



*Special
Sneak Peek!*

***THE DUKE
AND THE
DARKNESS***

*Book #1 in the Dukes of
Darkness series*

by
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**WHEN THEIR DEEPEST SECRETS
COME TO LIGHT...**

Devlin Raines, Duke of Dartmoor, has worked hard to put his father's sins and his life as a former mercenary into the past. He's saved the family's reputation, kept his mother and sisters safe, and is on the verge of a respectable—if loveless—marriage. His future seems on track—until a mysterious, beautiful woman inverts his world...a woman who can only be a ghost.

**ONLY THE DARKNESS
CAN SAVE THEM**

Peyton Chandler is dead to the world. When assassins attacked her family's carriage ten years ago, killing her parents and attacking her, she faked her own death to stay alive. But now she's returned to London to seek revenge against the man she believes was responsible...Devlin Raines. Only the more time she spends with him, the more everything she thought was true falls apart. And before she knows it, her only safe path to finding answers depends upon her ability to trust the one man she swore to destroy.

As events draw them closer, they're forced to work together to uncover the truth. But can they ever trust each other...or will the past destroy them both?

CHAPTER ONE

London
May 1817

Devlin Raines, Duke of Dartmoor, watched the dealer turn over the last card. An ace. He bit back a curse as the dealer scooped up the coins and kept them for the club.

Luck was not on his side tonight.

With a grimace, he stood, excused himself before another hand could be dealt, and made his way through the crowded game room toward the bar.

Good Lord, he was having a terrible night at the tables. If he were a superstitious man, he'd say that fate was out to get him.

Not just tonight, either. For the past few weeks, he couldn't buy a win at cards, and the losses were starting to add up. Worse, they were damnably embarrassing, and he had a reputation as a gambler to uphold, even here at Barton's where they let in any man as long as he had enough money to back his bets and any woman as long as she was beautiful.

That was what he liked best about this particular hell. Here, no one cared about titles or family histories, or that he'd spent years working as a mercenary before becoming a duke.

Here, he could simply be himself.

He needed that. Especially tonight.

Before arriving here, he'd detoured to Seven Dials to speak to two men he knew there from the days of his father's criminal enterprise, when the old Duke of Dartmoor had been involved in all kinds of illegal businesses from smuggling to child prostitution. Devlin had put an end to all that ten years ago, but ever since, he had remained on guard in case any part of what his father had created managed to crawl its way back into the light. His contacts told him that a new criminal ring had formed in London's underworld, one that had nothing to do with his dead father.

Devlin wasn't so certain. A lingering unease ached down in his bones, the same way old sailors felt approaching storms.

He prayed he was wrong.

"Cognac," he ordered, then selected two cigars from the box on the bar. He slipped one into his breast pocket for later and lit the other on the silver brazier at his elbow.

He puffed at the cheroot and watched as the smoke curled slowly upward. His mother and sisters didn't like it when he spent all night at the clubs, preferring to have him at home with them. A chagrined smile tugged at his lips. They would have suffered apoplexy if they knew he came here instead of going to one of the more respectable places in St James's. But he couldn't find proper escape in those clubs the way he could here, where he could lose himself in the middle of a packed, noisy room.

It was the same reason, all those years ago, that he'd studied fighting at Eton under Anthony Titus, *maître d'armes*. During the rigors of training and the bouts of fencing, he had been able to lose himself, if just for a few hours. Only later did he come

to realize that what Titus was teaching him wasn't how to fight but how to remain in control.

Devlin had learned to take his solace wherever he could, including on nights like this. Especially since he'd soon have to give them up completely in favor of Lady Catherine Carlow, daughter of the Earl of Northrop. The woman he'd decided to marry.

The attendant set a glass of cognac in front of him. Devlin held the glass up to the light to check the golden color, swirled it, then lowered his nose for a long inhalation, all before taking a sip. Notes of jasmine, vanilla, earthy black truffle... *Perfect*.

