



*Enjoy this special sneak peek
of the final book in the
Dukes of Darkness series!*

PROLOGUE

*Early January, 1814
Cuillin Castle, Near Weymouth*

Chase Maddox, Duke of Greysmere, pounded his fist against the roof of the carriage he had rented at the local posting inn to take him to Portsmouth. *Had* to rent one. After all, he didn't want his own coachman to be able to tell anyone where he was going, in case anyone foolishly decided to follow him. By the time his in-laws realized he had left his estate, he would be halfway to Spain, and then no one would be able to find him.

But he had one last act to take before leaving and shouted up at the driver, "Stop here!"

The team halted, and Chase opened the door himself to jump down. He hadn't bothered hiring a tiger. God knew taking a driver into the hell engulfing him was devilish enough. Bringing two innocent men with him would have completely damned his soul. And wasn't that already black enough?

"Wait here," he called out as he walked up the slope toward the cliff top overlooking the icy surf below.

It wasn't the sea he was interested in, with its sheen of foam and grey-green coldness, nor was it the sun which sank quickly toward the horizon in a blaze of reds, purples, and oranges. Instead, his gaze fell onto the castle stretching across the top of the horseshoe-shaped bend on the other side of the cove. He had known that the road to Portsmouth would bring him this way, that from this vantage point, he'd be able to take one last look at the place he was leaving.

"Home hellish home," he muttered beneath his breath, the words lost against the wind that whipped in from across the water and the pounding crash of the high surf.

Even now, Cuillin Castle gleamed like brimstone from the fiery hues of the winter sunset washing over its honeycomb-colored stone, its unlit windows staring blackly across the sea. He wouldn't have been surprised if Lucifer himself emerged for a ramble across its ramparts, to survey his domain. After all, hadn't his dark presence always been as palpable here as the unforgiving storms that routinely lashed the cliffs?

Despite its grandeur, though, the building was as cold and damp as the rain and surf that beat against it, as if capable of falling into the sea at any moment.

Disappointment pierced him that it hadn't done just that already.

But he didn't give a damn about seeing the castle. No, the punishing place in his soul forced him to roam his gaze over the snow-covered gardens and then across the woods beyond, following the twisting drive that snaked its way toward the village.

His eyes stopped on the old stone church with its Norman tower rising above the barren trees. A beacon of godliness that had done nothing to fend off the darkness that seemed perpetually poised over the estate.

He couldn't see the churchyard beside it, but he knew it was there. Just as he knew there would never be markers in it for his wife and two-year-old son, whose remains hadn't been recovered from the Channel after the shipwreck that took their lives less than a month ago. Their souls were officially being given over to God right then, in fact. Eleanor's family would all be gathered in the church at that moment for the memorial service—her parents John and Mary, her cousins Tessa and Winifred—along with friends, estate tenants, and villagers. All of them would be waiting for Chase to join them, the grieving husband...

But it wasn't grief that was driving him away, today of all days. It was the overwhelming need for self-preservation.

If he stayed, he wouldn't let himself live to see the dawn.

He reached into the pocket of his greatcoat and withdrew the toy soldier he'd taken from the nursery. The two-dimensional tin figure had been hand-painted to resemble a Prussian army officer. He'd bought the set two years ago when Thomas was born, wanting to play soldiers with him when he was old enough, to teach him strategy, and tell him the role Chase had played in saving Europe from Napoleon. Now the set lay in its wooden box, never to be played with.

He shoved the tin soldier back into his pocket.

His eyes stung as he stared out across the water. Their deaths were his fault. Because he'd failed to protect them. Because he'd never learned to be the kind of father Thomas deserved. Because he couldn't be the attentive husband Eleanor needed...and because he had never loved her the way she had loved him. Theirs had been a marriage of amiable acquaintances who had shared common interests. Nothing more. Yet he had thought that would be enough to make them both happy. After all, most society marriages were based on less.

He'd been so very wrong.

Guilt over their deaths consumed him. He couldn't sleep or eat, every breath sheer torture. Even now, he couldn't escape the desolation his life had become because the roaring surf and howling wind couldn't prevent the sound of the church bell from reaching him. One... two... three... Each slow, deep reverberation of the death knell echoed into his bones.

