



*Enjoy this special
sneak peek of
THE DUKE OF DECEIT!*

Chapter One

August 1817

London

Lucien Grenier, Duke of Crewe, leaned back against the squabs of his town coach and smiled at the pretty young prostitute sitting across from him.

What was her name? He couldn't quite remember...Lavinia? Loretta? Lucretia? Surely, it began with an L.

But then, there was no reason why she, of all the prostitutes employed at Madame Pierre's brothel, should stand out enough for him to remember her name,

especially when the women there were used to answering to any name the male customers called out.

"Thank you," she said again for the tenth time since he'd helped her into the carriage and told the coachman to take them to Covent Garden.

"You're quite welcome...Lucille." *That* was it. He was glad he'd remembered when she showed her appreciation of that little thoughtfulness with a small smile of her own. She had a long, sleepless night ahead of her, and riding in the coach with him to the opera would only be the beginning, if he had his way.

But then, when it came to women, Lucien always got his way.

"Why do it?"

He shrugged at her soft question. "Madame's was on my way to the opera. Picking you up there wasn't a difficulty at all." Neither was paying Madame Pierre for the missed income Lucille would have generated tonight with the other gentlemen who frequented the brothel. It was the only way Lucien had been allowed to leave with her. Yet he was used to paying Madame for access to the women who worked for her in the old townhouse on the good side of St Giles—if there was such a thing as a *good* side to that God forsaken patch of earth.

"No." She leaned forward, and her pretty face grew serious. "I mean the other. You're at the brothel several times a week, but you never...*you know*...with any of us."

You know. Although she'd been a prostitute for the past two years, she was still innocent in so many ways.

"Instead, you bring all those books and spend time reading to us."

"And making you read to me, don't forget," he corrected. Which was the real reason he spent so much time at Madame Pierre's. He wanted to teach the ladies to read

and write in hopes that, at the very least, the gentlemen who frequented the brothel couldn't so easily take advantage of them. At most, he hoped they might find other avenues for making their way in the world.

"Yes. That. Why?"

He arched a brow. "Why spend hours in close contact with scantily clad, beautiful ladies stretched out next to me in bed?" *In bed* because Madame felt no need to spend money on unnecessary furniture like chairs and insisted he pay for the rental of the bedroom, regardless of what went on there. Or didn't. "I'd have to be a fool to pass that up." When she began to argue, he interjected, "You don't like the books? You don't like learning to read?"

"I do, truly." She bit her bottom lip. "I just can't figure out why you want to do that with us."

"Some men like whips and being tied up. I like books." He shrugged and lowered his voice. "Books are much more dangerous."

She cast an assessing glance over him and muttered, "You're an odd man."

More than you realize. "You should stay on with your family in York," he told her, switching topics as the coach stopped in front of the opera house. Her family had sent word that her father had suffered a terrible accident and that she was needed at home. But she hadn't any way to travel north until Lucien discovered her situation and offered to help her. More, he hoped she'd take this chance to start a new life. "There's no reason for any of them to know what you've been doing in London. You can read now. They'll believe you worked in a shop or in a mill."

She nodded, wide-eyed, as if the idea had never occurred to her before.

"I'll make certain any belongings you've left behind at Madame's are sent up to you there. You don't have to return to London if you don't want to." He prayed that once she was back with her family in the north she'd stay there. If God held any mercy whatsoever, Lucien would never see her again.

"Thank you." Her voice was rough with emotion. She paused. Then, seeming to come to a decision, she rushed out, "I don't have any money to repay your kindness, but we can...*you know.*"

Lucien fought back a smile.

"You'll enjoy it, I promise. The other men all pay good blunt for time with me."

"I'm sure they do." He shoved open the door as wide as possible so everyone standing in front of the grand building could see straight into his coach and notice that the Duke of Crewe wasn't alone. "But it's enough payment just to have people see you in the carriage with me. After all, I wouldn't want anyone to think I couldn't find a companion for the theatre." He winked at her. "Or at least for the ride to it."

"You're a good man, Lucien."

"*Good?*" He scowled in exaggeration. "How dare you say such an awful thing about me!"

Then he swung down to the street. He shut the door behind him and stepped forward to speak to his coachman.