He doubted Lady Catherine would ever understand how a glass of cognac in the middle of a crowded hell could calm him the way few other things could. But she would be polite enough to pretend to.

Pretense. Duty. Eventually perhaps affection. Above all, turning a blind eye... He grimaced into his glass. The makings of every good society marriage.

Nothing had been publicly announced yet because the marriage settlement was still being hammered out by family attorneys on both sides. But he'd offered, she'd accepted, and he expected to officially announce the engagement by month's end. Well-educated and proper with an appreciation of the arts and no concerns about his military past, Catherine was charming and pretty, and they bumped along well. Oh, there was no love between them, but that didn't bother him. Theirs would be a marriage tempered by tolerance, friendship, and a sense of shared obligation.

Still, Devlin didn't think she would appreciate a husband who spent his nights at places like Barton's. She expected a good husband and father to their children, and he planned to be that.

The exact opposite of his own father in every way.

But he wasn't leg-shackled yet, so he returned to the tables. Dawn still lingered hours away, and several thousands of pounds remained to be wagered. He sat and tapped the table to be dealt the next hand.

A woman slipped gracefully onto the chair next to his, then tossed a couple of coins to the dealer with a flick of her slender wrist.

Devlin slid his gaze over her—and caught his breath. *Sweet Lucifer*, she was striking.

He thought he knew all the women at Barton's, but he certainly didn't recognize this one. Not with that chestnut hair piled on top her head in loosely pinned curls, not with those dark blue eyes and creamy skin that looked as smooth as marble. Yet something about her struck him as familiar.

Impossible. She'd never been here before, he was certain, and he would have remembered meeting a woman like her at one of those tedious society soirees his mother forced him to attend. *You are Dartmoor*, she always told him, *and it is expected...* So he went just to please his mother, even if he hated every minute.

No, this woman didn't belong in gilded drawing rooms with their tame entertainments, at stuffy balls with their regimentation, or at boring ladies' garden clubs. One look at her proved that. With an aura of confidence surrounding her like fine perfume, she belonged right here. Barton's was one of the few places in London that welcomed women through its doors and at its tables, where uniformed attendants brought glasses of liquor to the ladies as well as the men, and where it was accepted that no one inside need fear for their reputation. The hell belonged to the underbelly of London

society, an exclusive club whose name everyone in the *ton* knew but which no one would ever dare admit to having entered, where gentlemen and ladies mixed with courtesans and high-end prostitutes of both sexes.

Which was she, lady or courtesan? She was certainly dressed for an evening of pleasure. Her midnight blue velvet gown draped teasingly off both shoulders, giving the impression that a slight shrug might send the entire bodice slipping away. Oh, what a damn shame if that happened...to bare to his eyes the full breasts beneath, whose rounded tops were just teasingly visible beneath the satin-edged neckline. A small tilt of her head as she watched the dealer accentuated the length of her elegant neck, encircled by sapphires as blue as her eyes.

She wasn't simply beautiful.

She was raw temptation.

Yet unlike the courtesans, she paid no attention to the men around her in the hell who stared as if she were a delectable feast they wanted to devour as greedily as the roasted pheasant in the dining room. Instead, her attention remained fixed on the cards as the dealer placed them in front of each player.

The hand played out, bets were wagered on each card, and Devlin won. *Finally.*

He eased back in his chair. "I haven't seen you here before," he said to the woman, unable to resist engaging her in conversation. "How are you finding Barton's?"

Not looking at him, she curled her red lips as if in faint amusement at a private joke. "It's everything I was told it would be."

"And what were you told?"

"That it's home to ruffians, blackguards, libertines of all kinds..." Her gloved fingers sorted the money she had placed on the table before her. "And those are just the women."

He chuckled and turned toward her on his chair as the dealer placed down the first round of cards. She shone like a blue diamond, putting the handful of other women in the club to shame. Already, he was certain, bets were being placed over which man would be fortunate enough to leave with her.