Knowing he couldn't remain at Cuillin or attend the memorial service, he had mounted his horse instead and ridden to the posting inn, hired a coach, and told the driver to head toward Portsmouth, with orders not to stop until the team was too exhausted to go another mile. Once he reached the port, Chase would buy passage in the first ship heading east. This was the only way he would be able to survive, by returning to the same place that had nearly killed him years before—Spain.

The church bell fell silent. Chase flipped up the collar of his coat and turned on his heel to stalk back toward the carriage.

“Let’s go,” he ordered the driver as he swung up into the compartment and closed the door against the winter, whose bitter cold he no longer felt. God help him, he felt *nothing* anymore except the guilt that gnawed at his bones, devouring him from the inside out.

The driver cracked the whip, and the team moved toward the dying sun.

As the bleak countryside rolled away beneath him, Chase leaned his head back against the squabs, screwed shut his eyes, and willed himself not to die.

CHAPTER ONE

Late May, 1817

Weymouth

Tessa Albright let her shoulders slump with relief as she found a bubble of peace in the crowded and noisy assembly rooms. She closed her eyes and pulled in a calming breath. Ah, having a moment alone was wonderful. Now, if she could only find a way to—

“Make certain you dance with Mr. Meacham.”

Her eyes flew open. *That* wasn’t at all what she’d been thinking.

Roughly jolted from her peace, Tessa glanced over her shoulder at Lady Bentley. The formidable matron scurried up beside her and clasped her elbow, whether to gain her full attention or to prevent her from fleeing for the door Tessa couldn’t have said. Knowing how the woman approached the season like Napoleon with a battle plan, the truth was anyone’s guess.

“He’s a solicitor who has come into an inheritance of seven hundred pounds a year,” Lady Bentley prattled, her fan a blur of rapid flitting. “His mother is deceased, he has no sisters, *and—*” She excitedly drew out the word into twenty syllables. “—he’s looking for a wife!”

“I see.” Tessa cast a look around the crowded assembly rooms at the heart of Weymouth and at the heart of the Weymouth social season, limited as it was. Which one of the finely dressed men gathered here tonight, all of them wearing a studied glower of bored disdain, was the female-deprived Mr. Meacham? She needed to know if only to avoid him.

Oh, that made her terrible, she supposed, for thinking that about a man she hadn’t even met. But avoiding him wasn’t a matter of snobbery; it was an act of self-preservation. If Tessa had to be introduced to one more unmarried gentleman this evening, she was going to scream.

But then, she was doing a lot of things these days that were out of character, including attending tonight’s dance. La! For that matter, attending the entire Weymouth

summer season when she would rather have been home in Hampshire. But did she have a choice?

She looked at Lady Bentley's determined expression and pulled in a fortifying breath. *Not at all.*

But that was what happened to dowry-less daughters of scandalized army officers when they reached the ripe old age of twenty-three without marrying. Their options became smaller and smaller until they disappeared completely...or took the form of a solicitor worth seven hundred pounds per annum who apparently had as few possibilities in marriage as Tessa did.

"I don't believe he's danced yet this evening," Lady Bentley chattered on, "so you have a golden opportunity to convince him to dance with you."

Not golden. *Gold-plated.*

Tessa's shoulders sank. She was grateful that the baronetess had agreed to bring her and her little sister Winifred to Weymouth as companions while her husband remained in London on business. She couldn't deny that. Nor could she deny how wonderful it was that Sir George had so graciously agreed to sponsor her for the season, if only to give his wife somewhere to aim her energy so the woman wouldn't come to too much trouble on her own while he was away.

The awful truth, though, was that Tessa *did* need to find a husband to take care of her and Winnie. She only wished Lady Bentley would sometimes focus on something other than marrying her off so Tessa might actually enjoy the season for once, on something other than scouring through the latest arrivals in Weymouth for someone—*anyone*, apparently—in need of a wife.

Oh, Tessa couldn't really blame Lady Bentley for charging into the fray with such steely determination. Given the scandal and subsequent rumors now swirling about the Albrights like river eddies at high tide, Tessa's odds of securing an advantageous match seemed slim to none, and everyone who hadn't been living under a rock for the past two years knew it, too. It made finding the kind of suitor Tessa wanted—a man of good character with solid prospects and a heart capable of love, a man who would accept Winnie as part of their marriage—well...simply impossible. None of those men wanted the poor daughter of a disgraced army officer with a troublesome little sister in tow.

