

JILTED BY A CAD by Cheryl Holt

EXCERPT

PROLOGUE

“What time is it now?”

Josephine Bates, simply called Jo by her acquaintances, whispered the question to her half-sister and lone sibling, Maud.

“Almost one-thirty,” Maud whispered in reply. “Something must have happened to delay him.”

“He’ll be here any second,” Jo loyally insisted.

“Yes, I’m certain he will be,” Maud halfheartedly agreed.

They shifted uncomfortably, jumping as the vicar cleared his throat. They were seated in the front pew at the church, so he was able to glare down at them with stunning effect. He checked his timepiece, and he wasn’t discreet about it. Then he cast an exasperated scowl at his wife. She tiptoed over to Jo and leaned down so they could speak quietly.

“Miss Bates,” she said, “my husband has another wedding to perform. The bride and groom are waiting.”

Jo and Maud didn’t have to peek over their shoulders to realize that fact.

The church door kept opening, and they would whip around to see who had entered, being positive Jo’s fiancé, Mr. Cartwright, would march in. He’d be laughing and full of apologies as to why he’d been late for the most important appointment of his life.

But it had never been Mr. Cartwright. Couples were lined up to wed after Jo, and they were accompanied by their friends and families. Jo was the only person with no entourage. Her only guest and witness was to be Maud. Mr. Cartwright wasn’t bringing anyone either.

The members of the nuptial party behind them were occupying several rows and impatient for Jo to get out of the way so they could start their own joyous event. Their glowers cut into her back.

When Mr. Cartwright had scheduled the ceremony, the vicar had firmly explained that it would be *wedding* day at the small chapel. Every half hour, he would officiate with a new bride and groom. He offered a quick service for those who didn’t have a pile of money to waste on frivolities or who couldn’t abide the enormous fuss and bother of a big celebration.

Jo was definitely part of that group. She craved a fast conclusion where she could shuck off the past and become a bride. She was eighteen, and with her pretty looks, sunny demeanor, and acceptable

dowry, it was an opportunity she'd always expected to occur. Yet she hadn't expected it to occur quite so soon.

Mr. Cartwright had burst into their world like a comet streaking across the sky. With very little effort, he'd swept Jo off her feet. Her head was still spinning over how swiftly it had all coalesced.

She was about to have her own home, was about to escape Maud's snits and rages. It was so thrilling to be marrying, to have found a spirited, amiable husband like Mr. Cartwright. She couldn't believe she'd been so lucky.

"I'm sorry to have been an impediment," Jo said to the vicar's wife. "Please tell your husband to proceed with the next ceremony. My betrothed, Mr. Cartwright, should be here shortly. If your husband is amenable, perhaps he can squeeze us in afterward."

"Yes, that will work." The vicar's wife frowned at Maud, then at Jo. "Should we send someone to check on Mr. Cartwright? He's over an hour late."

Jo would have declared that he'd appear at any moment, but before she could defend him, Maud butted in. "Maybe we should send someone, Jo. I'm worried he might have suffered an accident."

At the prospect, Jo's pulse raced. "He hasn't had an accident, Maud. Don't jinx us. There has to be a perfectly good reason for his failure to arrive."

The vicar's wife didn't seem to think so. "I can have my son, Tim, ask after him. We'll all be relieved to receive some answers."

Jo wanted to remain steadfast, wanted to argue that Mr. Cartwright hardly needed to supply any answers, but Maud silenced her with a dour grimace.

He rented a room at a men's boarding house. Maud provided the address to Tim. He nodded and rushed off.

Maud and Jo moved to the rear pew so the newcomers could have the front. They sat through the ceremony, then the next one, and the next one too. Jo's spirits had flagged to their lowest ebb. People passing in and out cast curious glances at her, having heard her groom hadn't shown up.

She slunk down, wishing she were invisible. Who treated a bride as Mr. Cartwright was treating her? Who treated any woman—bride or not—so shabbily?

Yes, Mr. Cartwright was always late. He joked about it, and initially, she'd been irked by his sloppy manners. But then, after she'd learned how jolly and carefree he could be, she'd set aside her aggravation. He wasn't like other men, and she was glad he wasn't.

She'd grown up at her father's estate in the country. Her mother had perished when she was a baby, and Jo's father had been a detached parent who'd mostly stayed in London. She'd been raised by servants, with Maud as her sole companion. Maud was five years older than Jo, and she was stoic, petty, and vain. She barked and criticized, so having her as a companion was like having no one at all.

Jo had lived a modest, simple existence, and she hadn't had any experience with wooing or romance. The chief male to whom she could compare Mr. Cartwright was her deceased father. He'd been grouchy and unhappy, so Mr. Cartwright was a breath of fresh air who'd brought excitement into her dreary world.

He didn't *love* her. They hadn't known each other long enough for strong feelings to develop, but he certainly possessed a tender regard. He wouldn't leave her in the lurch. Still though, it had been two hours.

