

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR



AVON
BOOKS

LISA
KLEYPAS
Chasing
Cassandra

The Ravenels

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AVONBOOKS

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Dedication

*To Carrie Feron,
my editor, my inspiration,
and my safe place in the storm.
Love always,
L. K.*

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Chapter 1

Hampshire, England
June 1876

It had been a mistake to invite himself to the wedding.

Not that Tom Severin gave a damn about politeness or etiquette. He liked barging into places where he hadn't been invited, knowing he was too rich for anyone to dare throw him out. But he should have anticipated the Ravenel wedding would be an utter bore, as weddings always were. Nothing but romantic drivel, lukewarm food, and far, *far* too many flowers. At the ceremony this morning, the tiny estate chapel of Eversby Priory had been stuffed to the rafters, as if the entire Covent Garden Flower Market had disgorged its contents there. The air had been so thick with perfume that it had given Tom a mild headache.

He wandered through the ancient Jacobean manor house, looking for a quiet place to sit and close his eyes. Outside, guests congregated at the front entrance to cheer for the newly married couple as they departed for their honeymoon.

With the exception of a few guests such as Rhys Winterborne, a Welsh department store owner, this was an aristocratic crowd. That meant the conversation consisted of subjects Tom couldn't give a rat's arse about. Foxhunting. Music. Distinguished ancestors. No one at these gatherings ever discussed business, politics, or anything else Tom might have found interesting.

The ancient Jacobean house had the typical dilapidated-but-luxurious look of an ancestral country manor. Tom didn't like old things, the smell of mustiness and the accumulated dust of centuries, the worn carpets, the ripples and distortions of antique window glass panes. Nor did the beauty of

the surrounding countryside hold any enchantment for him. Most people would have agreed that Hampshire, with its green hills, lush woodland, and sparkling chalk streams, was one of the most naturally beautiful places on earth. In general, however, the only thing Tom liked to do with nature was cover it with roads, bridges, and railway tracks.

The sounds of distant cheers and laughter funneled into the house's quiet interior. No doubt the newlyweds were making their escape amid a shower of uncooked rice. Everyone here seemed genuinely happy, which Tom found both annoying and somewhat mystifying. It was as if they all knew some secret that had been kept from him.

After having made a fortune in railways and construction, Tom had never expected to feel the bite of envy again. But here it was, gnawing at him like woodworm in old timber. It made no sense. He was happier than most of these people, or at least richer, which was more or less the same thing. But why didn't he *feel* happy? It had been months since he'd felt much of anything at all. He'd been overtaken by a gradual, creeping awareness that all his usual appetites had been blunted. Things that usually gave him pleasure now bored him. Nothing, not even spending a night in the arms of a beautiful woman, had been satisfying. He'd never been like this before. He was at a loss to know what to do about it.

He'd thought it might do him some good to spend some time with Devon and West Ravenel, whom he'd known for at least a decade. The three of them, along with the rest of their disreputable crowd, had often caroused and brawled their way across London. But things had changed. Two years ago, Devon had unexpectedly inherited an earldom and had assumed the role of responsible family patriarch. And West, the formerly carefree drunkard, now managed the estate and tenants, and talked incessantly about the weather. *The weather*, for God's sake. The Ravenel brothers, formerly so entertaining, had become as tedious as everyone else.

Entering an empty music room, Tom found a large upholstered chair occupying a shadowy nook. After turning the chair to face away from the door, he sat and closed his eyes. The room was as silent as a sepulcher, except for the delicate ticking of a clock somewhere. An unfamiliar weariness settled over him as gently as mist, and he let out a sigh. People had always joked about his vitality and his fast-paced life, and how no one could keep up with him. Now it seemed he couldn't keep up with himself.

He needed to do something to jolt himself out of this spell.

Maybe he should marry. At the age of thirty-one, it was high time to take a wife and sire children. There were dozens of eligible young women here, all blue-blooded and well-bred. Marrying one of them would help to advance him socially. He considered the Ravenel sisters. The oldest, Helen, had

married Rhys Winterborne, and Lady Pandora had married Lord St. Vincent this morning. But there was one sister left . . . Pandora's twin, Cassandra.

