
CECILIA'S VICTORY

The Wards of Lamercier

Book 2

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Chapter 1

LONDON, *1811*

Lord Daniel Eliot perused the documents Lord Halstead had given him, carefully noting the details that hinted at where the writer was located. His face showed no suggestion of his feelings or his opinion. He read the pages again, memorizing phrases and facts. Finally, he closed the dossier and placed it on Halstead's large and neatly organized mahogany desk.

"How reliable is this information?" he asked.

Halstead raised an eyebrow and the corners of his mouth quirked. He was used to Daniel Eliot's meticulousness. It was what made him ideal for the kind of work they engaged in. "That is partly what I am hoping you will discover. Lady Shelton disappeared two years ago and it seems that she has been residing in Spain but has now relocated to her husband's family home in France." His voice became more somber. "She has continued with her schemes and we need to track her down, as well as discover who her contacts are in England. She has wrought much harm within our military forces and if she is not stopped, many more of our soldiers

will die unnecessarily and Napoleon will triumph in his nefarious plans to conquer all of Europe, including England."

"Lady Shelton would not have escaped had that foolish girl not been beguiled by a handsome face and become embroiled in matters that are beyond her understanding." His usually grave voice hardened with censure.

"Are you ever going to forgive Miss Goodwin? I believe she is in town for the Season and you will need to be polite to her, perhaps even dance with her once or twice." The dryness in Halstead's voice did little to disguise his meaning. It was clear to all of his friends that Daniel Eliot had become very obsessed with the very pretty ward of one of the members of their association, the Spymasters Alliance, which Halstead had founded when it became clear that there were people who used their position in the *haut ton* to gather information that could harm the war efforts.

Eliot sniffed. "Forgive? None of her behavior during her first Season was in any way pardonable. Her actions almost resulted in Medwell's death and the disgrace of her whole family, not to speak of giving Georgianna the chance to flee. She should have been severely spanked." Lord Eliot gritted his teeth and tried to use the force of his iron will to subdue the sudden thickening of his cock as he thought of Miss Cecilia Goodwin draped over his knees, her shapely derrière bare as his hand peppered her with hard smacks and the creamy skin of her arse turned a rosy pink. His thoughts made his next words harsher than he intended them to be. "If it were not for my friendship with Medwell, I would have nothing to do with a young lady who is so shallow and thinks of nothing except her beauty."

Halstead watched his friend with amusement. Eliot was usually taciturn and said as little as possible, keeping his emotions firmly in check. This uncharacteristic outburst

made it obvious that Cecilia Goodwin had affected him in a way that no women ever had before. "*The lady doth protest too much,*" Halstead quoted softly under his breath but Eliot's sharp ears caught the words.

His face grew darker. "We do not have time to waste discussing Miss Goodwin. What must be done about Lady Shelton?"

Halstead's grin faded and he patted the dossier. "She still has some acquaintances here in London. Mingle with them and find out how much they know about her whereabouts and if any of them have been in contact with her. We need to discover who is actually involved in passing on military secrets to her. When the information in this letter has been corroborated, you, Bellingham and Barlow will need to go to France and bring her back here to stand trial. She is, after all, still a British citizen who has committed treason, no matter where her loyalties lie."

"It is a task more suited to Medwell and his renowned charm, but marriage is making him soft and unsuited to this kind of work."

Halstead chuckled. "I cannot imagine Jane allowing him to flirt with other women, no matter how important it might be for the safety of the country."

"Exactly. He is under the thumb of his wife and no longer available to do the kind of assignment at which he used to excel."

"He loves Jane and would do nothing that would cause her any harm or distress, but I believe it has strengthened his purpose." Halstead's eyes focused on a miniature of his own wife, Louisa, that was in a beautiful silver frame on his desk. He smiled. "There is much to be recommended in the love of a good woman,"

Eliot raised an eyebrow. "I have no intention of allowing myself ever to be sidetracked by vague romantic notions."

He rose, picked up the dossier, and said, "I will discuss Lady Shelton with Medwell. He knows her habits and tastes better than most." With a curt nod of the head, he left an amused Lord Halstead to gaze fondly at the image of his wife and ponder the vagaries of love.

"This house is like the Sleeping Beauty just waking up from a long sleep." Nell spoke softly as she looked around the entrance hall of Medwell House, the London residence of Lord Robert Lamercier, the Earl of Medwell, guardian to her and her younger sisters and husband of her eldest sister, Jane. "It is almost a pity to disturb its tranquility."

Lord Robbie chuckled. "It has been closed up for far too long. The few times I have been to London in the last two years or so, I stayed at the club rather than open up all the rooms here, but it is a house built to be lived in and with all of you here now, it will indeed come alive again."

Alicia helped Nell with her coat and bonnet. "It is strange to be in London again and it's going to be even stranger to have to attend so many balls and soirées."

