

Christmas Ever More, A Lady Forsaken Novella
Excerpt

Chapter One

Lady Haversham sighed with contentment, taking in the mess of ribbons, parchment, and unwrapped toys littering the floor around her. Only a year ago, she'd never have believed a room at Foldger's Hall could hold so much joy and love. And hope.

They'd been organizing...and wrapping...and decorating for hours, and still the room was full of things that needed to be done. And with all the hours of labor came a sore back, aching neck, and cramping fingers.

Viola held her swollen hands before her, alternating between clenching her fists and straightening her fingers. Her ankles most assuredly matched the rest of her, though she'd lost the ability to see past her swollen belly weeks ago.

"You really should rest, Vi," Ruby called from across the room. "I can finish the wrapping and start on the holly wreaths. Besides, Harold should be here any moment."

She placed her hands on the floor to either side of her where she sat, readying to push herself close enough to use the lounge to assist her to stand. The pregnancy had been fairly easy and enjoyable thus far, but her increased size was quickly becoming cumbersome.

"I will be fine." Vi eyed the distance between her and the lounge. "Maybe I will wrap a few more gifts before retiring."

Ruby raised one brow. "Do you need assistance to stand?"

Vi was loath to admit she needed help. As the lady of the house, she was determined to take care of everyone, prepare the perfect holiday celebration, decorate every doorway, and make sure there were ample gifts for all.

But when one planned a celebration that included seventeen children, nearly a dozen adults, and an estate large enough to house them all, Vi was allowed to be tired and overwhelmed—thankfully, she needn't admit that fact to anyone but her nearest and dearest friend, Ruby.

"I assure you I am not still sitting upon this pillow on the hard floor only because I cannot conceive a way to get myself upright." It was the exact reason, if she were being honest—which she was not. Brock had warned her not to overexert herself so close to the baby's birth, and he'd thought traveling to her father's country estate—which housed Mrs. Dutton and her orphanage—would reduce the amount of work Vi would have to do, but that hadn't been the case. "Now, tomorrow is the eve of Christmas and I must ready the holly!"

Ruby laughed, a heartfelt, genuine chuckle Vi had begun to recognize ever since Ruby married Brock's best friend, Harold.

Her friend was, at long last, happy—as Vi had always wanted for her. Ruby had a doting husband and the prospect for her own family in the near future.

Ruby returned to the large present she was attempting to wrap—a new rocking horse for the younger children—humming *Oh Come All Ye Faithful*. It had been a trying time after Vi married; Ruby's uncertainty at her own prospects in life had weighed heavily upon them both.

Who had suspected it would take Harold Jakeston, the kindest, most compassionate man in all of London, to aid Ruby in finding her true path in life?

"Do stop staring!" Ruby called over her shoulder, directing a stern look at Vi. "If you do not get to work, we will have no mistletoe hung and, therefore, no reason to kiss our dear husbands outside our bedchambers—and we both know how Harold and Brock are always looking to steal a kiss."

A squeal sounded from across the room, and laughter erupted, ending the quiet in the parlor.

“That I am.” Brock stumbled into the room, a tiny boy upon his shoulders with his small fingers clasped under Brock’s chin for security. “I do feel a bit heavy today, weighed down. Maybe we should cancel the festivities. I am certainly falling ill,” he proclaimed, bringing the back of his hand to his forehead as if he were preparing to faint.

The giggling grew louder.

“Oh, no, m’lord,” Gavin shouted from Brock’s shoulders. “M’lady has been working awfully hard.”

“You mustn’t be sick,” twin voices chimed.

Vi looked down to see Abby and Sharla clutching Brock’s legs—seated upon his feet—as he navigated the messy room.

“My heavens, girls,” she called. “Do let Lord Haversham go and leave at once or there will be no presents for the lot of you.” While her voice was stern, there was little vehemence to her words. Viola looked forward to lavishing gifts on the children.

The girls sobered quickly, releasing Brock and scrambling to depart the room.

“My apologies, ladies.” Brock lifted Gavin from his shoulders, grunting at the task. “My, boy, you’ve grown a stone since the last time I saw you.”

Puffing his chest and resting his hands on his tiny hips, the boy said, “I must have, m’lord. It won’t be long afore I must take to the stables—to earn me keep.”