He didn't blame them. She was stunning...and strangely familiar. He knew her, but how? "And how are you finding the men?"

"Entertaining." She doubled her bet on the next card. "Intriguing." Then doubled it again on the next. At that, two of the other players dropped out of the hand, unwilling to match her wager. "Challenging."

He suppressed a smile. She might as well have been describing herself. When she won the hand and two hundred pounds with only a pair of tens, he realized exactly how much of a challenge she posed.

Finally, the evening had become interesting.

They played on, the stakes growing steeper with each card. The winnings divided themselves fairly evenly around the table, but one of the other players left the game, claiming the play had grown too rich for his accounts.

The dealer paused the game to bring out a new deck of cards and exchanged a few words with the club manager.

An attendant appeared at the table. "Another drink, Your Grace?"

"Please."

"And for you, ma'am?"

She eyed Devlin's drink. "What are you having?"

"Cognac."

"How very Continental of you." Her eyes gleamed as she turned them on the attendant. "I'll have the same. Please bring the bottle and a second glass."

The attendant looked questioningly at Devlin, who nodded his consent. Then the man hurried away to fetch the brandy.

She tossed in a handful of coins as the dealer laid out the next hand, bringing the opening wager higher than it had been all night. "I didn't realize I needed a man's permission to drink here."

Devlin would have said that pique drove her bet, if not for the cold control in her voice. He explained, "The brandy is from my private stock." He matched her wager. So did the other three men at the table, and the next cards were laid down. "I keep a case here for my own use."

"You often spend evenings here, then?"

He noted wryly that she didn't thank him for the brandy. "A few."

"Playing games?"

His lips curled. She made gambling sound like a children's afternoon in the park. "Something like that."

"Are you any good?"

"I have my moments."

"Yes, I'm certain you do." She won the hand, and the dealer pushed her winnings toward her. "Occasionally."

That stung his pride, both the barb and the loss. Yet Devlin doubled the amount of the opening bid on the next hand.

She didn't blink in matching it. "Do you often lose?"

"No," he drawled. "Usually I win."

"What a coincidence." She smiled but didn't glance his way. Was that flirtation...or amusement at his expense? "So do I."

As if to punctuate her comment, one of the other players rose and left the game. Only three of them remained at the table now, and the stakes increased as they played on until each hand was worth over one thousand pounds.

The attendant brought the bottle of cognac and a glass on a silver tray, then set them at Devlin's right elbow. Devlin tossed him a coin and splashed a small pour of brandy into the glass. He held it out to her.

She arched a disdainful brow. "That's a rather small pour, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't want you to assume I was attempting to get you foxed." But he added a second pour to the glass.

This time, she accepted it. "And in my experience," she said as she smiled against the rim of the glass, keeping it raised to her mouth and his attention on her ripe lips, "men greatly underestimate ladies' abilities."

"In drink or cards?"

"In everything."

His gut tightened. Surely, she hadn't meant that as sexual *entendre*, yet her words wound through him, leaving an aching tingle in their wake. Who the *hell* was she? Why couldn't he place her?

“I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced.” He held out his hand. “Devlin Raines.”

She held out her glass for topping off. “A pleasure.”

With a chuckle, he splashed more cognac into her glass.

This woman was sharp, whoever she was. He was still no closer to ascertaining if she were a lady or a courtesan. Or why she stirred shadowy memories in the back of his mind that frustratingly he couldn’t quite uncover. He wasn’t a eunuch, for God’s sake. He should have remembered everything about an encounter with a woman like her.

“And you are...?” he prompted.

“Going to win.”

Devlin grinned. Her confidence was damnably alluring. He enjoyed witty women who were able to hold their own in any conversation. Throw in the way she looked, all warm and soft and sensual, with enough flesh revealed to make him wonder what the rest would look like when she was bare—

“You seem to be a man who appreciates a woman who knows what she’s doing.”