"Take her to the Black Horse in Hampstead," he ordered and handed over several coins. "Buy her passage on the mail coach to York and a bundle of food to take with her, then give her whatever coin is left. Stay with her until the mail coach departs. I'll hire a

hackney to take me home tonight.” He added pointedly, “And do not touch her, no matter what she offers.”

The coachman hesitated. “But everyone at the inn will see she’s arrived in the coach of the Duke of Crewe, Your Grace. They’ll all know you’re paying her way and think that you...” He didn’t finish that scandalous comment.

“Exactly.”

Lucien turned on his heel, bounded up the wide front steps two at a time, and swept into the opera house.

Whispers followed in his wake as he made his way through the crush of opera goers, accompanied by unchecked stares and craning of necks in order to gain better views of him. Women shared gossip behind wide fans to hide their stares, but he knew they were all talking about him. They often did whenever he went anywhere respectable, such as tonight’s opening performance of *The Magic Flute*. He chuckled to himself as he made his way up the stairs toward his private box which he rented because, unlike most of the people in attendance tonight, he actually liked opera. Loved it, in fact. But most of London would have sworn he attended only to make use of the box for more wanton pleasures.

He let them believe it. After all, having society think he was the blackest rake since Casanova served his ends well.

Tonight, though, something was...*off*.

Unlike usual, the whispers continued long after he left the lobby and walked down the wide hallway running behind the boxes. Young misses didn’t gape or widen their eyes as they’d always done before whenever he smiled predaciously at them. There were no disdainful looks, no contemptuous glances, and no one shrank away from him as if he were contagious with the plague. No, this time, they simply let him pass. A few of the men even nodded at him as if he were a respectable gentleman instead of a blackguard.

“What the hell is going on?” he muttered to himself as he stepped into his box, leaving the rear door open so the attendant would know he’d arrived.

He tossed his hat and greatcoat onto a nearby chair and moved to the front of the box. He placed his hands on the railing and leaned forward to glance around the opera house spread out before him as the attendees made their way to their seats and boxes. A ripple of excitement rose from the floor, and soon everyone was turning to stare up at him.

“What the devil...?” Had all of London gone mad?

Lucien shoved away from the railing as the attendant entered the box with a bottle of port from the private case Lucien kept at the theatre. He nodded toward the side table in the rear of the box. “Put it there.”

The attendant nodded and sneaked a look over his shoulder at Lucien as he set down the bottle and glasses.

Lucien muttered his thanks and tossed the man a shilling for his trouble, then reached to pour himself a glass.

He looked up. The young man was still in the box. “Yes?”

“I don’t mean to overstep my place, sir,” the attendant began, “but I wanted to say thank you.”

With a faint shrug, Lucien put the stopper back into the bottle and set it down. “I always show my appreciation with a coin or two.” He smiled at the attendant as he lifted

the glass to his lips. “Keeps the liquor coming my way and my privacy my own...or whoever joins me in my box tonight.” *Or doesn't.*

“No, sir. I meant for your donation.”

He paused. “What donation?”

“To the opera.”

Lucien lowered the glass without taking a sip. Except for an outrageously expensive box rental, he'd not given a penny to the opera. “Pardon?”

“Well, I suppose not to *the opera*, exactly, but to the Foundling Hospital through the opera.” The young man smiled at him as if that sentence made perfect sense.

Lucien blinked, utterly baffled.

Misunderstanding his reaction, the young man rambled on, “Donating a shilling for every person in attendance for tonight's opening performance is a grand contribution.”

“To the Foundling Hospital,” Lucien repeated dully. Surely, he'd missed something in their brief conversation that would explain what on earth the attendant was talking about.

The young man nodded. “That must be why so many people are in attendance tonight.” He grinned. “It's good to know all that caterwauling's good for something, eh?”

“You're mistaken. I haven't donated anything to anyone, least of all to children.” He curled his lips into a well-practiced sneer, lowered his voice as if sharing a secret, and lied, “As far as I'm concerned, the fewer urchins clogging our streets the better. If God wants them to starve, who am I to stop Him?”

The young man's mouth fell open, and he gaped at Lucien.