Vi couldn’t help but smile. “You have a few more years before Mrs. Dutton will allow you to skip on your schoolwork.”

“Is it true?” With dark brown eyes and hair of the lightest blond, Gavin turned a pleading look on her. “Will Alex be here for Christmas?”

It always shocked her that the children still asked for Alex. He’d been employed by the Marquis of Drake—Ruby’s late father—for over a year now.

Ruby stiffened from her spot across the room where she stood in an effort to block the pile of gifts behind her.

“Of course, he is coming,” Vi said with more excitement than was necessary. It was a vain attempt to reassure Ruby that when Alex arrived, he would bring Ellington; though they both knew they couldn’t force Ellie to go anywhere she didn’t want to go. “And I am most certain he will take you to the stables and show you all he’s learned whilst working in a real stable in London.”

“Now, out with you.” Ruby swooshed her hands as she walked across the floor. The boy jumped into action and scurried from the room, slamming the door in his wake. “Lord Haversham, I am glad you are here. Vi is in desperate need of rest before she collapses from exhaustion and the festivities are forced to happen at her bedside.”

“These dirty ragamuffins will not take up residence in my chambers,” Brock said with mock horror. “There is naught for me to do but remove my wife—kicking and screaming, if necessary—from this room.”

Vi laughed at his exaggerated tone. “That will not be necessary, my lord.” She paused, puzzled at her current dilemma, which was the same as a few moments before. “If you would be so kind as to help your increasing wife from the floor—“

“Say no more.” With a flourish, Brock settled his hands beneath both of Vi’s arms and lifted her to her feet as if she were lighter than a feather, which was assuredly not the case. Vi’s head spun from the sudden movement. “You should have called me sooner,” he admonished her.

“I have much to do,” Vi sighed. The mere thought of the work that needed to be done was daunting. “Maybe if you and Ruby would be so kind as to bring the presents to our room, I can sit upon the bed and continue.”

“Oh, no!” Ruby argued. “Mrs. Dutton and I can continue wrapping, and Sarah can hang the garlands and

mistletoe.”

Vi’s lady’s maid, Sarah, had been anxious to help since they’d arrived two days prior to ready for the holiday. However, the holiday fun was meant for all to enjoy—with Brock and her as hosts. Requesting Sarah’s assistance with organizing everything did not seem right, but time was slipping away, and they needed all the help they could get.

Giving in, Vi said, “She can help, but on one condition.”

“Name it, my love.” Brock pulled her into his arms, settling her in a loose hug. “I will agree to anything.”

“I am sure you would,” Vi chided. “But I am talking about Ruby.”

“Me?” Her friend’s brow furrowed in confusion. “What do I have to barter?”

Vi had been hesitant to address the subject, believing in Alex and his natural ability for persuasion; but as the hours passed, and Christmas steadily approached, she knew Ruby worried that her sister Ellington would not come. Instead, favoring to remain in London—alone.

There was naught Vi could do to avoid the topic further. “Please, do not fret over Ellington. Alex had promised before we left town that he would make sure she arrived safely at Foldger’s Hall in time for Christmas.”

Sadness clouded Ruby’s face, and her shoulders sagged just the slightest bit, barely noticeable. “And what if she refuses to come?” Ruby asked. “She already said she would not—that the country life and holiday festivities were not to her liking.”

“Do you honestly believe she would rather sit in that dusty old townhouse by herself than come here and spend a few days with people who care about her?” Vi was worried that Ellington would do exactly that, but allowing Ruby to see her own fears wasn’t an option. “Do calm your nerves... Alex will arrive any moment, and Ellington will be in tow. I assure you.”

“Worst case, I will have the carriage readied for you and Harold to journey back to London.” Brock was trying to help, but the desperate look Ruby turned on Vi said his words were of no comfort.

“If Harold ever arrives!”

Vi couldn’t help but laugh. It was normally she who was the worrywart, not Ruby. “Harold will be here shortly. The roads between here and the Haversham estate are clear.”

“I know I am worried for naught.” Ruby continued to clasp and unclasp her hands. “I shouldn’t fret—I know it isn’t the easiest thing to travel with William in his condition, though he has been doing much better.”

“He needs a bit of extra care, but Harold knew he needed some distance from Vicar Jakeston before he too ran away,” Brock said, entering the conversation once more.