Tom had yet to meet her, but he'd caught a glimpse of her at dinner last night, through multiple bowers of greenery and forests of silver candelabra. From what he'd been able to tell, she was young, blond, and quiet. Which wasn't necessarily *all* he wanted in a wife, but it was a good start.

The sound of someone entering the room broke through his thoughts. *Damn.* Of the dozens of unoccupied rooms on this floor of the house, it would have to be this one. Tom was about to stand and make his presence known when the sounds of a female sob caused him to shrink deeper into the chair. *Oh, no.* A crying woman.

"I'm sorry," the unfamiliar feminine voice quavered. "I don't know why I'm so emotional."

For a moment Tom thought she might have been talking to him, but then a man replied.

"I imagine it's not easy to be separated from a sister who's always been your closest companion. A twin, no less." The speaker was West Ravenel, his tone far warmer and more tender than any Tom had ever heard him use before.

"It's only because I know I'll miss her. But I'm happy she's found true love. So very happy—" Her voice broke.

"So I see," West said dryly. "Here, take this handkerchief and let's wipe away those tears of joy."

"Thank you."

"It would hardly be unnatural," West commented kindly, "for you to feel a touch of jealousy. It's no secret that you've wanted to find a match, whereas Pandora has always been determined never to marry at all."

"I'm not jealous, I'm worried." The woman blew her nose with a soft little snort. "I've gone to all the dinners and dances, and I've met *everyone*. Some of the eligible gentlemen have been very pleasant, but even when there's nothing terribly wrong with one of them, there's nothing terribly right either. I've given up looking for love, I'm only searching for someone I could come to love over time, and I can't even find that. There's something wrong with me. I'm going to end up an old maid."

"There's no such thing as an old maid."

"Wh-what would you call a middle-aged lady who's never married?"

"A woman with standards?" West suggested.

"*You* might call it that, but everyone else says 'old maid.'" A glum pause. "Also, I'm too plump. All my dresses are tight."

"You look the same as always."

"My dress had to be altered last night. It wouldn't button up the back."

Twisting stealthily in the chair, Tom peeked around the edge. His breath caught as he stared at her in wonder.

For the first time in his life, Tom Severin was smitten. Smitten and slain.

She was beautiful the way fire and sunlight were beautiful, warm and glowing and golden. The sight of her dealt him a famished, hollow feeling. She was everything he'd missed in his disadvantaged youth, every lost hope and opportunity.

"Sweetheart," West murmured kindly, "listen to me. There's no need to worry. You'll either meet someone new, or you'll reconsider someone you didn't appreciate at first. Some men are an acquired taste. Like oysters, or Gorgonzola cheese."

She let out a shuddering sigh. "Cousin West, if I haven't married by the time I'm twenty-five . . . and you're still a bachelor . . . would you be my oyster?"

West looked at her blankly.

"Let's agree to marry each other someday," she continued, "if no one else wants us. I would be a good wife. All I've ever dreamed of is having my own little family, and a happy home where everyone feels safe and welcome. You know I never nag or slam doors or sulk in corners. I just need someone to take care of. I want to matter to someone. Before you refuse—"

"Lady Cassandra Ravenel," West interrupted, "that is the most idiotic idea anyone's come up with since Napoleon decided to invade Russia."

Her gaze turned reproachful. "Why?"

"Among a dizzying array of reasons, you're too young for me."

"You're no older than Lord St. Vincent, and he just married my twin."

"I'm older than him on the inside, by decades. My soul is a raisin. Take my word for it, you don't want to be my wife."

"It would be better than being lonely."

"What rubbish. 'Alone' and 'lonely' are entirely different things." West reached out to smooth back a dangling golden curl that had stuck against a drying tear track on her cheek. "Now, go bathe your face in cool water, and —"

"I'll be your oyster," Tom broke in. He stood from the chair and approached the pair, who stared at him in openmouthed astonishment.

Tom was more than a little surprised himself. If there was anything he was good at, it was negotiating business deals, and this was *not* the way to start off. In just a few words, he'd managed to put himself in the weakest possible position.

But he wanted her so badly, he couldn't help himself.

The closer he drew to her, the harder it became to think straight. His heart worked in a fast and broken rhythm he could feel against his ribs.