"I wasn't planning on dancing any more tonight," Tessa said, latching on to the excuse as her salvation from being paired with Mr. Meacham. A blatant lie. But what was one more untruth added to all the others she'd already told tonight? *Oh, yes, I'm very much enjoying the season... Oh, yes, Weymouth's season is so much better than London's... Oh, no, I wouldn't mind taking a turn about the room with you—and your mother.*

"You need to make the most of every opportunity, my dear," Lady Bentley scolded. "The season will be over before you realize, and you cannot let every eligible man pass by without so much as a glance."

Tessa wasn't doing that...was she? "I simply don't think Mr. Meacham is right for me."

"No gentleman is perfect, but one without female relatives comes very close." Lady Bentley pointed her fan at Tessa to punctuate her warning, but the exaggerated sternness of her gaze only caused a small bubble of laughter to rise in Tessa's throat.

“And given what happened with Major General Albright, you cannot afford to be choosy.”

Tessa choked on her laughter at that grim reminder. Yes, she knew that very well. After all, the only reason she was here was because of her father’s actions.

Rather, because of his *inaction*.

War either made men or broke them, and her general father had been no exception. After nearly three decades as a soldier in the king’s cavalry, he’d been undone at Genappe two years ago.

The skirmish was so small it couldn’t even be labeled a proper battle. Yet for reasons Tessa would now never know, her father had abandoned his duty that day, and instead of sending his brigade into the fray as ordered, he held his men back. The battle had been a routing victory for the French, many of whom survived to fight against the Allies again only a short time later at Waterloo. And her father, a major general who had advanced in his career due to field promotions rather than purchasing his rank as sons of aristocrats had done, became the perfect scapegoat.

In the battle’s aftermath, the War Department gave Papa the opportunity to claim a so-called distinguished departure from uniform by resigning his commission—in truth, he was ordered to resign or face public court martial, although rumors about his cowardice had spread so quickly that a public trial had already happened by default. He’d had no choice but to return to England like a dog with its tail between its legs while the rest of the British high command celebrated victory on the Continent.

In the months that followed, her father never talked about Genappe and why he hadn’t ordered his men to advance. He never once rose to his own defense, no matter how many times she had asked him to explain what happened that day. Slowly, faced with his obstinate silence, Tessa had come to believe the unbelievable...that her father had lost his nerve.

He never recovered from the accusation and died only a few months later, joining her mother in the village churchyard.

So at twenty-one, Tessa was left with a young sister to care for, very little money, and few prospects. Even though she’d had nothing to do with what happened at Genappe, she had been caught in the fray. What little social standing she’d had was destroyed by association. The sins of the father and all that nonsense... If not for the generosity of their second cousins John and Mary, Tessa had no idea what would have become of her and Winnie.

It was the second time John and Mary had come to their aid, in fact. The two had already taken in Tessa and Winnie years ago when their mother died, with Tessa only twelve and Winnie no more than a baby. They’d raised both girls while their father had been fighting on the Continent, then graciously allowed them to remain on their small Hampshire estate when Papa died because Tessa couldn’t care for Winnie alone. Always, John and Mary treated the two sisters as if they were their own children, loving them just as they had their daughter Eleanor, who had been only one year older than Tessa.

Tessa grew disheartened whenever she thought of moving away from their loving home, but she also knew she and Winnie couldn’t remain there much longer. The last thing she wanted was to repay their kindness by becoming a burden.

Something had to be done about the future, and that something turned out to be Tessa sacrificing herself upon the pyre of the marriage market.

The entire situation made her want to scream in frustration.

Instead, she admitted quietly, "I just want a husband who loves me."

Which was why she had foregone the London season for Weymouth, where the competition for suitors was less. Never mind that it was because the quality of suitor was also less. Truly, she was beginning to believe that the marriage market was akin to penguins on an iceberg—only those with sure footing and an innate sense of balance would survive, and everyone could look forward to an icy plunge into a colorless existence.

"Don't be a hopeless romantic, my dear. You will appreciate a man who's steadfast and boring, trust me." Lady Bentley punctuated that with a tap of her fan to Tessa's arm. "Love matters little between a wife and her husband."

