



DEVIL'S HONOR

D E B R A D I E R

Please Enjoy This Excerpt

From Devil's Honor

By Debra Dier

London, 1816

“I cannot promise His Grace will see you this morning, Miss Darracott. Last night was...” The butler lifted one bushy white brow. “Last night was a particularly exhausting evening for His Grace. But I will do my best to impart the urgency of your request.”

Isabel Darracott gave the elderly retainer the same smile that had won her admittance past two footmen and into the Duke of Marlow’s London town house. “Thank you. I trust you shall not fail me.”

“I will do my best, Miss Darracott.”

Isabel sagged against the back of a leather chair after the butler closed the library door. She could only imagine how the Duke would take the news of her uninvited appearance in London, especially after he had experienced an exhausting evening. He probably suffered from gout, as many men on the shady side of fifty did. He would probably be furious with her. Somehow the idea to confront the Duke had seemed a great deal less threatening when she planned this at home.

Silently she chided herself. She was four and twenty, far too old to act missish. She forced starch into her back and drew in a deep breath, catching the soft scent of leather from the morocco-covered chairs and sofas. “I have every right to be here,” she whispered, trying to prop up her sagging courage.

Indeed, the Duke ought to be ashamed of his actions. Still, she could not stop feeling a country mouse about to do battle with a lion. She smoothed

her hand over the wrinkles in her apple green wool pelisse. Nine hours riding in a crowded mail coach did not do much for a woman's appearance.

She hurried toward a pier glass on the mahogany-paneled wall above the fireplace, hoping to improve her appearance before her first encounter with the elusive Duke. If she could only convince him to—

“Dear heaven!” Isabel froze, her breath halting in her throat at the sight that greeted her near the hearth. A man lay sprawled on his side on the carpet near one of the sofas. His left hand was flung out toward the fireplace, resting against the burgundy and ivory carpet, palm up, long elegantly tapered fingers curled inward.

She stepped closer, approaching him as warily as she would a wild animal that might bite. He was tall, his long legs encased in close-fitting black wool trousers. He certainly was not one of the servants. She might not be acquainted with London fashion, but she recognized expensive cloth and expert tailoring when she saw it. The Duke had two sons. She suspected the man lying on the floor might be one of them. Still, why was he sleeping on the floor of the library?

He shifted, rolling onto his back with a lazy growl. His white shirt spilled open all the way to the stitching half way down his chest, drawing her attention to the black curls shading his skin. It certainly was not proper to notice a man's physique. Yet this man demanded her attention. Since there was no one to notice her impolite stare, she indulged herself.

He was so starkly masculine, so splendidly proportioned—broad across the shoulders and chest, with a lean waist and narrow hips. How any man could manage to look commanding while sleeping on the floor, she didn't know. But this man definitely managed. Even in repose he radiated a barely restrained aura of power.

“Are you all right?” she asked softly.

He twitched his nose, his only response. She knelt beside him, with every intention of making certain he wasn't injured in some way. He certainly did not appear injured. He seemed to be sleeping as peacefully as a

babe in a cradle.

Odd, simmering warmth rippled through her as she absorbed every detail of his features. Black waves of hair, overly long, framed a face sculpted with bold lines and curves—a fine, straight nose, sharply chiseled cheekbones, and full lips that lent a moody expression to his countenance. Thick black lashes rested against his cheeks; the color of his eyes was a mystery. The night had painted his lean cheeks with an enticing shadow of beard. Surrendering to a wayward nudge from her curiosity, she touched his cheek, just a graze, a soft brush of her fingertips against that fascinating rasp of black stubble.

He stirred, a low growl emanating from deep in his chest. She snatched back her hand as he opened eyes the color of an ocean at sunrise, grey and green blending with a startling beauty. The heat of her rising blush shimmered across her skin. “I hope I did not disturb you.”

He blinked, as though trying to bring her face into focus. A lazy smile curved those sensual lips, transforming a handsome face into a devastating weapon.

All the moisture evaporated from her mouth. She was suddenly aware of how awkward the situation truly was. No doubt he would think her rather bold. “You must be curious to find a stranger at your side. You see, I am here to...” Oh my goodness, it was terribly difficult to think while looking into those eyes. “Ah, I was waiting for...”

Her words dissolved in a squeak as he wrapped his powerful arms around her and pulled her down against his hard chest. Before she could utter more than a startled gasp, he captured her lips with his.