Now out of patience and wanting time alone before the opera began, Lucien waved the attendant from the box. This time when he raised his glass, he took a long, healthy swallow of port and relished its rich taste on his tongue. Perhaps this night would make more sense once he reached the bottom of the glass.

If what the attendant had told him was truly circulating through the opera house, then no wonder everyone was staring at him tonight. They simply couldn't believe such an act of kindness would come from him.

All would be put to rights regarding his black reputation when they realized that the rumor of his generosity was a mistake. Some other duke had surely set up the donation scheme, and less careful people had simply confused the two of them.

Although, truly, how daft would someone have to be to think the Duke of Crewe was that charitable? Helping unwanted children...*ludicrous.*

When he returned to his seat at the front of the box, a small burst of applause at his appearance broke out at the edge of the house, only to die away into loud murmurs and whispers, all certainly about him.

He grimaced. The sooner this mistake was made known, the better.

Lucien let out a sigh of relief when the curtain rose to start the opera. In the shadows of his box, with the soprano onstage drowning out whatever unfounded whispers about him continued to rise from the audience, Lucien could finally relax.

After all, this was where he belonged—in the darkness.

Society thought him nothing but a worthless scapegrace and irredeemable blackguard, a libertine's libertine who cared for no one and nothing but the pursuit of his own pleasures. The worst gentlemen in London society called him a friend, and he'd been

permanently banned from Almack's on reputation alone. Unmarried misses were shooed away from him by overprotective mamas—the same mamas who couldn't wait to corner him alone in a dark room, lift their skirts, and beg him to satisfy them, only to think him an even greater blackguard when he rejected them, which he always did.

He had worked damn hard to cultivate that reputation, too, and all because of his father, a man he loathed with every ounce of his being.

If a man could be pure evil, Richard Grenier had been exactly that.

The late Duke of Crewe had been a tyrant to his family—a monster. At the best of times, he ignored them; at the worst, he berated and cursed them. What he'd done to Lucien's brother Phillip, though, by denying him his rightful inheritance and expelling him from the family, had been nothing short of absolute evil. At least his father had never raised his fists against his family. But then, he didn't have to. He had all kinds of other ways of making their lives hell.

The old duke had also used his position as a peer to finance a criminal world whose activities were so heinous as to be responsible for the forced labor of children and prostitutes, smuggling, fencing goods—a web of illegal and immoral businesses that rivaled any which could have been cast up from the fires of hell. He'd even provided weapons to the French at the height of the Peninsular Wars, even as his own son was fighting against them on the Continent. An act of treason in every way. As with the rest of his illegal activities, though, he got away with it.

Lucien had vowed to be the exact opposite of his father in every way and cause as much trouble for the old bastard as possible...gambling, whoring, racing, fighting, even getting expelled from university—no small feat given that his family had donated enough money to the college to have a chapel named in their honor. In retaliation, his father had cut off his allowance, and Lucien had to make do with the only talent he possessed—fighting. So he headed off to the Continent to become a mercenary. There, in mission after mission, he thrived. After all, no man was a fiercer fighter than the one who had nothing to live for, and the fires of battle compared little to the fires eating away inside him.

Even then, though, his father couldn't disown Lucien completely. The old bastard still needed an heir to inherit the dukedom, and Lucien was all he had.

Ironically.

Lucien had returned to England only after his father died, where he quickly discovered the benefits of cultivating a black reputation. It kept at arm's length people he didn't want nosing around in his business, while others avoided him completely, as if immorality were as easy to catch as a fever. He was feared and loathed, and part of him knew he truly deserved it.

After all, he'd done terrible things in the war, justifying all of it with the belief that Napoleon had been the greater evil. Yet hundreds of men died because of his reconnaissance work with the Prussians. He never let himself admit it aloud, but the Prussians allowed him to do far more damage to the enemy than the British ever would have. At that point in his life, he'd wanted nothing more than to rain down death and destruction on whoever was within range, and he'd done exactly that.

What he hadn't been prepared for was how those years of being a mercenary still lingered, returning unbidden in nightmares and at quiet moments, especially when he was alone. Memories of what he'd seen and done still haunted him and probably always

would. But perhaps, if he could turn his heart just icy and black enough—hell, if the damned thing finally died completely—perhaps he would no longer care about what he or his father had done and could finally find peace.

