when referring to Paul’s letters, some things are hard to understand by those who are *untaught* or are *unstable* and who *twist* to their *destruction* the scriptures. Cashé, you make everything black or white, but the world knows not such extremes; it’s covered in shades of gray.” Lady Eleanor paused to calm her breathing. “You wish to know of what I might criticize Viscount Averette. How about the fact that your uncle would see a woman and a child die simply to keep the lines of propriety? Or how about that you’ve not seen your twin in nearly three years, and until recently, not Velvet for over two? How about that not once did your righteous Uncle Samuel send one quid of support for Velvet’s upbringing? I imagine it is so for Satiné, as well. I know this to be a fact for the past six years because as father became more incoherent, the estate ledgers became my duty to oversee and to update. How about the fact that when Velvet came of age, no one in your family acknowledged it with an appropriate dowry? Again, it was that *depraved* man known as William Fowler—my father—who bequeathed her a dowry of thirteen thousand pounds. But even more importantly, it was *my family* who saw to Velvet’s education, who tended her when she was ill, who nourished her hopes and her dreams. You may be Velvet’s sister by blood, but I’m her sister in life. Despite our *depravity* and *our ill breeding*, my family gave Velvet a home when your righteous grandmother and Uncle Samuel wouldn’t.” Lady Worthing gave Marcus a quick curtsy. “Your Lordship, I’ll see to your and Miss Cashé’s carriage. I assume you’ll be a gentleman and will accompany her west.”

Marcus certainly wanted nothing more to do with Miss Cashémere, but he’d not leave the girl to plague Linton Park with her misconstructions. He refused to subject Kerrington’s wife to such a fate. He’d remove Cashémere Aldridge from the viscountess’s household if he had to physically carry the spoiled brat all the way to Cheshire. “Unfortunately, Lady Worthing, my parents raised a gentleman.”

“And the world is a better place for it, my Lord.” Lady Worthing rolled her eyes in disbelief. She plastered a cordial smile on her face when she turned one last time to meet Marcus’s gaze. “Tell my brother that I pray for the speedy and safe return of each of you.”

“Yes . . . certainly, Lady Worthing,” Marcus stammered. Then she left them alone in the drawing room. Marcus waited until Lady Eleanor’s receding steps had told him that she’d truly departed before he vehemently attacked Miss Cashé. “I’ve traveled through much of the Continent and the East. I’ve known schemers and liars, but not in all the years of my life have I known anyone who spoke with such hatred and such ignorance! What is it about you that makes you so despise the world—to see nothing but evil and iniquity? To put yourself as judge and jury? I can conceive of your immaturity, Miss Cashémere, but I cannot comprehend your need to lash out at everyone.”

Tears misted the girl’s eyes. “I’m not immature, Your Lordship. I’ve learned my lessons well. You’ve no idea . . .”

“Then tell me, Miss Cashé. I’ll understand. Explain it to me, and I’ll make the things right. I swear by my honor.”

“I need not your honor nor your understanding, my Lord!” She stood quickly. “I also don’t need your protection. I release you from your promise to see me to Cheshire. It’s still daylight, and we can be at Chesterfield Manor in a matter of hours.” Cashé reached for her

reticule and bonnet. "I thank you, Lord Yardley, for your concern for my well being." She made a curtsy to leave.

Marcus caught her arm. "If you think I'll allow a girl to travel alone even for a few hours, Miss Cashémere, you're sadly mistaken."

She hissed, "I'm not a girl, Lord Yardley."

"You're not yet a woman for you act as a child," he growled.

She flushed. "I'm nearly nineteen. My uncle intends for my betrothal after my next birthday. If I'm woman enough to marry, I'm no longer a girl."

Marcus studied her countenance. Cashé Aldridge was an enigma to which he held no answer. "I'll see you safely to Baron Ashton's estate and then join my friends in your oldest sister's rescue."

Her bottom lip trembled. "As you wish, Your Lordship." She jerked her arm from his hold and raced from the room.

Marcus simply shook his head. "No, as you wish, Miss Cashémere."