



Deleted Prologue
***THE DUKE
AND THE DARKNESS***

Book #1 in the Dukes of
Darkness series

Warning – *This scene contains violence and violence of a sexual nature. (My agent said this prologue needed all kinds of trigger warnings, so it was cut from the final book for being too dark. Read at your own risk.)*

Prologue

London

Early March, 1806

Something wasn't...*right*.

Peyton could feel it, as surely as she felt the damp midnight air prickling at her skin.

She tried to peer through the

carriage windows at the city as they moved slowly through London, from Dartmoor House in Pall Mall toward their own townhouse on the north edge of Mayfair, but her attention kept darting back to her parents as they sat on the bench on the other side of the dark compartment from her. Unusually silent, both of them stared out opposite windows although nothing could be seen through the thick fog.

There had been words as they'd walked to the carriage and climbed inside. Angry, impatient words exchanged in that low voice that her parents reserved for those arguments that they didn't want her to overhear.

Papa had been with Dartmoor and the Duke of Crewe in the library, where the men had been drinking port and smoking cigars, while the ladies and the other gentlemen had been in the drawing room, listening to an opera singer whom the duchess had engaged for the evening's entertainment. So wonderful! That her first foray into society should have been at Dartmoor House, that Devlin Raines, Marquis of Truro and one of the most handsome young men she'd ever seen, was home from university—she could barely believe how lucky she was...until Papa appeared unexpectedly in the drawing room, his face flushed, and insisted that they leave. Right then. Long before the evening's festivities were over. Mama barely had time to give proper goodbyes before Papa practically pulled her out the door. Peyton had only gotten a lingering parting look herself at Truro—who hadn't seemed to notice that she'd been in the room at all—before she slipped out the door behind them.

Her chest ached with disappointment that they'd left so early, that barely none of the guests had gotten a chance to see her in her gown, the pale pink one with mulberry-colored ribbons that was made of satin and felt so soft when Mama's maid Proctor helped her dress this evening. Just like a real lady. True, she was only sixteen and wouldn't have her formal debut for another two years. And also true, Truro most likely paid her no more mind than a piece of furniture, with his moss-green eyes fixed on the opera singer and oblivious to everyone else in the room. Oh, but it was grand just to be there!

In truth, she shouldn't have been there. Neither should have her parents. Oh, her father was a very respected businessman, with a growing reputation among England's elite that allowed them to associate with the lower levels of society. But attending a soiree hosted by a duke and duchess was something special indeed, even for Charles Chandler, who had money but no title or old family line to leverage for higher status within the *ton*. Mama certainly realized that, which was most likely why Edwina Chandler had dared to spare publicly with her husband for insisting that they leave early.

Another stolen glance at her parents in the darkness, then back to the window, despite the fog that made seeing anything of London impossible tonight. So thick, in fact, that the driver had made them wait in front of Dartmoor House while he sent one of the tigers to fetch lamps because he said it wasn't safe to travel without them. Then they had to wait because the tiger had trouble finding a spare lantern in the Dartmoor Stables that they could use, then wait even longer because the lamp was dry and wouldn't light, sending the same tiger back to the stables again. It had been a good twenty minutes of very tense silence in the dark compartment before they'd even been able to start off.

Even then, they'd moved slowly, with the tiger walking in front of the carriage, holding up the lamp to light the way and guide them home. Peyton had no idea where they were or how far they'd traveled, and nothing that was visible in ghostly images through the sea of white-gray gave her any sense of position. But she prayed that they'd reach home soon, so she could get out of the damp and cold—and out of the tension between her parents that felt as thick as the fog choking in around them in the pitch blackness.

"Where are we?" Mama whispered, reaching to place her hand on Papa's leg and gain his attention. "It feels as if we're heading in the wrong direction."

"That's just the fog. It makes everything feel twice as far as it really is." He patted her hand reassuringly, but his voice lacked conviction. "We'll be home shortly."

Mama nodded and turned back toward the window, but this time, she didn't pull her hand away from Papa's.

A few minutes later, the carriage stopped.

Papa pounded his fist on the roof to get the driver's attention. "What's wrong? Why have we stopped?"

"A problem with the lamp, sir," the driver called back, his voice muffled by the closed carriage. "We'll be on our way again shortly."

"See there?" Papa squeezed Mama's hand with a smile in the darkness. "Just the lamp. Nothing to—"

The window shattered.

Her mother's scream filled the carriage with a blood-curdling terror. Seconds later the opposite window smashed, and pieces of glass flew across the compartment, spraying onto Peyton's lap. Arms reached inside the carriage to yank the doors open. Her father

beat at the men with his fists, but the doors were torn from the carriage, left to dangle at a unnatural angle.

The team startled at the noise, and the carriage jerked forward before they were stopped, throwing Peyton and her parents off-balance.

With a soft cry, her mother fell onto the floor between the benches. Then large gloved hands grabbed her legs and ripped her out of the carriage, even as her hands clawed at the floor to save herself.

“Edwina!”

Her father lunged for her, grabbing her wrists as she clung to the door frame by her fingertips. “Charles, help me! Dear God, please—*please!*”

Then she slipped through his grasp, yanked out into the darkness by the attackers.

Through the other open door, a man grabbed Papa from behind. In one motion a large hand grasped her father by his chin and yanked up his head as a blade slashed through the darkness, slicing across his throat. His body jerked, and a horrific gurgling sound filled the darkness.

Peyton screamed, so loud that her throat burned as the sound tore from her. Over and over, scream after scream—

Then hands reached for her, to yank her out of the carriage. Her head struck the frame, and a blinding pain left her breathless. Black spots blotted out what little she could see in the fog and darkness. But she grasped for the carriage to keep from being dragged away, even as the attacker struck at her face again and again. They were going to kill her. If she let go, they would kill her—

Her hands slipped loose, and she fell backward through the air, landing hard against the wet cobblestones with a jarring thud. She cried out not in terror now but in pure fury, kicking and hitting as hard as she could at the man who had come after her. Tiny fists and kicks...useless against the man’s larger size. His face was hidden in the shadows, but she clawed at his eyes and ripped at his clothing, fighting with every ounce of strength inside her. Her nails caught him where his neck sloped into his shoulder and sank deep, digging a trench of blood through his flesh.

“Bitch!”

A lucky kick caught him between the legs. He let go of her with a muted grunt of pain, and Peyton scrambled away, crawling desperately across the wet cobblestones and still begging for help. But there was only the sound of her own screams echoing off the stone walls of the alley.

A boot struck her in the temple, and she collapsed with a whimper. Then the man was on top of her, straddling her as he held her down beneath him. She was helpless, and her stomach roiled sickeningly. His hands yanked up her skirts—

Across the alley, Peyton saw her mother lying face down on the cobblestones, not moving. Mama’s lifeless eyes stared blankly as a trickle of blood seeped from her nose...Then the darkness mercifully overtook her.