Cassandra moved close to West as if for protection, and stared at him as if he were a lunatic. Tom could hardly blame her. In fact, he already regretted this entire approach, but it was too late to hold back now.

West was scowling. "Severin, what the devil are you doing in here?"

"I was resting in the chair. After you started talking, I couldn't find a good moment to interrupt." Tom couldn't take his gaze from Cassandra. Her wide, wondering eyes were like soft blue midnight, star-glittered with forgotten tears. The curves of her body looked firm and sweet, no hard angles or straight lines anywhere . . . nothing but inviting, sensual softness. If she were his . . . he might finally have the sense of ease other men had. No more spending every minute of the day striving and hungering and never feeling sated.

"I'll marry you," Tom told her. "Any time. Any terms."

West gently nudged Cassandra toward the door. "Go, darling, while I talk with the insane man."

She gave her cousin a flustered nod and obeyed.

After she'd crossed the threshold, Tom said urgently, without thinking, "My lady?"

Slowly she reappeared, peeking at him from behind the doorjamb.

Tom wasn't sure what to say, only that he couldn't let her leave thinking she was anything less than perfect, exactly as she was.

"You're not too plump," he said gruffly. "The more of you there is in the world, the better."

As far as compliments went, it wasn't exactly eloquent, or even appropriate. But amusement sparkled in the one blue eye that was visible before Cassandra vanished.

Every muscle in his body tensed with the instinct to follow her like a hound on the scent.

West turned to face Tom, his expression puzzled and annoyed.

Before his friend could say a word, Tom asked urgently, "Can I have her?"

"No."

"I have to have her, let me have her—"

"No."

Tom turned businesslike. "You want her for yourself. Perfectly understandable. We'll negotiate."

"You just overheard me refusing to marry her," West pointed out irritably.

Which Tom hadn't believed for a moment. How could West, or any man with working parts, not want her with this all-consuming intensity?

"Obviously a strategy to reel her in later," he said. "But I'll give you a quarter of a railway company for her. Also shares in an excavation company. I'll throw in some hard cash. Name the amount."

“Are you mad? Lady Cassandra isn’t a possession I can hand over like an umbrella. In fact, I wouldn’t even give you an umbrella.”

“You could talk her into it. It’s obvious she trusts you.”

“And you think I would use that against her?”

Tom was perplexed and impatient. “What’s the point of having someone’s trust if you won’t use it against them?”

“Lady Cassandra is never going to marry you, Severin,” West said in exasperation.

“But she’s what I’ve always wanted.”

“How do you know? So far all you’ve seen is a pretty young woman with blond hair and blue eyes. Does it occur to you to wonder what’s on the inside?”

“No. I don’t care. She can be whatever she wants on the inside, as long as she lets me have the outside.” As Tom saw West’s expression, he said with a touch of defensiveness, “You know I’ve never been one of those sentimental fellows.”

“You mean the ones with actual human emotions?” West asked acidly.

“I have emotions.” Tom paused. “When I want to.”

“I’m having an emotion right now. And before it obliges me to wedge my boot up your arse, I’m going to put some distance between us.” West skewered him with a lethal glance. “Stay away from her, Tom. Find some other innocent girl to corrupt. I already have enough excuses to murder you as it is.”

Tom’s brows lifted. “Are you still sour about that contract negotiation?” he asked with a touch of surprise.

“I will always be sour about that,” West informed him. “You tried to cheat us out of the mineral rights to our own estate, when you knew we were at the verge of bankruptcy.”

“That was business,” Tom protested.

“What about friendship?”

“Friendship and business are two separate things.”

“Are you trying to claim you wouldn’t mind if a friend tried to fleece you, especially if you wanted the money?”

“I always want the money. That’s why I have so much of it. And no, I wouldn’t mind if a friend tried to fleece me; I would respect the effort.”

“You probably would.” West sounded far from admiring. “You may be a soulless bastard with the mindless appetite of a bull shark, but you’ve always been honest.”

“You’ve always been fair. That’s why I’m asking you to tell Lady Cassandra about my good qualities as well as the bad ones.”

“*What* good qualities?” West inquired sharply.

Tom had to think for a moment. "How rich I am?" he suggested.