Tessa muttered beneath her breath, "You mean her penguin."

"Pardon?"

"I said you've met Mr. Renslow." Which sounded nothing like what she'd truly said, but she couldn't be bothered with technicalities under such dire circumstances. "I'm afraid I cannot dance with Mr. Meacham because I've already given permission for Mr. Renslow to claim a second dance with me." She leaned in closer behind the matron's fan and confided, "I think he might be marriage-minded, and I wouldn't want to offend him by showing attentions to another man."

The fan halted in mid-flutter. Lady Bentley's wrinkled eyes lit hopefully. "Truly?"

Tessa couldn't find the heart to lie again, so she simply nodded.

"Oh, what wonderful news!" Lady Bentley squeezed her arm affectionately—or perhaps victoriously, Tessa was too dejected to decide. Then the baronetess lowered her voice. "I hear he's worth two thousand pounds per annum. With that income, I'm certain no one will care that he's an industrialist." She gave another squeeze to Tessa's arm, this one oddly apologetic. "Or not care very much, anyway."

Not care very much? No, society would simply hate him.

Robert Renslow was a partial owner of a Derwent River mill in the Peaks. He'd raised himself up from being the son of a High Street merchant with only a rudimentary formal education and years of hard work, including on his own factory floors to learn the mechanics of the business and understand the life of a mill worker. Knowing he was a societal outcast, just like her, Tessa held a soft spot for him in her heart, enough to finally answer his dogged entreaty to let him court her.

Well, that, and the added bonus of being able to fend off critical assessments of her by yet more gentlemen as if she were a mare up for auction at Tattersall's.

Truly, after the fatigue of tonight's dance, Tessa had nearly reached the point of waving a white flag. She couldn't bear to keep parading about, desperate to catch gentlemen's eyes in hopes one of them would be the husband of her dreams. She had once prayed for a fairytale romance with a dashing hero, as her cousin Eleanor had, but now, she wanted only to find a man who tolerated her peculiarities, offered kindness, and could comfortably keep them in a secure home.

That man, as it was turning out, seemed to be Mr. Robert Renslow. A man society liked not very much at all. Well, at least Tessa and he had that in common.

He was in Weymouth for the same reason she was—because the London season was socially out of reach. They had been introduced a few weeks ago at the start of summer, and since then, they had danced together at every assembly and chatted

amicably whenever they bumped into each other while strolling the esplanade, visiting Harvey's or Wood's libraries, or attending the theatre. Tonight, after they'd taken a turn about the room, he'd asked for her permission to call upon Lady Bentley to ask the baronetess for permission to formally court her.

Caught off guard, Tessa had muddled her way out of a definite answer, but she knew in her heart she wouldn't find a better man who wanted to marry her. Given her precarious hold on the fringe of society by her fingernails, she was lucky to have such a man interested in her at all.

So as soon as she could free herself from Lady Bentley's grasp, she would find Mr. Renslow and give him a definite answer.

Tessa bit her bottom lip. *Maybe.*

Her cousin Eleanor would have known what to do. Before she tragically died three years ago, Eleanor had navigated the dangerous, crocodile-filled waters of society as well as anyone, certainly far better than Tessa ever could. But then, as the granddaughter of a duke, Eleanor had been born to it.

With a pretty face that wouldn't have dared let a single freckle mar it, a demur demeanor, and lustrous blond hair that always behaved exactly as wanted, Eleanor had been the most beautiful miss to debut into society the year she turned eighteen. Tessa, who had been a year younger, had watched her cousin's triumph from the shadows, green with envy. Gentlemen found Eleanor charming and agreeable, and she was well educated in dancing, drawing, embroidering—all the skills necessary for an aristocratic wife. So no one was surprised when she captured the heart of Chase Maddox, Duke of Greysmere, and married him by season's end.

Tessa had been thrilled for her cousin, of course, because she had spent enough time with the young duke to learn what a good man he was. After all, any other man would have merely tolerated Tessa's presence in order to facilitate his courtship of Eleanor, but not Chase. He had taken a true interest in her as a person, despite her firm views that often put them at odds in conversations. He had always been friendly to her whenever he called on Eleanor and never complained that he had to partner with her for dance lessons, during which she repeatedly stepped on his feet.

