

## Devilish Lord, Mysterious Miss

### Chapter 1

Lord Matthison reached for the area railings to steady himself, blinking up at the façade of the house where Miss Winters lived.

He had no idea how he'd fetched up on Curzon Street, at the house of the scheming jade who had stripped him of his last vestige of hope.

He was drunk, of course. Any man who'd had the week he'd just had would have done exactly the same though – made for the nearest gin shop and called for a bottle. For when the cards had turned against him, and he'd gone down to the tune of five hundred guineas for the third night in a row, he'd had to accept it was over.

"Cora," he moaned, as the pain of her loss struck him with an intensity he had not felt since the first day she'd gone. Gin was so deceitful! It promised to relieve all woe, but all it had done was strip him of the ability to pretend he did not care. Nor had he dreamed he would turn out to have such a hard head, he would still be on his feet by dawn. Or that those wayward feet would have brought him to the last place on earth he would willingly have gone.

"But I won't marry you!" he yelled, shaking his fist at the shuttered windows. What did he care if Miss Winters was ruined!

He had not lured her into her father's study, tousled her hair, and torn the bodice of her gown. No, she'd done all that herself. Then launched herself at him just as the door swung open, making it look as though they had been locked in a passionate embrace.

Not that she wanted to marry him so much now, he laughed mirthlessly. He'd soon wiped that triumphant smile from her face!

"So, you want to dance with the devil, do you?" he had mocked, seizing her by the upper arms when she would have broken free.

"You are hurting me," she had protested, beginning to look a little uncertain.

"But that is the kind of man I am," he had answered. "Have you not heard the rumours?"

The confusion in her eyes had made him wonder if she really did not know. It was just possible. Her family did not mix in the best circles.

"As you do not seem to understand the ways of the ton, I will explain. Some of them ignore my reputation, because of the vast amount of wealth I have accrued since I made my pact with the devil. They claim not to care how I came by it, because my birth is sufficiently exalted for them to turn a blind eye. But they would never let me near any of their daughters.

And there are others who are fascinated by the aura of evil I carry with me. They get quite a thrill from telling people they've been daring enough to ask the man who murdered his fiancée to attend one of their insipid gatherings. Oh," he said, when a look of horror had spread across her face. "So you had not heard? That I had made a pact with the devil, or that I had been engaged, long ago? To the innocent and unsuspecting Miss Montague..."

Suddenly it had felt like a kind of blasphemy, to speak *her* name aloud while he was holding another woman in his arms. He had flung the trembling Miss Winters from him, but kept between her and the door. He had not finished with her yet!

"They never found her body," he relished informing her. "So they could never bring me to trial. But, since it was my best friend, the man who had known me since childhood, who brought the accusation against me, I must have done it, must I not?"

Miss Winters had begun to rub at the spot on her arms where he'd been holding her, but he'd felt not one ounce of remorse.

"Since the day she disappeared, I have had phenomenal luck at the tables. Is that not proof that I have stained my soul with the blood of a virgin? I often wonder," he'd grated, "why people still sit down to play cards with me, when they know I can't lose. Just as I wonder," he had paced slowly towards her, his fury unchecked, "why you expected this little charade to have any effect upon me. You do not suppose a man whose soul is as black as mine, is going to send off a notice to The Morning Post just because someone saw me in a compromising position with a virgin, do you?"

He had thought that would have been an end to it. Last thing he'd seen of her, she'd fled from the room, sobbing, and flung herself into her mother's arms. His mouth twisted into a cynical sneer as he recalled what a short distance she'd had to go. Her mother had been hovering right outside the door.

Anyway, he shrugged, she had definitely changed her mind about wanting to marry him.

Her father, though, was made of sterner stuff.

"Now look here!" he'd blustered, storming into Lord Matthison's rooms late the next afternoon. "You cannot go about compromising young girls, and then scaring them off with half-baked tales that sound as though they've come out of a gothic novel!"

"Is that so?" he'd drawled, not even bothering to raise his eyes from the deck of cards he was shuffling from his left hand into his right.

"It most certainly is! As a gentleman, you owe it to my daughter to offer marriage!"