His mouth twisted at that veiled flirtation. “What gentleman doesn’t?”

“Before this night is over, I’ll be on top.”

His cock jerked in his breeches. *Jesus*. There was no veil that time.

“Surprised you, did I?” A cat-like smile turned up the corners of her mouth. “I’m not a courtesan out for your money, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she told him loudly enough that a man walking past the table faltered mid-step before moving on.

He chuckled. He admired her audacity, even if he found her mysterious enough to give him pause. “Good to know my fortune’s safe.”

“Oh no, you misunderstand. I’m definitely out for your money.” She rested her elbow on the table and her chin in her palm, then gazed at him with an expression of such forthright honesty that he bit back a laugh. “But I’m not a courtesan.”

“Thank you for putting my fears to rest,” he drawled.

But she hadn’t. It bothered him that he couldn’t place her. She wasn’t one of the Spanish or French women who had entertained him on the Continent, nor one of the widows who had so eagerly thrown themselves at him since he’d returned. Nor was she a mistress seeking a new protector, although that was more likely given that he hadn’t seen her in society before—if she were *his* lover, he’d certainly keep her locked away from all other gentlemen.

So who the devil was she?

The last man left the table then; only the two of them remained. The dealer called for a pause and left the table to speak again to the club manager, surely to inform him that the stakes had grown even higher.

Devlin laid his arm across the back of her chair. “You’re very beautiful.”

“You noticed,” she murmured, her eyes almost glowing as she turned them onto him. Those eyes...not just blue, but multiple shades of blue. The shadows of memory stirred faster in his mind, but nothing came into focus. “How perceptive of you.”

He wasn’t blind, for God’s sake. “In that dress...you want to be noticed.”

He moved his hand to trail his fingertips over her bare shoulder in a soft caress. He smiled when she trembled.

“Who are you?” he drawled. “And what is it you want?”

“You.”

His fingers stilled against her skin. He froze, except for his cock which began to ache with longing.

“You said you weren’t a courtesan,” he reminded her.

“I’m not. I’m not for sale.” She removed her right glove, then dipped her fingers lightly into his glass of brandy. He watched as she sucked the drops of golden liquid from her fingertips. “But I *can* be won.”

He stared at her, transfixed, her brandy-wetted lips glistening in the lamplight. A small drop clung to the corner of her mouth. He reached slowly to wipe it away, then licked it off his thumb. It tasted of her. Of brandied cherries, rich and sweet with a hint of tartness, and it left him craving a deeper taste.

She leaned toward him to bring her mouth close to his ear, and the soft brush of her breast against his arm stole his breath away.

“If we’re going to play together tonight,” she purred, her breath tickling warmly against his cheek, “then let’s make it worthwhile, shall we?”

His blood heated with anticipation. “What do you have in mind?”

“Winner takes all.” Her lips slid across his cheek in a featherlight caress as she shifted away. The challenge in her sapphire eyes was undeniable.

“I’ll win,” he warned, his deep voice husky with desire.

She settled back in her chair, pulled on her glove, and lifted his arm away from her shoulder, returning it to his side. Her attention turned back to the dealer as he returned with a new deck of cards in hand and the club manager at his side to oversee the game.

“You won’t,” she whispered, but with such icy intensity Devlin would have sworn he saw her shiver.

He frowned. “If you’re not comfortable with—”

“Deal,” she ordered.

The dealer nodded and placed three upturned cards on the table in front of her, Devlin, and himself.

With a king in her cards, she placed a stack of banknotes onto the table. “One thousand pounds.”

Devlin smiled and matched her wager for that card. And the rest. When the hand was over, he’d won five thousand pounds, only to lose it all and more on the next one. He didn’t care. Either way, when the game ended, he’d escort her upstairs to one of the private rooms and into bed. As she’d implied earlier, it was simply a matter of who would be on top.

