

## The Devil's Thief

London, June 1, 1817

### Chapter One

The faint, metallic screech sounded as loud as thunder in the oppressive silence of the dark bedroom. Julianna froze, silhouetted by the moonlight against the back wall, the sudden noise stealing her breath away.

"Unless you care to be shot this evening, I wouldn't move from where you're standing." The deep voice was quiet but firm and it came from the shadows of the big bed.

Julianna remained still as a statue, her mind awlirl. For a moment all was silent, but then she heard the bedsheets rustle and the mattress groan. She cast her eyes toward the bed, afraid to move even an inch. She could see from the man's outline that he was now leaning against the headboard. His arm appeared to be resting on his upraised knee, but it was too dark to tell whether or not he was actually holding a gun.

"You're probably wondering if I do indeed have a gun," he said nonchalantly, and Julianna had to suppress a gasp. *How did he know?* She closed her eyes and pursed her lips in annoyance at herself. Of course he knew. It's what any halfway intelligent person would be thinking if they were discovered in her position.

"Let me reassure you that the answer is yes."

His reassurance was hardly necessary, since she had already concluded that to be the case. In her experience, gentlemen were alarmingly odd, at least in most

respects, so it was no surprise that this one apparently slept with a gun. Given his wild and reckless reputation, it would perhaps be more surprising if he did not.

He snorted inelegantly from the bed, which amused Julianna in spite of the dangerous situation she was in. In that moment he didn't sound at all like the Honorable Mr. Alasdair Sharp to whom she'd recently been introduced, but very much like an annoyed schoolmaster.

"Stand up, for God's sake," Mr. Sharp ordered from the bed. "You look like a caricature of a thief, hunched over and creeping along the wall."

Julianna started to straighten and she heard another rustle from the bed.

"Slowly," Mr. Sharp admonished, and she froze again for a moment before straightening very, very slowly.

"And now you must tell me what you found so irresistible in my bedroom in the middle of the night."

Julianna heard the amusement in his voice and it irritated her. So he found her amusing, did he?

The slight weight in the secret pocket of her shirt burned into her side like a brand as she faced him. "Let me reassure you that it was the Stewart Pearl I found irresistible," she retorted, "and nothing else."

As soon as she spoke she could have bitten off her tongue. Why, oh why did she always open her mouth before thinking things through? Surely he would recognize her now.

"You're a woman," Mr. Sharp exclaimed in shock.

Julianna closed her eyes in despair at her own foolishness. If she had kept her mouth shut, he wouldn't have figured that out so quickly, maybe not at all. She was dressed in dark trousers and a dark shirt, her hair pinned up. In the dark she was certain she could pass for a man. The waning crescent moon outside barely gave enough light for him to see her. Even though her outburst had given away her sex, she refused to confirm it by answering him. She was light-headed with relief that he had not recognized her voice.

"I thought you looked a little short for a man," he mused, "but I imagined that you were an apprentice thief or some such thing. It never entered my head that you might be a woman."

Julianna had to press her lips together not to make a disparaging comment about the contents of his head, since it was clear he had no idea who she was. It wouldn't be wise in this situation, although it was her natural inclination.

"Cat got your tongue, Miss Thief?" he asked, and Julianna shivered. She was not afraid of him—rather, she was afraid that she was losing control of the situation and of herself.

He shoved the covers aside and rose from the bed, and Julianna almost squeaked in alarm. He was naked. The pale moonlight flowing through the open window fell across the floor at an angle, and as he stood next to the bed, the light shone on his very naked body, illuminating him from his flat stomach to his bare feet.

His face was still covered in shadow, but Julianna remembered it from the many times she had seen him leaving his house and walking down the street, not

to mention the party she had attended the other night. Mr. Sharp was a descendent of the Stewarts, all right: tall, handsome, with a high forehead and spectacular blue eyes. He looked just as the eyewitness accounts had described Bonnie Prince Charlie. She should have known from his firm, pointed chin that he wouldn't be an easy mark. But she'd been distracted by his silky blond curls and those eyes, not to mention the width of his shoulders. Oh, yes, and, more important, the Stewart Pearl. At the party she had barely been able to take her eyes off the famous pearl, which sat in solitary splendor in a glass case surrounded by candelabra—gleaming, pale, and round and begging to be stolen.

“So you want my pearl, do you?” he asked, his voice smooth and suggestive.

Julianna's gaze darted up to his shadowed face, but she could see nothing. The anger and amusement in his voice, however, had been replaced by something else. Something that made her distinctly nervous, considering that he was naked and she was caught.