Intermission jolted him from his thoughts. The opera house came alive as the audience rose from their seats and a small army of attendants scurried through the building to provide refreshments and drinks.

Lucien pushed himself out of his seat. He wasn't eager to leave his box, but he had no choice. After all, whenever the opera reached intermission, then his turn came to put on a play of his own. He had to act the part of a rakehell.

So he made his way out of his box and into the crowd where, as always, he would cast enough heated glances at willing women to let everyone think he'd chosen one of them to entertain himself with in his box for the next act. Occasionally, he actually did. And sometimes, he'd smile at one of the unmarried misses, as if he knew exactly what she hid beneath her gown, just to stir up trouble.

But tonight, as he made his way down the wide hall behind the boxes, no one moved away. Instead, the blasted bluebloods pressed in upon him, with proper ladies smiling at him and respectable gentlemen nodding in approval. A few even called out, "Bravo!" and "Admirable!"

Good Lord. He had to find out who the real peer was who'd pledged the donation and—

He pulled up short as the Duke of Wembley stepped in front of him and blocked his way.

"Well done!" The old man slapped him on the shoulder and grinned at Lucien as if the two were bosom chums. "I always knew the Duke of Crewe had a good heart buried somewhere deep beneath all that black ice."

Lucien was struck speechless. *A good heart?* Oh, this was more than simply confusing him for someone else—

This was downright slander.

"You're mistaken, Duke," Lucien corrected as loudly as possible. "My heart is as black as ever and still frozen solid."

Lucien slid past him and headed straight for the stairs leading down to the lobby and the main door. Best to leave. *Now.* The last thing he needed was for more people to think him a selfless patron. After all, selflessness led to goodness, and goodness led to likeability, and God forbid anyone should *like* him. Then they would want to converse with him about all kinds of topics, to have him attend their soirees and demand he host his own... They would infiltrate his life like an occupying force and discover all kinds of things he didn't want anyone to know.

Yet despite his obvious hurry to leave, people shouted out to him, more women smiled and flitted their fans in his direction, and a trickle of applause followed in his wake.

He increased his pace.

When he reached the footpath fronting the opera house, he let out a muttered curse. He just remembered that he'd sent his carriage on with Lucille, and there were no hackneys for hire anywhere in sight. Overhead, a cold drizzle began to fall. That was when he also remembered he'd left his coat and hat in his box. There was no going back for them.

“Just as I’ve always said,” he muttered as he hunched his shoulders against the rain and made his way on foot toward St James’s. “No good deed goes unpunished.”

Apparently, that was true even if the good deed wasn’t his.

He jogged across the busy street, dodging carriages and mud puddles. When he stepped onto the opposite footpath, he saw a small movement in a dark doorway. A child. No—two children, huddled together in rags against the cold, rainy night.

He halted. “You there.”

The children froze at his voice, but they couldn’t stop the shivers that racked their little bodies.

“Do you have somewhere to spend the night?”

“Here,” the boy answered.

The little girl shrank into the lad’s skinny side and peered fearfully up at Lucien. Dirt smeared her pale face, and her cotton dress, which was too big for her, did nothing to protect her from the cold air.

“*Not* here,” Lucien growled as he removed his jacket and placed it around the little girl’s shoulders. “Go to Brechenhurst in Seven Dials. You’ve heard of it, I’m certain.”

The boy nodded. The girl stared warily at Lucien, eyes wide as saucers.

Lucien pulled two coins from his waistcoat pocket and handed one to each child. “Go there and ask for Mrs. Martin. Tell her that Mr. Hunter sent you. She’ll help you. All right?”

The boy nodded and repeated back the instructions, not knowing they were actually a secret code. The manageress of the shelter would understand and take in the two children, even though the doors had closed for the evening, giving them a meal and providing them a safe and warm place to spend the night.

The boy climbed to his feet and helped the girl properly into Lucien’s jacket which hung down to her ankles, so tiny was the little wisp of a creature. The boy took her hand and led her away in the direction of Seven Dials.

She glanced back over her shoulder at Lucien. “Thank you, sir.”

The soft sound tore through his chest like a bullet. He replied hoarsely, “You’re welcome.”

