

Every now and again, I have ambitious plans to use current books to set up future books. As planning ahead is not my forte, this usually fails miserably. When I began *Emerald Ring*, I assumed I would write Charlotte's book next and wanted to do something to bring Charlotte into the spotlight, preparatory for her star turn. It didn't quite work—which, in the event, turned out to be a good thing, since the following book was hijacked by Mary and Vaughn and wound up not featuring any Charlotte at all. (That was the book that became *The Seduction of the Crimson Rose*.) Poor Charlotte had to wait a whole extra year for *The Temptation of the Night Jasmine*.

Below, you can see one of the lost Charlotte scenes from the original draft of *Emerald Ring*, in which Charlotte, in classic Charlotte fashion, attempts to console an anxious Letty on her less than joyous wedding day.

"He said something about hemlock."

Letty grimaced. "For him, or for me?"

Charlotte saw the grimace and strove to reassure her. "Oh, for him!" she said, with an emphatic nod. "It was quite definitely for him."

"In other words," summed up Letty grimly, "when it came down to marrying me or death, he chose death."

"He hasn't killed himself yet," pointed out Charlotte encouragingly.

"It's only been four hours," riposted Letty.

"Oh, Letty." Charlotte sank down on the settee next to her and rested a tentative hand on her friend's arm. She said earnestly, "You know you can always come to us at Dovedale House. Grandmama likes you... or, at least, she doesn't dislike you," amended Charlotte, "which is much the same thing with Grandmama."

*Some books scoot along peacefully from event to event and chapter to chapter. Others stall out. *Emerald Ring* was definitely a staller. In the fall of 2005 (my 3L year of law school), I spent a good two months stalled out on Chapter Six. I had an image, you see. Images always get me in trouble. It was an image of Letty sitting on her side of the connecting door at Pinchingdale House, waiting for her spouse to enter. It was the classic Arranged Marriage moment, the moment that always makes your heart go all a-flutter as you wonder, *Will they? Or won't they? Only—it wouldn't work.* After two months, I scrapped the connecting door and went with the version currently in *Emerald Ring*, where both Letty and Geoff leave straight from the party.*

Resurrected from the archives, here's the original version of Chapter Six, connecting door and

all:

Chapter Six

By the following evening, Letty was sure of just one thing. She would rather be anywhere than where she was.

The Viscountess' chambers at Pinchingdale were a frothy rococo fantasy in pale pink and gilt. Simpering shepherdesses frolicked with amorous goatherds in perennial flirtation along the base of the vases perched on either side of the dressing table, and the gilded mirrors on the walls boasted more whimsical curves than a Botticelli Venus. Next to the flowered satin brocade of the bed-hangings, Letty's hand looked uncouthly brown, darkened by years of roaming around the countryside without her gloves. Letty quickly dropped the corner of the hangings and retreated to the dressing table, but there was no refuge to be found there. Even in all the unaccustomed glory of her best dress, with a fashionable cameo on a ribbon around her throat for ornament, Letty felt like a maid who had strayed into her mistress' room after hours.

But it wasn't the Fragonard fantasies painted in mural along the walls, or even cupids supporting the mantle that wore at Letty's nerves, and made her pace anxiously up and down on the Aubusson carpet, feet treading nervously over the gay pattern of trellises and roses. It was the door.

The connecting door.

It was a flimsy little door, the pale blue of the paint scarcely visible under the fantastical gilded moldings that writhed across the surface. The twisted golden doorknob was scarcely distinguishable from the rest of the ornamentation. Unless one had been staring at it for the past half an hour. Letty had been staring at it for so long she was sure that if she closed her eyes the image of the twining golden vines would be imprinted permanently on the insides of her eyelids.