There was much to be thankful for this year; not only were she and Brock having their first young, and Ruby and Harold settling into their wedded life, but William was recovering well after the shipping container had fallen upon him a few months prior. He’d likely not walk again, but he was alive. Even the marquis’ passing, about the same time, could not dampen their jovial mood.

“It is time, Vi.” Brock released her and nestled his hand at the small of her back. “To bed with you. When you awaken, I will make sure there are plenty of gifts for you to wrap.”

“...and I will make sure Cook has the menu ready for your approval,” Ruby said.

Vi was blessed to have two people who cared for her as much as her husband and her dearest friend, yet their overprotectiveness was trying at times. “Can you give us a moment?” she said, standing on tiptoes to place a kiss upon Brock’s cheek. “I will be right out... please summon Sarah to assist Ruby and Mrs. Dutton.”

Not one to be dismissed, Brock took hold of Vi’s chin and tilted her face to his. His lips settled upon hers with possessiveness, something Vi had come to expect—and enjoy. Parting her lips, her tongue darted out to run across his. Brock stiffened slightly at her unexpected forwardness.

Ruby cleared her throat, and Viola reluctantly released her husband’s lips.

“I stand corrected, my wife is not in need of a nap, but the minx has earned some time above stairs.”

“Oh,” Vi swatted his arm before continuing. “Do give us a few moments, after, I promise to spend the entire afternoon locked in our chambers with you.”

“Why does that sound more like a threat than a promise?” he joked. When both women glared, he raised his hands in surrender. “I see I have outstayed my welcome. I will meet you in the hall, Wife.” He closed the door quietly behind him, in complete contrast to Gavin’s earlier slam.

Viola kept her eyes on the door, hoping Ruby would give her a moment or two to gather her thoughts after Brock’s kiss—he never failed to take her breath away.

“Vi, I know what you are going to say—“

“Oh, do you?” Vi shifted to face her friend, determined to keep her own worries at bay.

“Yes. I should not worry about Harold and William. I should not fret about Ellington and Alex. And, I most definitely should calm myself before everyone arrives or the children notice my frazzled state.”

While she was thinking most of those things, Vi hadn’t been overly concerned with Ruby’s frazzled state, as she called it.

“I am sorry I hadn’t noticed your nervousness before today,” Vi apologized. “I have been so concerned with my own affairs—namely this celebration—that I hadn’t taken your distress into consideration.”

Vi held her hands out, and Ruby set the ribbon she’d been clutching down, moving to entwine their fingers. She’d spent many years drowning in her own sorrow and self-pity...Ruby had been with her through it all, never forsaking their friendship, even though she should have left her long ago to secure her own happiness. Vi had no doubt that if she hadn’t met Brock—and subsequently fallen hopelessly in love—she and Ruby would still reside at Foldger’s Hall, resigned to live the life of spinsterhood.

Thank the graces above it hadn’t come to that.

“I wanted to say, no matter if Ellington comes, I know she cares for you and Harold,” Vi squeezed Ruby’s fingers in reassurance. “You must remember who raised her. Your father was not a kind nor compassionate man. The child doesn’t know how to accept the love you and Harold so freely give her.”

Ruby nodded, a tear on the brink of spilling down her cheek.

“Give her time,” Vi continued. “Plus, I have no doubt she will arrive—and in due time—because this is going to be the grandest Christmas celebration this household has ever seen.”

A tentative smile settled on Ruby’s face, banishing the tears. “Yes, not a soul would dream of disappointing you on Christmas.”

Pulling her in close, Vi hugged Ruby as best she could manage with her large belly. “I fear my husband would be sent out to avenge my honor and bring the offending party to heel!”

The tension fled as they embraced once more, laughing at their shared jest, for they knew Brock would likely travel to London and drag Ellington to Foldger’s Hall if it would make his wife happy.

And Viola had no qualms about demanding just that if it would make her dearest friend happy.

She only hoped it would not come to that.

“You best be going before Brock returns and throws you over his shoulder to haul you to your bed.”

“Oh, that would not be possible...just look at me!” She settled her hands about the roundness of her belly and was greeted by the kick of her baby.

No, nothing was going to stand in the way of her grand Christmas celebration.