The weight of the day pressed down on her, and it was incredibly difficult to maintain her calm façade

"I have to step outside," she mumbled to Maud, and she hurried away without pausing to discover if Maud followed.

She walked out, and she tarried, studying the busy street. They were in London, at a chapel to which she and Maud had no connection. She'd have liked to be married at her local church, but she'd let Mr. Cartwright convince her that London was better.

He'd been anxious to proceed immediately with a Special License, then he planned to whisk her away to Manchester so he could introduce Jo to his sister. It was easiest to depart from London. She'd agreed to his every suggestion, and why wouldn't she have?

She was thoroughly smitten, and he was such a delightful fellow. Even Maud liked him—when she didn't like anyone. But now, with Jo standing by herself—her hair curled and braided and her bouquet wilting—she was beginning to panic.

What did she really know about Mr. Cartwright? She'd had no parent to make inquiries or furnish advice. There was only Maud, and Maud—her guardian—was as eager to be shed of Jo as Jo was to flee their tedious home. When Mr. Cartwright had proposed, Maud hadn't hesitated to consent.

The church door opened, and Maud sidled out.

"Has he jilted me, Maud?" she asked.

"I refuse to speculate."

"If he doesn't come, I'll die. I'll just die!"

"Nobody's dying." Maud's tone was very stern.

"Where is he then?"

"It's his habit to be tardy."

"It's been over two hours!"

Jo burst into tears. She couldn't help it. The stress of the prior few weeks had finally caught up with her. With Mr. Cartwright's speedy courtship and his insistence on a quick wedding, she'd barely had time to pack her belongings and say her goodbyes.

One minute, she'd been a young lady living with her spinster sister in the house Maud had inherited from her grandmother. Then the next, she'd been engaged and racing toward her new life as a bride. It was too much to take in.

Maud pulled out a kerchief and stuffed it in Jo's palm.

"Don't cry," Maud scolded. "You always look horrid when you do. What if he strolled up this very second and your face was all red and mottled?"

Jo chuckled miserably. "Dear Maud, you never cease to put me in my place."

"Someone has to. Otherwise, you'd be quite out of control."

"Yes, that's me—a wild, unrestrained girl."

A hysterical laugh bubbled up, and she swallowed it down. There was no more boring, reserved person in the kingdom than Josephine Bates. To consider herself as ever being *out of control* was hilarious.

Down the block, the vicar's son, Tim, was returning, and they stiffened. He was alone, Mr. Cartwright not with him. Maud actually clasped Jo's hand and squeezed her fingers.

"Miss Bates?" Tim said as he ran up. "I checked on Mr. Cartwright for you."

"Yes. What have you learned?"

His cheeks flushed as if he was embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Miss Bates, but Mr. Cartwright left town this morning. At dawn."

Jo cocked her head, as if he'd spoken in a foreign language she didn't understand. "Left...for where?"

"Apparently, he was off to Scotland for some hunting."

Maud sucked in a sharp breath, and Jo weaved side to side, scarcely able to keep her balance. She couldn't have heard correctly.

"You're sure?" Jo asked.

"Very sure." Tim withdrew a letter from his coat and offered it to Jo. "The proprietor of the boarding house made me give you this."

Jo gaped at it as if it were a venomous snake. She was afraid to reach for it, but ultimately, she grabbed it and read it slowly as Maud tried to peek over her shoulder.

"What does he say?" Maud asked.

"It's a bill for Mr. Cartwright's lodging," Jo murmured. "He didn't pay what he owes, and the proprietor is demanding we pay for him."

"You're joking!"

"No."

Maud yanked the letter away and scanned to the bottom to the amount that had accrued. “Well, I never!” she huffed. “What gall! What insolence! How dare he?”

Jo couldn’t decide if Maud was referring to Mr. Cartwright or the proprietor.

There was an awkward silence, then Jo said to Tim, “By any chance, was there a message for me from Mr. Cartwright?”

“No, Miss Bates. He simply packed his bag and departed. He...ah...claimed he’d had enough of London and the people here.”

“I see...”

“I told the proprietor about your wedding.”

“And...?” Maud asked when Jo couldn’t.

“Mr. Cartwright never mentioned any wedding,” Tim responded, “and the proprietor had no idea he was betrothed. He’d been...ah...keeping company with an actress the entire time he was staying at the man’s house.”

“What?” Maud gasped.

“I thought you should know,” Tim muttered.

Jo’s knees gave out, and she collapsed down onto the step.

Behind her, Maud was whispering to Tim. She slipped him a coin, telling him to talk to his mother, to apprise the vicar that Jo’s name could be scratched from his schedule. But Jo couldn’t focus on them.

She could only ponder handsome, cheerful Mr. Cartwright who was supposed to rescue her, who was supposed to provide the contented future she’d dreamed of having.

“What now?” she wailed to the gray sky.

It had been cool and cloudy all day, and it was starting to sprinkle. The drops plopped on the sidewalk, on her shoulders and bonnet too. The rain was cold and uncomfortable, but she didn’t feel it.

She didn’t feel anything at all.