He opened the next hand with the same thousand-pound wager as before, then watched as she coolly swallowed the last of the brandy in her glass. He watched the soft undulation in her elegant throat and wanted his mouth, right there, on her so badly that his hand shook as he reached for his own glass to distract himself.

But she did say that the winner would take all, and he planned on taking all of her. Repeatedly.

She tripled the wager on the next card. That got his attention, and also that of the club manager, who nodded to accept the bid when the dealer looked at him questioningly. Ten thousand pounds rode on the last card.

When the dealer flipped it over, the manager blew out a relieved sigh. The club had won.

“We don’t have to keep doing this,” Devlin told her beneath his breath, to keep from being overheard by the crowd of gathering onlookers. “We both want to end the evening the same way.”

For a moment, she didn’t reply. Then she turned her head and boldly looked at him. “I want to win.”

So do I. He glanced at her rapidly dwindling winnings, then slowly moved his gaze over her...down her delicate neck to the temptation of her full breasts beneath the soft velvet he wanted to rip from her body. “Can you afford to lose?”

She laughed, her spellbinding eyes gleaming as they found his. “Can *you*?”

Overwhelming need twisted his gut. More than anything in the world, he wanted to be inside her when she closed those shining eyes and cried out with pleasure. The damned seductress knew it, too.

She placed all her remaining money—one thousand pounds—on the first card of the next hand, surprising him. Deliciously so. Because if she had no more money to wager on the rest of the cards in the hand, then...

“When I win this hand, what will you offer me in winnings?” he murmured as he brought his mouth close to her ear. He still didn’t know if she were courtesan or lady, if he’d ever met her before or not. Suddenly, he didn’t give a damn either way.

“What would you like?”

He went hard as all kinds of wanton thoughts spilled through his mind. Her coming on top was the least of them, but it would be a damnably fine way to start.

“Everything,” he drawled. And meant exactly that.

Her gaze held his. “Done. But at least give me the chance to win some of your money on each of the cards.”

“Done.”

She gestured to the manager to lean down and spoke quietly into his ear.

The man’s gaze flicked to Devlin. He said something to her with a pointed lift of his brows. When she answered, he nodded, then straightened and circled behind the table. Then the manager signaled for the dealer to step aside so he could finish the hand himself.

“The club is out,” the manager informed them, rapping on the remaining deck with his knuckles. “Understand?”

“Of course,” Devlin answered. She and Devlin would be on their own against each other, negotiating their own wagers. Perfectly fine terms with him.

The first cards were dealt. A queen for Devlin...and a king for her.

“And your wager for the next card?” Devlin asked, leaning toward her again. He expected her to whisper something scandalous into his ear—

“Ten thousand pounds,” she announced loudly enough for the manager to hear.

“The lady stakes ten thousand,” the manager called out, which circulated curious whispers and stares throughout the crowd that had gathered to watch. “And you, Your Grace?”

“Match.” Devlin knew she was bamming everyone in the room, except for him and the manager who both knew she didn’t have those kinds of funds. She was wagering with air on each card. But they weren’t playing for money now.

The next card brought a five for him and an ace for her. He was ahead, but not by much. So he leaned over and whispered into her ear exactly what he wanted for this card’s wager, sparing no details.

Her cheeks flushed at his wanton wager. "All right." But she couldn't utter the bet aloud to the manager. Instead, she cleared her throat and said breathlessly, "We've agreed on...a private wager."

Snickers and guffaws went up from the crowd pressing in around the table, which only made her blush deepen. Delectably.

Not keen on letting all of Barton's know what the two of them would be doing upstairs for the rest of the night, he reached over and carefully removed her sapphire earbob and set it onto the table. "There. Your stake, my lady."

Let them think she was too proud to admit to wagering away her jewels. He'd give them back to her when she was lying naked in bed with him.