Letty dropped her head into her hands and rubbed her fingers hard over her eyes, as if by doing so she could wipe out the door, the room, the day. There was so much to obliterate, Letty didn't know where to begin. She could, she supposed, start with the long walk down the aisle that morning, the malicious whispers of the wedding guests hissing in her ears. In the space between door and altar, Letty had heard no fewer than sixteen versions of her own ruin, none of them coming anywhere near the truth. When a child's voice piped over the general din to ask, "Mama, is that what a fallen woman looks like?" Letty had had to choke back a hysterical giggle. She ought, she thought madly, to have satisfied their suspicions, and undulated down the aisle wearing wetted muslin and a bodice that barely dipped nearly to her waist. Instead, in her best evening dress, hastily made over for the occasion, with its modest lace fichu and little bows on the puffed sleeves, she had looked more like a vicar's daughter at a country assembly than a

notorious wanton, much to the visible disappointment of the scandal seekers packed into the pews of St. George's Hanover Square.

Scandals just weren't supposed to happen to people like her. Scandals happened to people like Mary. Beautiful people. Daring people. Irresponsible people. They happened to those who pushed the edges of society's strictures and threatened the comfortable commonplaces of the world around them. Letty had never pushed anything more exciting than the edges of her family's budget. Scandals didn't happen to people like Letty, who washed behind their ears, braided their hair at bedtime, and always ate all their green vegetables. Well, almost always. But, surely, a spear of broccoli more or less couldn't make that much of a difference on the cosmic scales that weighed good and evil.

Yet, here she was, in the gilded opulence of a Mayfair bedchamber, keeping a nervous eye on the connecting door in case her reluctant husband should choose to exercise his marital rights.

Letty plucked at a stray thread on the fraying cuff of her white linen nightdress, and contemplated what she would do when the gilded handle finally moved. Since the night of their disastrous midnight adventure, she and Lord Pinchingdale had exchanged a grand total of four words.

One "I do" each, to be precise.

Over the course of the endless day, they had moved in parallel through the throngs of curious guests, smilingly accepting congratulations and deftly deflecting tactless queries—at least, Lord Pinchingdale deftly deflected tactless queries. Letty simply continued to smile. She was afraid that if she stopped, even to speak, she would never be able to put the expression back. And, all the while, throughout the long, painful afternoon, there had been Lord Pinchingdale standing next to her, close enough that the sleeve of his blue, superfine coat brushed her gloved arm. Close enough that she could feel the heat from his body, like the warmth of a fire in a neighboring room, just close enough to sense, but too far away to afford any comfort. The faint tang of his bay rum cologne teased her nose, bringing with it memories of a stolen moment in a dark inn yard, memories so vivid that Letty would have blushed from them if she hadn't already been pink-cheeked with heat and embarrassment. Close enough for memory, but not close enough to speak. A nearly tangible barrier existed between them, compounded of Lord Pinchingdale's stiff posture and the watchful eyes of the wedding guests, clamping down on any impulse to speak more effectively than concentric walls of stone. Time after time, Letty snuck sideways glances at her new husband, convinced, each time, that she had reached the limit of her endurance, and something had to be said. But every time she turned, prepared to tug on his arm, and demand they speak—now—something about Lord Pinchingdale's still profile had blunted the attempt.

Letty snuck another look at the connecting door, which was remaining infuriatingly, resolutely stationary. Should she open it? Should she just barge through and—but there was the rub. She

wasn't quite sure exactly what she meant to say. Over the past day, she had gone through several versions, which varied according to her mood. Letty had considered and discarded, "If you hadn't been so foolish as to elope, neither of us would be in this mess." While an accurate reflection of her feelings, it wasn't exactly the most politic way to go about establishing a truce with her new husband. "I'm sorry," went far too far in the opposite direction. Certainly she was sorry he'd been forced to marry her—she was sorry she'd been forced to marry him—but to apologize would be tantamount to admitting to guilt, for a situation that just wasn't her fault. Or, at least, only a little bit her fault, Letty amended, squirming uncomfortably on the chair in front of the dressing table. She couldn't quite blot out Mary's scathing indictment of her interference.

Maybe she was a little meddlesome. Letty picked up the silver backed brush from the dressing table, incised with the monogram of a past viscountess, and applied it vigorously to her hair. If she was meddlesome, it was only because other people couldn't properly manage their own affairs.