In all, Chase seemed to be model husband material—a good man who would take care not only of Eleanor but also her family, a dashing aristocrat and former mercenary who exemplified the adventurous hero Tessa dreamed about for herself.

Which was why she simply couldn't fathom why Eleanor never loved him.

Oh, her cousin loved the idea of being married to such a handsome man and certainly of being a duchess, giving her the social rank and attention she craved, and she loved that everyone knew she lived in a grand castle. She absolutely adored and treasured Thomas, the little boy the marriage had given her, and being the mother to the heir of a dukedom.

But love her husband? No. Or at least, not yet. She had died before she had grown to love Chase, although Tessa often wondered if Eleanor ever would have.

Unlike her cousin, Tessa didn't dare hope that a man like Chase would ever fall in love with her. After all, Eleanor had been simply perfect, while Tessa... Well, she was simply *imperfect*.

She had been told repeatedly that she was far too flippant and impertinent, far too willing to speak her mind, and she'd yet to discover a boundary she hadn't been willing

to push. No amount of pretty hair or freckle-less face could make up for that—not that she possessed either. But she was passable in appearance, certainly, enough that she hoped her looks would hide her decided lack of a lady's education. Instead of learning to sew and paint, Tessa had been tutored by her cousin John in the scandalous ways of politics, science, and philosophy. Truth be told, she wouldn't be able to tell a pianoforte from a harpsichord if one fell on her.

None of that had ever bothered her, though, until she realized exactly how much of a disadvantage it gave her when it came to finding suitors. And that, coupled with her father's scandal and lack of a dowry, made her downright unmarriageable. Tonight's dance only reinforced that fact.

And all of it was made worse by Eleanor's absence.

Tessa's chest tightened with that old familiar pang of grief and guilt that struck her whenever she thought about her late cousin. She had been doing that a lot lately. Eleanor's twenty-fifth birthday should have been last week, and the thought that Tessa would never be able to celebrate another birthday with her cousin was nearly unbearable.

When news came three years ago that Eleanor had drowned in a storm while sailing for London, the envy that Tessa had felt twisted into something more intense...guilt that she had wished for someone like Chase for herself, and anguish that she would never be able to ask Eleanor's forgiveness now for being so envious. All of it was compounded by Chase's sudden departure from England. Tessa could understand his grief. After all, he'd lost the love of his life and their child, and he must have been utterly devastated. But he didn't even stay long enough to attend the memorial service. He hadn't even bothered to say goodbye.

With that, the ideal of him as a knight in shining armor deteriorated into a deserter in tarnished gilding. The three years of his silence that followed during what proved to be the worst years of Tessa's life only reinforced this new image of the man who had once seemed like such a hero.

Perhaps Eleanor and Lady Bentley were both correct after all. Perhaps love was best avoided. Certainly, there was less pain that way.

"Oh, there's Lady Skelton!" Lady Bentley snapped her fan closed with glee. "Our invitations to her garden party haven't yet arrived—Oh, Lady Skelton! A word, if you would!"

The portly woman scurried away, waving her fan wildly like a sword to make the crush of bodies part before her like Moses with the Red Sea.

Tessa's shoulders slumped. She desperately needed a glass of water. And a bottle of whiskey to go with it.

Ignoring the start of a headache at the base of her skull, she weaved her way through the room to the refreshments table. The uniformed attendant took one look at her and held out a glass of punch with an apologetic smile, as if he knew how daunting it was to run the gauntlet of courtship rituals and wished he truly could slip her some whiskey.

She shook her head at the punch and took a glass of water instead. All the weak punch in all the world wouldn't ease her tightening throat at the thought that the rest of her life might be decided tonight with a simple yes...or no.

"Miss Albright." A deep voice rumbled behind her, one familiar enough to trail fingers of warmth down her spine. "I hope you've been well."

Tessa caught her breath, her body flashing numb as she turned around. Good God...

Chase Maddox.

She stared at him, her mouth falling open and her eyes blinking, certain she was seeing a ghost. *Impossible*. It couldn't be him—not here, not like this. Not after so long...

So long, indeed.

Slamming her mouth shut, she flung her water into his face.

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