But from the irritated look she threw his way, she didn't seem at all pleased.

Devlin won both the card and control of the hand. Without a word, only a wolfish smile that told her exactly what he wanted for his wager, he removed her remaining earbob and set it beside the first.

She won the card and edged him out of the lead. Barely. But enough that she was allowed to set the wager for the final card.

"Twenty thousand pounds," she announced.

The room instantly fell silent, the laughs choking off into startled whispers.

She smiled coyly at Devlin. "Unless you cannot afford it?"

He laughed. Not afford imaginary money? He had nothing to lose but a thousand pounds from his original bet, and hours of pleasure to be gained. "Matched."

His luck had finally changed. The hand rested on one last card he was confident he'd win.

The manager placed down the last cards. A deuce for Devlin, a four for her.

A moment's hesitation gripped the room as all the onlookers held their breaths, followed by shouts of disbelief that Dartmoor had been beaten. By a woman.

Devlin laughed good-naturedly along with them. The damage to his reputation would sting for a while, but he knew what the true wager had been and how he would ultimately emerge a winner tonight regardless of the cards.

He pushed himself away from the table, then held out his hand to help her to her feet. He squeezed her fingers as they rested in his and sketched her a shallow bow. Hours of wanton pleasure were promised in that gentlemanly gesture.

She slipped her hand away and unassumingly collected her coins and banknotes as the crowd around them dispersed back to the other tables, the spectacle now over. He was glad of it. Fewer people would notice that they were about to leave the game room at the same time, and not for the front door.

She rested her hand on his bicep, and the soft touch radiated up his arm and into his chest. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to find the retiring room. I should refresh myself before we continue the rest of this evening's games." As she picked up her earbobs, the sultry look she gave him made his mouth water. "Don't you agree?"

He would have agreed to nearly anything as long as she kept looking at him like that. As if she wanted to hunt him like prey.

She turned to the manager. "Would you be kind enough to settle my tallies on His Grace's account?"

The manager's eyes darted curiously to Devlin, who nodded his consent. "Of course, ma'am."

Devlin chuckled at her audacity. She'd not only publicly bested him; now she expected him to pay for her food and drinks for the evening, as well.

But of course he would. And breakfast, too.

As she began to move away, he took her elbow from behind and stopped her. He lowered his head over her shoulder, close to her ear. "Who are you? Tell me now. I have to know."

She tensed beneath his fingertips. For a moment, he thought she wouldn't answer—

"Lady Payne."

He scoffed at that with a short laugh. "You're lying."

She slowly pulled her arm from his light grasp and said cryptically beneath her breath, so softly he was certain he misheard, "When you meet the devil in the darkness, he never gives you his true name."

Then she slipped away through the gaming room toward the front of the hell, smiling her appreciation as she went to those gentlemen who congratulated her on her play.

He stared after her, frowning. *The devil in the darkness...* What the hell did she mean by that?

But he wasn't concerned. After all, he had the rest of the night to wheedle her true identity out of her. And enjoy himself immensely in the process.

Devlin pulled the spare cigar from his breast pocket and lit it on the tabletop brazier. "Patton," he ordered the manager, "I'm going to need a key to one of the upstairs rooms and a fresh bottle of cognac. We'll want breakfast in the morning."

Patton hesitated. "Perhaps you should settle up first, Your Grace."

He laughed. "What's to settle?"

"Thirty-one thousand pounds."

His heart skipped. For a long moment, he only stared at the manager, the cigar clamped between his teeth as he tried to fathom... "She had no money. She wagered air."

"But she did have funds, Your Grace." Patton gaped at him. "I thought—I thought you knew—"

Cold dread seeped through him like ice water. "Knew what?"

"She took out a marker when she arrived, using a land deed as collateral. For forty thousand pounds. All her bets were backed by the club."

Christ.

By the time Devlin rushed through the front doors and outside into the night after her, she had already vanished.