"Out of the question," he'd replied, taking the pack in his right hand, splitting it in half, and dextrously folding it over on itself with supple, practised fingers. "I am already betrothed."

That assertion had not silenced Mr Winters for more than a couple of seconds. "Ah. You are referring to the Montague girl!"

Lord Matthison had felt the shock of hearing the man speak her name in such an offhand way clear through to his bones. And when Mr Winters had gone on to say, "She's dead, ain't she?" the cards had spluttered from his hand to land in a confused jumble on the table top.

"Yes," he had finally managed to say, with lethal calm. For nobody knew better than he, that Cora walked the spirit world. "Technically, I suppose you could claim I am free to marry again. But since nobody has ever managed to discover her body, her family prefer to think of her as missing. And I, therefore, am still legally bound to her."

A nasty smile had spread across Mr Winters' avaricious face. "Then we will just have to, legally, unbind you, will we not? So you can have no more excuse to avoid making an honest woman of my daughter. I do not care what it costs, or how long it takes. I *will* have Miss Montague declared legally dead. And then, My Lord, we shall have you!"

Three days ago, that had been. Three days since Mr. Winters had declared his intent to instigate the proceedings that would kill Cora Montague all over again.

But he did not know Robbie Montague. Good ol' Robbie, he grimaced, folding his arms across his chest and leaning back against the area railings.

Robbie would have no truck with Mr Winters' suggestion that it was time to let go of his sister by holding a memorial service and finally putting up a gravestone. Robbie would never set him free to marry again, and fill Kingsmede with children

that were not his sister's. If he could not see him hang, Robbie's only satisfaction would be to make sure he remained suspended in a legal limbo.

Mr Winters, he smirked, had quite a fight on his hands.

The amount of hawkers pushing their handcarts up to the big houses, and the deepening of the shadows on his side of the street told him that it was well past daybreak now. Of the fourth day. For the three consecutive nights since Mr. Winters had declared war on Cora's memory, he'd lost heavily at the card tables.

Last night, he had finally accepted what that meant.

He had thrown down his losing hand, tossed what he owed onto the green baize tablecloth, and stumbled from the gaming hell into the street. To confront his own personal hell.

"Cora," he'd moaned uselessly into the empty alley way. "I couldn't help it!" But there had not even been an answering echo.

She was not there.

For the first time in seven years, he could not feel her presence, anywhere.

He'd damned Mrs Winters for conspiring with her daughter to compromise him. He'd damned Miss Winters for forcing her lips against his in that unholy parody of a kiss. And he'd damned Mr. Winters for daring to speak of Cora as though she was of no account. Between the three of them, they had managed to do what even death could not.

They had driven her away.

He had never told anybody that she haunted him. They would have thought he had gone crazy. Hell, he often wondered about his sanity himself!

But it had only been a few days after the last time he had touched her warm soft skin, that he had felt her spirit hovering close by.

At a race track, of all places.

He had gone there with Robbie's accusations and curses ringing in his ears. He had been stunned when Robbie had accused him of murdering his sister. "If you can believe that of me, then you will want this back!" he had yelled, throwing what was left of the money Robbie had lent him to pay for the wedding, at him. "I thought you were my friend!"

They had flung increasingly harsh words at each other, which had culminated in Robbie yelling, "Curse you and your money! May you rot in hell with it!"

Hell, he'd mused. Yes, he had felt as though he was in hell. And like so many of the damned, he had set out on a path of deliberate self destruction, staking all that was left of Cora's wedding fund on a horse that was certain to lose.

He'd eyed up the runners, and been drawn to one that was being soundly whipped by its infuriated jockey. It was frothing at the mouth, its eyes rolling as it went round and round in circles. The jockey had lashed at it some more. He still couldn't get it to the starting line.

*"That horse doesn't want to be here any more than you do,"* he could imagine his tender-hearted Cora saying. *"Poor creature."*

And that was when he knew he had to lay her blood money on the horse she would have felt sorry for.

When it romped home a length ahead of its nearest rival, he heard her delighted laughter. He would swear to it. And pictured her clapping her hands in glee.