Then the two took off, running into the rabbit warren of narrow alleys. Lucien turned back toward the street—

A carriage sped by and splashed water high into the air. It cascaded over him from head to boots and soaked him through to his skin.

He froze for a moment and simply let the water drip off his body onto the footpath. Then he blew out a hard breath and walked on toward St James’s.

No good deed, indeed.

Twenty minutes—and one very wet mile and a half later—he stepped into Brooks’s small drawing room to wide-eyed stares from the other members. It took Lucien a full minute before he realized they weren’t staring because of the ruined state of his waistcoat and trousers or his scandalous appearance in shirtsleeves. They were staring because they’d heard the same mistaken rumors as the opera audience.

News of his false generosity had preceded him.

“Welcome, sir.” An attendant appeared at his side. “Would you like a drink?”

“I’d like a towel,” he grumbled. He tossed the young man a shilling. “Lord Abernathy keeps a spare set of clothes upstairs. Tell Barnaby to set them out for me.” The club’s butler could be counted on to tell everyone that Crewe needed a change of clothes, and perhaps Lucien could twist the club’s gossip about tonight’s events into some much more wicked reason why he’d been removing his clothes than the truth. “And yes, fetch me a cognac. A generous pour.”

The attendant nodded and hurried toward the dining room and its ground-floor bar.

“Good Lord, man,” Henry Merchant-Fox called out from beside the fireplace as he flicked ash from the end of his cigar and raked an amused look over Lucien, from his sopping wet hair to his muddied boots. “Awfully cold night to be swimming in the Thames, isn’t it?”

“Not the Thames,” Sir Michael Darnley corrected loudly, snagging the attention of the half dozen men lounging about the room on its brown leather sofas and chairs. “Haven’t you heard? Crewe’s turned charitable. Surely, he was saving drowning swans in the Long Water.”

“I heard he was rescuing kittens at Buckingham House,” another man piped up.

“No, no,” another interjected. “It was puppies in the park—”

“Queen Charlotte from Farmer George!”

The men broke into raucous laughter.

Christ. Lucien pulled in a deep breath and cast a longing glance after the attendant. He needed a *very* generous pour.

“The *on dit* regarding my newfound goodness is mistaken,” Lucien said, wiping his hand down his sleeves to futilely fling away the rainwater. “I haven’t made a donation to the Foundling Hospital and have no intention of making one. You know me.” He swiped his hands over his thighs. His trousers were just as soaked as his waistcoat. “I only spend money when it benefits me. Or amuses me.” He gave a grin he didn’t feel. “Either way, it’s always about *me*, certainly not orphans or foundlings.”

“Ah, but giving money to unwanted brats is exactly the sort of thing that might amuse you,” Merchant-Fox countered. “That is, to bring attention to how many of them come from aristocratic seed—”

“Then watch the pride of Westminster scramble to donate money to care for children they’re all pretending don’t exist in the first place,” Darnley finished.

Merchant-Fox pointed his cigar at Lucien. “And all of them wondering which ones are *yours!*”

That roused even more laughter from the men.

The realization sank over Lucien as coldly as had the rain that he couldn’t win. The more he attempted to deny any contribution to the Foundling Hospital, the more the men would believe it. Despite everything, one certainty always applied to the *ton’s* gossips—the more improbable the story, the more they loved to spread it around. And Lucien Grenier giving significant money to unwanted children was the most improbable story to circulate in years.

The club attendant returned with his drink. Lucien snatched the glass from the man’s silver salver and turned on his heel to stomp toward the stairs. His boot landed on the first step—

“What charity will you give to next, Crewe?” Merchant-Fox called out after him. “Going to establish a Sunday school?”

“That’s giving Crewe too much credit,” Darnley objected. “He’d have to know which day of the week is Sunday.”

“Ah! But he does know,” Merchant-Fox corrected. “It’s the day when all the brothels are closed!”

Damnation. Lucien rolled his eyes and took the stairs two at a time, leaving tiny puddles behind on every other step. Irritation heated through him at being the butt of their jokes. Worse—he had no idea how anyone could have confused him with the real patron of the Foundling Hospital, whoever it was.

But he was damned well going to make it stop.