He slowly moved toward her. As he approached, she saw that he was indeed holding a pistol. She wasn't all that knowledgeable about guns, but at that moment her primary concern was that the gun might contain a bullet, and she really did not care to be shot this evening. When he stopped in front of her, Julianna couldn't take her eyes away from the gun.

She was so intent on the pistol, she was startled when she felt his finger under her chin, urging her gaze upward. She met his eyes and a measure of her fear must have shown on her face.

“I don’t need this, do I?” he murmured, lowering the pistol. Julianna vehemently shook her head. He smiled at her response, and then released the trigger gently. He leaned over and set the gun down on a nearby table. Julianna was so relieved, she leaned back against the wall, her knees weak.

“Why do you want my pearl?” he asked quietly. He reached out and gently brushed a fallen lock of hair off her cheek, his finger trailing along from her forehead to her jaw.

He was so close and so unguarded, and a dozen scenarios of how she could escape this unfortunate situation flashed through Julianna’s mind. But each one ended in violence, and she found herself strangely unwilling to attack him. He had put the gun down, as foolish as that might have been, which represented a modicum of trust that she did not want to betray. The truth was, her odds of escaping were fairly slim. The only feasible exit was the window, and it was too far away to make it there without being caught. And if she ran, this odd truce would surely be at an end.

“I need the money.” She surprised herself by answering his question. Although surely the answer should have been obvious to him. Why else would someone steal something?

That wicked finger of his trailed down her neck and pushed open the collar of her shirt. He slowly and very lightly rubbed the pad of his finger along her collarbone and Julianna shivered. She should not, absolutely *should not*, be letting him do that. But it felt delicious, and no man had ever touched her like that. No man had ever gotten close enough to do so. She supposed she should protest his

familiarity, but the circumstances were not in her favor. And really, what was she going to do to stop him? If she wanted to, that is.

“Do you?”

His murmured words did strange things to Julianna’s insides. She’d found men attractive before, but she’d never desired one. She shook her head at her wayward thoughts. *No, no*. That way led to trouble. If she’d learned anything from her father’s devious romantic entanglements, it was *that*. Desire was one thing; surrendering to it, and the potentially disastrous consequences, was quite another thing entirely.

“No? You don’t need the money?” He stopped rubbing along her collarbone, and Julianna felt the skin and muscles there tighten and jump in protest. Surely that was not good.

“No,” she said loudly, and his head jerked back a little in surprise. Julianna blinked rapidly and then shook her head again. She was so completely out of her depth in this situation that his mere touch confused her. “I mean, yes, yes I do need the money. For rent, you see.”

She winced at her garbled explanation. Could she possibly sound any more foolish? It would be better if she just kept silent.

“Are you desperate, poppet?” he murmured. He was looking at her oddly, his head tipped to the side. His finger resumed its exploration of her collarbone, adding a new twist as he dragged it down one side of her deep, open shirt collar and back up the other side. Julianna shivered and bit her lip to suppress a

whimper. "How desperate? I wonder," he said, and Julianna wasn't sure if he was talking to her or to himself.

He stopped the movement of his finger but left it pressed against the hollow dip between her collarbones. Good lord, she'd never imagined that area could be so extremely sensitive. It would be difficult to expose her throat and shoulders in the latest fashions without remembering his touch. He had managed to make such a simple caress feel sinfully erotic. *What a delightfully wicked man he is turning out to be.* She smiled at the thought, and she saw an answering spark in the narrowing of his pale eyes and the twist of his lips into a wry smile. Julianna immediately pulled back, breaking their contact. She was being a fool, encouraging him when she should be trying to talk her way out of the situation. What on earth was wrong with her? Despite appearances, she had never engaged in conversation, or anything else for that matter, with a naked man. She was about to tell him as much when he spoke again.

"Do you know what I will do?" he asked conversationally, as he stepped back from her. He smiled politely before turning and walking over to the bed. He leaned against the bedpost, crossing his arms as he regarded her.

Julianna was having trouble thinking of anything except how much she missed his touch. "I . . .," She paused to lick her lips, and his smile grew. "I have no idea, frankly. This situation is beyond me." Julianna could not imagine how she was going to get out of this mess. She was so scared at the thought of being turned over to the authorities that she could hardly think. She couldn't reveal her identity. Doing so would create a furor, producing a whole new set of problems for her. But

how else was she going to convince him of her innocence when she had his pearl in her pocket? She'd always expected to come to a bad end—her father was a thief, after all, and she'd had no mother to raise her.

At her honest and exasperated remark, Mr. Sharp laughed out loud. He was her adversary. She had to remember that, if she hoped to get out of this situation unscathed.

He straightened and took a step toward her. "I'll give you the pearl, my dear."

Julianna's mouth dropped open in astonishment. "What?"

"For one night in my bed. Tonight."