He moved his lips against hers, firm, demanding, as though he could not get enough of her. She gasped against his lips. He plunged his tongue into her mouth. Through the shock ripping through her she recognized a faint taste of brandy in his kiss. He moved his head, his beard rasping against her soft cheeks. At the country assemblies and house parties she had attended, never once had she met a man who had aroused her interest. Desire had been nothing more than a word read in books, a concept contemplated on dreamy

afternoons, a curiosity she wondered if she would ever understand—until this moment.

Even in her innocence she recognized the swift tide sweeping over her as that most intriguing of emotions. Although she considered herself practical in most aspects of her life—since practicality had become a necessity after her mother’s death—she had never completely abandoned her girlish dreams of romance and passion, a love so powerful it would set her world on end. A love that sparked legends. She had read about such things in books. She had dreamed about such wonders at night. She had feared she would live her entire life and never taste desire. Yet this was desire, raw hunger, unrestrained passion. Dear heaven, she could not breathe.

He rolled with her in his arms, pinning her against the thick wool carpet. The weight of his big body pressed against her. Powerful muscles shifted against her breasts, her belly, her legs, each touch a confirmation of potent masculinity. His scent—sandalwood soap and an intriguing musk that defied identification—flooded her senses. The heat of his body soaked through the layers of their clothes.

Through the heated rush of blood through her veins she recognized all the reasons she could not allow this liberty. She struggled beneath him, pushing against his broad shoulders. Yet he didn’t seem to notice or care. Instead of releasing her, he slipped one hand between their bodies and caressed her breast. She stiffened at the bold touch. Through wool and muslin her skin tingled at the warmth of his hand on her. He squeezed the sensitive tip between his fingers, sending sensation shooting through her. She gasped against his mouth. In desperation, she swung her reticule, smacking the side of his head. That caught his attention.

“What the bloody hell!” He pulled away from her.

Isabel scrambled away from him, tripping over her skirt as she came to her feet. She caught the back of a chair and steadied herself.

He sat on his heels, rubbing the side of his head, glaring at her. “Why the devil did you do that?”

She drew a shaky breath. Her body was trembling so badly her voice quavered when she spoke. “It seemed the only way to convince you to stop attacking me.”

He rose, his movements filled with the powerful grace of a born athlete. “Attacking you?”

She touched her lips, feeling the soft tingling there. She could not quell the trembling of her limbs. She felt as though he had pushed her from a rather high height and she had just managed to survive the fall. “Are you going to deny you attacked me?”

“What the hell do you expect? Bothering a man while he is sleeping.”

She bristled at his continued vulgarity. “Are you in the habit of sleeping in the library?”

“I sleep where I bloody well choose.” He frowned, his grey-green gaze raking her from the top of her green velvet bonnet to the tips of her black half boots. “Who the devil are you? And what the hell are you doing in my house?”

She met his brusque demand with a direct look she hoped would disguise the trembling in her limbs. She pulled together as much dignity as she could manage. “I am Miss Darracott and I am waiting to see my guardian, the Duke of Marlow.”

“Your guardian?” He looked surprised, and then a glint of humor lit his stunning eyes. “Clay put you up to this, didn’t he? His idea of revenge for that tart I sent him last week.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. My visit has nothing at all to do with baked goods.”

He lifted his brows. “Baked goods?”

“I realize I must appear a bit disheveled, but I have not come from a shop. And I have nothing at all to do with the tart you sent your brother. I can

only assume it was gooseberry, since they tend to be a bit sour.”

He nodded. “I have never cared for gooseberry tarts.”

Isabel folded her hands at her waist, her reticule dangling from her wrist. “I am Miss Darracott, the daughter of Edward, the late Baron Bramsleigh. And if I did not need to speak with my guardian, I would not stay another moment in your company.”

He studied her a moment, his lips curving into a lazy smile. “So you are here to speak with your *guardian*, the Duke of Marlow.”

She really didn’t like the glint in his eyes. “The butler has gone to announce my arrival to the Duke. I expect he will return directly.”

He moved toward her in slow strides she suspected were designed to make her wonder what would happen when he reached her. It worked. She took a step back, and bumped into the back of a chair. Unless she wanted to run past him like a frightened schoolgirl, she was trapped. He drew near. She held her shaky ground.

In spite of her every attempt to quell her attraction to the rogue, her skin tingled with the same excitement she had experienced earlier when she lay pinned beneath him. He stepped so close his legs pressed against her pelisse. Far too close. Certainly no gentleman, even in London, would stand so close to a lady. Yet this man evidently followed his own rules.

She lifted her chin. “You are being quite impertinent.”

He lifted one thick black brow. “Am I?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice escaping in a thread of breath.