West groaned and shook his head. "I might feel sorry for you, Tom, if you weren't such a selfish arse. I've seen you like this before, and I already know where it will lead. This is why you own more houses than you can live in, more horses than you can ride and more paintings than you have walls. For you, disappointment is inevitable. As soon as you obtain the object of your desire, it loses its power to enchant you. Knowing that, do you think Devon or I would ever allow you to court Cassandra?"

"I wouldn't lose interest in my own wife."

"How could it be otherwise?" West asked softly. "All that matters to you is the chase."

Chapter 2

After leaving the music room, Cassandra had hurried upstairs to her room to wash her face. A cool, wet compress on her eyes had helped to soothe the redness. There was no remedy, however, for the dull ache that had started as soon as she'd watched Pandora's carriage pull away from the house. Her twin, her other half, had begun a new life with her husband, Lord St. Vincent. And Cassandra was alone.

Fighting the urge to cry again, Cassandra slowly descended one side of the grand double staircase in the great entrance hall. She would have to mingle with guests in the formal gardens where an informal buffet had been set out. Guests came and went as they pleased, filling their gold-banded plates with hot breads, poached eggs on toast, smoked quail, fruit salad, and slices of charlotte russe made with sponge cake and Bavarian cream. Footmen crossed through the entrance hall as they headed outside with trays of coffee, tea, and iced champagne.

Ordinarily this was the kind of event Cassandra would have enjoyed to no end. She loved a nice breakfast, especially when there was a little something sweet to finish it off, and charlotte russe was one of her favorite desserts. However, she was in no mood to make small talk with anyone. Besides, she'd eaten far too many sweets lately . . . the extra jam tart at teatime yesterday, and all the fruit ices between dinner courses last night, and that entire éclair, stuffed with rich almond cream and roofed with a crisp layer of icing. And one of the little decorative marzipan flowers from a platter of puddings.

Halfway down the stairs, Cassandra had to pause and gasp for air. She put a hand to her lower ribs, where her corset had been cinched more firmly than usual. As a rule, everyday corsets were close-fitting to support the back and promote good posture, but they weren't punishingly tight. She only tight-laced for special occasions such as this. With the extra weight she had

recently gained, Cassandra felt miserably bound up and breathless and hot. The stays seemed to trap all the air near the top of her lungs. Red-faced, she sat at the side of the staircase and leaned against the balusters. The corners of her eyes were stinging again.

Oh, this has to stop. Vexed with herself, Cassandra took a handkerchief from the concealed pocket of her dress and pressed it hard over a new trickle of tears. After a minute or two had passed, she became aware of someone ascending the stairs in a measured tread.

Embarrassed to be caught crying on the steps like a lost child, Cassandra struggled to rise.

A low voice stopped her. "No . . . please. I only wanted to give you this."

Through a blur, she saw the dark form of Tom Severin, who had come to stand a step below her, with two glasses of iced champagne in his hands. He extended one to her.

Cassandra began to reach for it, but hesitated. "I'm not supposed to have champagne unless it's mixed with punch."

One corner of his wide mouth tipped upward. "I won't tell."

Cassandra took the glass gratefully, and drank. The cold fizz was wonderful, easing the dry tightness of her throat.

"Thank you," she murmured.

He gave her a brief nod and turned to leave.

"Wait," Cassandra said, although she wasn't sure whether she wanted him to stay or leave.

Mr. Severin turned back to her with a questioning glance.

During their brief encounter in the music room, Cassandra had been too flustered to notice much about him. He'd been so very odd, jumping out like that and offering to marry a complete stranger. Also, she'd been absolutely mortified for him to have overheard her tearful disclosure to West, especially the part about having her dress altered.

But now it was impossible not to notice how very good-looking he was, tall and elegantly lean, with dark hair, a clear, fair complexion, and thick brows set at a slightly diabolical slant. If she were to judge his features individually—the long nose, the wide mouth, the narrow eyes, the sharply angled cheeks and jaw—she wouldn't have expected him to be this attractive. But somehow when it was all put together, his looks were striking and interesting in a way she'd remember far longer than conventional handsomeness.

"You're welcome to join me," Cassandra found herself saying.

Severin hesitated. "Is that what you want?" he surprised her by asking.

Cassandra had to consider the question. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "I don't want to be alone . . . but I don't especially want to be with anyone either."