Nell looked worried. "I am not sure that I want to be presented as a debutante. I am sure to commit some terrible *faux pas*."

Jane kept an eye on her eighteen-month-old son who was just beginning to find his feet and was trying to escape from his nanny's hold. "You and Ali will manage very well, Nellie. If Cece and I were able to mingle with the highest echelons of society, you will too."

Messy, the youngest of the Goodwin girls, eyed her sisters. "I can't imagine there are many twins in the *haut ton*. You two will be a sensation, especially if you dressed alike, although you never do that."

"I am sure Ali and Nell will not do anything that will cause a sensation." Jane handed her cape to the housekeeper.

A broad smile brightened Mrs. Webb's face as she balanced Jane's bonnet on top of her cape. "It is good to see you, miss, I mean, your ladyship. Welcome back to Medwell House. I have ensured that everything is in order for the young misses to have a good time. We are ready to entertain all their beaux."

"Thank you, Mrs. Webb. Before we begin any festivities or consider the possibility of suitors, the girls will need to do some shopping. Their current wardrobe is not suitable for balls and soirées." She gave Messy a withering look. "And they will definitely not dress alike."

Nell groaned. "Do we have to go shopping? I do not like the idea of standing for hours and hours in a modiste's shop while we're pricked and poked with pins. Can't Cece make our dresses?"

Jane looked around the foyer until she spotted Cecilia who was trying to keep Messy, their youngest sister, still for long enough to unfasten her cloak and bonnet. "Cece will be too busy enjoying herself to bother about sewing your clothes. She will, however, accompany you to the modiste's. Her taste is impeccable and she needs some new dresses herself."

Cecilia stiffened her shoulders but tried to look enthusiastic about assisting her sisters for their debut Season. She loved her sisters and truly did want them to have a wonderful time at routs, balls and dinners and perhaps find good husbands, but everything about London reminded her of her own dismal failure of a Season two years ago. She had to clear her throat before she managed to say, "Ali and Nell are both so pretty and have such good figures that it will be fun to help them choose new clothes." Her voice took on a determined edge that was quite unusual for her. "However, I still

have the dresses I made for myself when we first came to London and do not need any new ones. After all, the focus will not be on me. I am not a debutante anymore."

The earl chuckled and slipped his arm around Jane's shoulders, kissing her lightly on her cheek. "A bit of *deja vu*, my love. Your sister has inherited your stubbornness."

Just then, little Lord Gregory Robert Lamercier, not quite two years old, toddled up to his parents and tugged his mother's skirts, shouting, "Up! Up!"

Cecilia took the opportunity offered by the diversion to melt into the shadows underneath the large, imposing staircase. Jane scooped her son into her arms and he settled against her shoulder but immediately wriggled to get down when Messy's voice rang out.

"No, Ruffles! Bad boy! Come here!" The little brown dog had been investigating an interesting scent in the corner of the room and was now scratching at the wood paneling. Messy grabbed his collar and pulled him back. "I'll take you rat hunting in Green Park as soon as we're settled in," she promised. Once she had Ruffles firmly in hand, she complained, "I'm still not sure why I had to come to London with all of you. Ruffles and I would have been very happy at Lamercie Manor. Jed was going to show me where some badgers have their sett and I had just made friends with a hedgehog in the kitchen garden."

Jane shook her head and laughed. "It's high time that you began to acquire some society polish. In a year or two, you too will be coming out into society and just imagine the shock if you arrived at Lady Merton's dinner with a mouse in your pocket or began to argue with your dance partner about the best way to break in a horse."

Messy pulled a face. "I behaved very prettily at Lady Halstead's dinner last week. She said so herself." Gregory had toddled over and was now petting the dog. Keeping a

stern eye on both her pet and her nephew, Messy asked, "Am I in the same room I used before, Mrs. Webb?"

"That you are, dear, and we've made the changes you requested," Mrs. Webb assured her.

"Oh, good. There were far too many knick-knacks that could get broken when Ruffles gets excited." She headed up the stairs, tugging the dog behind her.

Gregory tried to follow the dog, but his nanny took hold of his hand firmly. "Come along, Lord Gregory. Let's get you upstairs and washed and changed before you have supper."

"No, no wash," he protested, but Nanny Browning was made of stern stuff. She simply began walking up the stairs, holding his hand, and he had to follow. Before they had climbed a half dozen steps, his protests were forgotten and he was merrily pointing out all kinds of things that caught his interest.

Jane watched him, a tender smile on her face. "I am in need of a wash and change of clothes myself."

"The maids have hot water ready for all of you, my lady. Dinner will be at seven o' clock," Mrs. Webb informed them as she bustled out to oversee the preparations.

Slowly, the foyer emptied as the family ascended to their rooms, leaving Cece in her gloomy spot under the stairs. It felt as if a fist had tightened around her heart. Like Messy, she would have preferred to stay secluded in the countryside but she had docilely yielded to Jane's coaxing and coercion and was now in town to help launch the twins into society. Bitter memories of her own debutante season assailed her.