In a daze, he'd gone back to the betting post, feeling like Judas at the thought of the cascade of silver that would soon be poured into his hands. In the next race, he'd backed the most broken down nag he could see in a last ditch attempt to purge

away his overriding sense of guilt. He *had* to get rid of that money. Robbie had cursed it!

As the pack set off, he thought he felt Cora sigh as the sorry specimen he'd backed lumbered wearily along the track. Dammit if he hadn't wagered on the very horse she would have chosen again! This time, he had felt there was a certain inevitability about the outcome of the race. Two furlongs from the finish, a riderless horse ran across the field, causing the leaders to stumble, and creating a few moments of mayhem, during which Cora's favourite wheezed up on the outside, crossing the finishing line while the rest were still disentangling themselves from the pile-up.

Cora had cheered. He'd heard her. No question.

The noisy crowds of race-goers faded from his consciousness as his mind had gone back to the day he had finally managed to place his ring on her finger.

*"Nothing will be able to part us now,"* he had said with grim satisfaction. And then, anticipating their wedding vows, he'd added, *"except death."*

*"Not even that,"* she had breathed, gazing up at him with naked adoration in her eyes.

And that was the moment he'd realized that no matter what Robbie might think, Cora was still his. He had felt her lay her hand on his sleeve, and hold him back when he would have tossed even those winnings away on the favourite in the next race. *"Enough now,"* she cautioned him. And tears had sprung to his eyes, because he had known, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that she loved him far too much to want to watch him blight his future with reckless gambling. And he had walked away.

From that day forward, he had done nothing without considering what she would have made of it. And the more he asked her opinion, the more often he had felt her hovering close by.

Robbie had stormed off back to Scotland, his parents had washed their hands of him, neighbours regarded him with suspicion, and former acquaintances shunned him.

But Cora had stood by him.

There had been times when he had sunk into such despair that he considered following her into the after-life.

But he could see her shaking her head in reproof, and hear her declaring that suicide was a mortal sin. He did not care if it was a sin, if it could bring them together. But something told him that whatever part of the after world she inhabited would exclude sinners of that sort.

And so, since he knew she did not want him to take that course, he'd just had to go on existing. He could not call it living. Cut off from his family and friends, he had begun to haunt the lowest gaming hells in London. They were the only places whose doors were still open to him.

Now, she was the only person he felt any connection with any more.

Even though she was dead.

If that made him crazy, then so be it.

If it was madness that drove him back to the card tables, so that he could hear her muttering about the drunkenness of his opponents as he ruthlessly stripped them of their money, or feel her breath fan his cheek as she blew on his dice for luck, then it beat the alternative! He had not cared that her unseen presence, walking at his side, acted like a barrier between him and the rest of the world.

She was still there.

Until Miss Winters had kissed him.

“Cora,” he moaned again, sagging against the railings in defeat.

If he only had the supernatural powers that people attributed to him, by Lucifer and all that was unholy, he would use them now! If he really knew of some incantation...

A line from somewhere sprang to mind. Something about three times three times three...

And even as he was muttering the incantation, a movement from the area steps of a house further down the street caught his eye. A short young woman, modishly yet soberly dressed, in a dark blue coat and poke bonnet, was climbing up onto the pavement. At first, he did not know why, out of all the people bustling about their business, this one insignificant female had attracted his attention. But then she turned to scan the traffic before venturing out into the road, and he caught a glimpse of her face.

And it felt as though something had sucked all the air from his lungs.

It was Cora.

“Bloody hell!” he swore, clutching the railings even harder as his knees threatened to give way beneath him. Somehow, with all that three times three business, and invoking unholy powers, he had managed to conjure up her shade! For the last seven years, he had heard her, caught her scent on the breeze, felt her presence, but never, ever had she allowed him so much as one brief glimpse of her...

“Bloody hell!” he swore again. While he had been standing there, completely stunned at having called up her spirit, or whatever the hell it was that had just happened, she had disappeared round the corner. She had walked away from him as though he was of no account. As though she had somewhere far more important to be...