Of course, she couldn't see that argument making terribly much of an impression on Lord Pinchingdale either. It would have to be the rational approach. Of all the men of her acquaintance, Lord Pinchingdale seemed most likely to respond to a calm critique of the facts. This marriage may not have been what either of them wanted, but there was no reason they couldn't at least try to make something palatable out of it, rather than skulking about behind connecting doors, fretting about the future. They would have a nice, sensible talk about their unfortunate situation, she would convince him she was as much a victim of circumstance as he, and then.... Letty's eyes strayed in the direction of the bed, then hastily scooted away again.

That line of thought was not exactly conducive to calm and sensible.

Unbidden, memories of those confused moments in the carriage interposed themselves against the gay ornamentation of the room, memories of gloved hands in her hair, and warm breath against her lips and a strong arm across her back, pressing her closer.

But all the tenderness in that embrace, Letty reminded herself, sitting primly on the edge of her chair, had been intended for Mary, not her. The best she could hope for was kindness. Amiability. She didn't expect to inspire the sort of devotion her sister had. Letty regarded her own small figure in the glass with an ironic quirk of the eyebrows. Launching ships just wasn't in her line. But companionship wasn't too much to ask for, was it? Once they sorted out the series of misunderstandings that had brought them to this point.

Letty rose determinedly from her perch in front of the dressing table. Enough behaving like a nunny. If she didn't want to spend the rest of her life staring at the connecting door, jumping at the sound of someone moving around in the room next door, she was going to have to take matters into her own little brown hands. Now. Not in an hour, not in a week.

Belatedly, Letty realized she was still holding the silver-backed brush, hoisting it aloft like Macbeth's dagger. Somehow, Letty doubted Lord Pinchingdale would be overawed into submission by threat of bludgeoning by brush. Letty sheepishly deposited the brush back on the dresser and made for the door with a less jaunty gait than she had begun.

On the other side of the connecting door, she could hear the faint sound of someone moving about. Taking a deep breath, Letty forced her cold fingers to close around the twisted brasswork of the doorknob. A nice, sensible conversation, she reminder herself. Surely, they could behave like two reasonable adults?

With unnecessary force, Letty pushed down on the knob and strode through the adjoining door.

"My lord," she began, and stopped abruptly.

The room couldn't be more different from hers. In place of the pale blue woodwork and nearly blinding profusion of gold leaf, Lord Pinchingdale's room was a masculine den of dark woods and royal blue hangings, the furniture heavily carved and obviously long-used. A vast Jacobean bed dominated one side of the room, flanked by chests of the same era, depicting the adventures of a knight leveling his lance against a series of windmills, his helm slightly askew, and his armor too large for him. By the fire, a round table had been set, and with it cane-backed chairs, made comfortable with a profusion of velvet-covered cushions, beginning to spit stuffing out the corners.

Lord Pinchingdale wasn't in the bed, and he wasn't at the table.

Instead, a neatly garbed maid was brushing the ashes of a recently extinguished fire out of the grate, leaving the hearth as cold and empty as the room.

Seeing Letty, the maid clutched her pail to her chest with both hands and bobbed a curtsy. "Your ladyship."

"Oh, hello," said Letty flatly, stopping short with her hand still on the door knob. She curled her bare toes into the weave of the carpet, peering around the maid, for any hint of her husband's presence. Knowing she was being ridiculous, but unable to stop herself, she asked hesitantly, "Is your master in?"

The maid's grip on the handle of the bucket relaxed a bit as she regarded her new mistress with evident surprise.

"You didn't know, my lady?" she asked, with something that sounded uncomfortably like pity.

"Know?" Letty echoed, resisting the impulse to peer underneath the great bed, just in case her husband might have dived down there to avoid her.

“Lord Pinchingdale left, my lady,” the maid said carefully, in the tone of one imparting news of a death in the family. “This evening.”

“He left,” Letty repeated, hating herself for the sudden wild surge of relief that gripped her at the news. It wasn’t really a reprieve, she reminded herself, only a stay of execution. They would still have to talk tomorrow... or the next day.... “For his club?”

“No, my lady.” The maid’s shovel hit the edge of the bucket with a sound like a church bell tolling. “For Ireland.”