He leaned forward. She leaned back. Yet she couldn’t put enough space between them to satisfy propriety or her sense of survival. A warm scent of sandalwood soap drifted from his skin and swirled through her senses. The warmth of his body radiated through the layers of their clothing, tempting her to lean into that warmth. She stared up at his handsome face, her heart

pounding against her ribs while a voice in her head screamed *Run!*

“Where did my brother find you?” he asked, his breath warming her cheek with a moist heat colored with a trace of brandy. “At Covent Garden?”

“I have never met your brother. And if he is as disagreeable as you, I hope I never have the occasion to meet him. I have come here to speak with my guardian. I doubt the Duke will appreciate the way you have behaved toward me.”

He slid his hand around her neck, his long fingers pressing against her nape. “Come now, my sweet. We both know I am Marlow. And I am certainly not your guardian.”

“What?” Shock speared through her at his words. “You cannot possibly be Marlow.”

“You are not the only one with those sentiments. Unfortunately there is no hope for the situation.”

Isabel stared up at him, searching for some sign of deceit in his eyes, finding nothing but a blunt truthfulness. “You are the Duke’s eldest son?”

He laughed softly, a dark sound filled with an odd note of self-mockery. “Justin Hayward Peyton Trevelyan at your service.”

The blood drained from her limbs. “And you mean to say something has happened to your father?”

“Even he could not command the hands of fate, or the course of his disease.”

Isabel closed her eyes, blocking out the compelling image of his face, snatching desperately for a slender thread of hope. “You are hoaxing me. Are you not?”

“Hoaxing you?”

She looked up at him. “Please tell me you really are not the Duke of

Marlow.”

“That would be a lie. And I do not tolerate lies of any kind. I am the Duke of Marlow, Marquess of Angelstone, Earl of Basingstoke, Baron of Campden, Trowbridge, and Arden. Now may we end this little farce?”

Isabel swallowed hard. No matter how much she wanted to deny the truth, it stared at her from a pair of exquisite grey-green eyes. “You really are Marlow.”

“I have been since my worthy sire died nine months ago.”

“What a complete disaster.”

“I am certain he thought it was.” He pressed his fingers against the back of her neck, urging her upward toward his lips. “Now, where were we before you interrupted me? Ah, yes, I believe I was about to make love to you.”

His dark voice coiled around her like a magnetic current, coaxing her near. She pressed back against the tall wing-back chair. He leaned closer. The warmth of his body beckoned her, promising more of the tingling excitement she had found in his wicked embrace. Desire slithered through her like a fiery serpent, leaving a trail of steam in its wake, threatening to melt her brain. “Take your hands off of me,” she said, appalled at the breathless sound of her voice.

He brushed his lips against the tip of her nose. “I must come to see you onstage sometime. You play the wounded innocent to perfection.”

She pushed against his chest. It was like trying to move a granite statue. “Oh let me go, you big brute.”

He smiled, his full lips tipping into a crooked grin. “How long do you plan to play this little game?”

“Stand aside.” She kept her voice low, speaking to him the way a lady would address a peasant.

“As you wish, *milady*.” He stepped aside and executed an exaggerated bow.

She put several feet between them before she turned to face him. “I realize it is too much to hope any logic will pierce that thick skull of yours, but circumstances demand I try.”

Marlow leaned back against the chair, folded his arms over his chest and grinned at her. “I can think of better things to do.”

“You obviously believe I am here for some nefarious purpose. I assure you, I am not a lady of easy virtue sent as a diversion by anyone, including your brother. I am Miss Darracott. My father, Lord Edward Darracott, Baron Bramsleigh, died nine months ago, leaving your father as my guardian, as well as the guardian of my two younger sisters.”

“I shall have to come up with a truly inventive way of showing Clay how much I appreciate this little play of his.”

“You are being quite infuriating.” She clenched her hands into fists at her sides, clutching for her composure. “I am not an actress. And I have never met your brother.”

“Is there a second act to this play? Because I am becoming rather bored with this one.”

“Do you not see the implication? You could very well be—” She broke off, unable to voice the unspeakable thought. “Oh this is a disaster. A complete disaster.”

Marlow frowned, his expression growing uneasy. “You are not going to start weeping, are you? I haven’t much patience for women who turn into watering pots. You can end the performance on this note and be on your way.”

Isabel forced her back to stiffen. “Obviously I cannot make you see reason. I intend to see your attorney, Mr. Yardley. Perhaps, under the circumstances, the situation can be rectified. And I need never see you again.

We can only hope that is the case.”