Two years ago, she had arrived in London, her heart filled with confident dreams of meeting and marrying a handsome and charming gentleman who would love her passionately, but her own foolishness had put her in danger and led to Lord Robert's being shot. She still had nightmares about that dreadful day even though the earl had recovered

completely. No one else seemed to remember her silliness anymore, but she was dreading being seen in society, dreading having to face people who knew that she had been infatuated with the traitor, Captain Ranford, even though not many knew she had attempted to elope with him.

She brushed her hand across her eyes, ridding herself of the sting of tears and the cobwebs of memories at the same time. She would give the twins the kind of support Jane had given her when they first came to London. This time, she would be the one in the background, the one with no dreams of her own but cheerfully ensuring that her sisters enjoyed themselves and were not gulled by any blackguards.

She took a deep breath and was just about to go up to her own room when a sharp bang resounded through the foyer. She froze at the loud noise. Her heart stopped for a moment and then began pounding even faster than usual. Her palms felt damp and a mist covered her eyes as the elegant town house faded and she was back on the road where the coach had stopped. The smell of gunpowder, the image of blood and the sound of screaming voices assailed her.

One of the footmen appeared almost miraculously and opened the front door in response to the loud knock that had been the cause of her sudden panic. She took a deep breath and leaned against the wall while she tried to steady her nerves. Slowly, her heart settled into its normal rhythm. It was impossible to shrug off the fear that swept through her whenever she heard a loud noise. Would she ever be rid of these images that continued to haunt her?

She held her breath when Lord Daniel Eliot stalked into the foyer, handing the footman his hat and tugging off his gloves. Her heart began beating faster, for a different reason this time. Lord Eliot was a forbidding presence, tall and dark, sweeping in like an avenging angel or like the ancient Greek

god, Apollo, ready for war. He did not notice her hiding in the shadows and she was able to admire how his perfectly tailored dark grey coat stretched snugly across his broad shoulders, emphasizing his broad shoulders. The crisp white of his stiffly folded cravat framed the fine shape of his chin and cheeks, and his smooth, close-fitting breeches drew attention to the long, lean muscles of his legs. Her eyes kept wandering to his hands which were so strong, so deft and which he moved with effortless grace. And yet, much as she admired his appearance, she was intimidated by his supercilious attitude. She was always more aware of her shortcomings when he deigned to look her way and she avoided him as much as possible even though he was a frequent visitor to the Lamercier houses.

She was unaccountably drawn to his fine physique, the strong lines of his face and the unmistakable air of authority that surrounded him. Her admiration of him, the effect he had on her, was her secret. No one, least of all him, suspected how much he affected her, how often she dreamed of him at night just as she was falling asleep and how she longed for him to admire and respect her. He was always impeccably polite to her, but she was also always aware of the disdain that hovered beneath the surface. He would never forgive her for her foolishness, never believe that she had changed, never believe that she was more than a pretty face. Her dreams would always remain secret.

It was a few moments before she could control her unruly thoughts enough to hear how he was insisting that he needed to speak to the earl right away. The footman was attempting to dissuade him, but he was moving forward inexorably, his lips drawn into a thin line.

She was the only member of the family present and so, wrapping herself in a cloak of dignity, she stepped out of the shadows. "Good day, Lord Eliot." Her voice sounded more

breathless than it should have. "We have only just arrived after two days of travel and we are not at home to visitors yet."

Lord Eliot turned his steely gaze on her and she tried not to flinch even though breathing was suddenly very difficult. Not a muscle of his beautifully formed face twitched. Taller than her brother-in-law and more imposing, he loomed over her. She had to stop herself from taking a step backwards even though she had to tilt her head to look up at him.

He waited almost a full minute before replying, his eyes traveling over Cecilia from her head to her feet and back again, taking in every wrinkle, every travel stain, every strand of hair that had fallen from its pins and was hanging loosely around her face. His manner was even more formal than usual. "Good day, Miss Goodwin. I am not here on a whim or a social call. I have urgent business with Lord Medwell."

She tucked one strand behind her ear and tried to look imposing. "I am sure if you leave your card, the earl will contact you at his earliest convenience."

The footman was still hovering in the background, not quite sure what to do. He now offered Lord Eliot his hat and coat again. "I will tell his lordship that you called."

Lord Eliot stared at the garments as if they were a snake the footman had found slithering across the floor. "I have no need of my coat." Without a further glance at Cecilia, he strode up the stairs and along the corridor towards the earl's study.

Cecilia was left with her mouth hanging open and her farewell unspoken. She shared a commiserating look with the footman and then made her way to her bedroom, vowing to have absolutely nothing to do with the insufferable Lord Eliot. No matter what effect he had on her.