"I'm the perfect solution, then." He lowered to the place beside her. "You can say whatever you like to me. I make no moral judgments."

Cassandra was slow to reply, momentarily distracted by his eyes. They were blue with dapples of brilliant green around the pupils, but one eye had far more green than the other.

"Everyone makes judgments," she said in response to his statement.

"I don't. My sense of right and wrong is different from most people's. You could say I'm a moral nihilist."

"What's that?"

"Someone who believes nothing is innately right or wrong."

"Oh, that's dreadful," she exclaimed.

"I know," he said, looking apologetic.

Perhaps some gently bred young women would have been shocked, but Cassandra was accustomed to unconventional people. She'd grown up with Pandora, whose twisty-turny, hippity-hoppity brain had enlivened an unbearably secluded life. In fact, Mr. Severin possessed a kind of contained energy that reminded her a little of Pandora. One could see it in the eyes, the quicksilver workings of a mind that ran at a faster speed than those of other people.

After another sip of champagne, Cassandra was relieved to discover the urge to cry had passed, and she could breathe normally again.

"You're supposed to be a genius, aren't you?" she asked, recalling a discussion between Devon, West, and Mr. Winterborne, all friends with Severin. They'd agreed the railway magnate possessed the most brilliant business mind of anyone they knew. "Sometimes intelligent people can make something simple into something very complicated. Perhaps that's why you have difficulty with right and wrong."

That elicited a brief grin. "I'm not a genius."

"You're being modest," she said.

"I'm never modest." Mr. Severin drained the rest of his champagne, set down the glass, and turned to face her more fully. "I have an above-average intellect and a photographic memory. But that's not genius."

"How interesting," Cassandra said uneasily, thinking, *Oh, dear . . . more oddness*. "You take photographs with your mind?"

His lips twitched, as if he could read her thoughts. "Not like that. I retain information more easily than images. Some things—charts or schedules, pages from a book—I can recall in perfect detail, as if I'm looking at a picture. I remember the furniture arrangements and the art on the walls of nearly every house I've ever visited. Every word of every contract I've signed and business deal I've negotiated are in here." He tapped his temple with a long finger.

"Are you joking?" Cassandra asked in amazement.

"Unfortunately, no."

"Why on earth is it unfortunate to be intelligent?"

"Well, that's the problem: Recalling vast amounts of information doesn't mean you're intelligent. It's what you do with the information." His expression turned wry. "Remembering too many things makes the brain inefficient. There's a certain amount of information we're supposed to forget because we don't need it, or because it hinders us. But I remember all the failed attempts as well as the successes. All the mistakes and negative outcomes. Sometimes it's like being caught in a dust storm—there's too much debris flying about for me to see clearly."

"It sounds quite fatiguing to have a photographic memory. Still, you've made the most of it. One can't really pity you."

He grinned at that, and hung his head. "I suppose not."

Cassandra finished the last drops of champagne before setting aside her glass. "Mr. Severin, may I ask something personal?"

"Of course."

"Why did you offer to be my oyster?" A hot blush climbed her face. "Is it because I'm pretty?"

His head lifted. "Partly," he admitted without a hint of shame. "But I also liked what you said—that you never nag or slam doors, and you're not looking for love. I'm not either." He paused, his vibrant gaze holding hers. "I think we would be a good match."

"I didn't mean I don't *want* love," Cassandra protested. "I only meant I'd be willing to let love grow in time. To be clear, I want a husband who could also love me back."

Mr. Severin took his time about replying. "What if you had a husband who, although not handsome, was not altogether bad-looking and happened to be very rich? What if he were kind and considerate, and gave you whatever you asked for—mansions, jewels, trips abroad, your own private yacht and luxury railway carriage? What if he were exceptionally good at . . ." He paused, appearing to think better of what he'd been about to say. "What if he were your protector and friend? Would it really matter so much if he couldn't love you?"

"Why couldn't he?" Cassandra asked, intrigued and perturbed. "Is he missing a heart altogether?"

"No, he has one, but it's never worked that way. It's . . . frozen."

"Since when?"

He thought for a moment. "Birth?" he offered.

"Hearts don't start out frozen," Cassandra said wisely. "Something happened to you."