

CHAPTER ONE

London, December 1818

Lady Regina Haversham's thirtieth birthday was precisely one month away, which didn't leave her much time to lose her virginity. Not that she wanted it lost. She wanted to know where it went and choose to whom she gave the dratted thing.

Her coach came to a stop in front of the offices of the Bow Street Runners in central London, and she drew in a deep, unsteady breath. She pressed her hands deeper into the white fur muff that sat atop her lap and willed her pounding heart to slow its nervous beat. Christmastide was her favorite time of year. She was in high spirits, but she was also as nervous as a young lady making her debut on her way to see the queen. This particular outing had every chance to end in disaster.

She glanced out the window. She probably should have hired a hackney. It would have been less conspicuous than her uncle's resplendent coach. There were already several on-lookers staring up at the black-lacquered conveyance with

the Duke of Colchester's seal on the side. She glanced down at her clothing. No doubt her ensemble was too elegant for marching into the offices of the best private investigative team in London, but she had no other clothing to wear, and this particular message was best delivered in person. She didn't know Daffin Oakleaf's home address, and she hardly thought a note to him for what she had in mind would be appropriate. No. Regardless of the stares, she had to see him in person.

Regina had settled on the perfect birthday gift to herself. She would spend the night with a man. Not just any man. The finest candidate. One who had the face and body of a Greek god. Thirty years old. Tall, fit, and handsome. Blond hair and green eyes that held a twinkle she found irresistible. She'd met him last summer at her uncle's estate. Her family had been gathered there for the unfortunate purpose of her cousin, the marquess's, funeral. John had been murdered, and inappropriate or not, the man Regina had come to covet was the Bow Street Runner who'd helped investigate his murder.

She hadn't seen Daffin since he'd left the estate that hot July day taking away the two murderers in shackles. Rarely a day passed since that Regina didn't think of him. She'd read about him in the paper, too. Lately, there'd been a series of articles in the *Times* focusing on his exploits. He'd caught criminal after criminal and, according to her cousin Nicole, made hefty bounties doing it. Now that Regina's period of mourning was over and her uncle was forcing the issue of her marriage, Regina was here to ask Daffin Oakleaf, legendary Bow Street Runner, to make mad, passionate love to her.

Her stomach performed a somersault. Could nerves make

one physically ill? She suspected they could. Suspected hers would. She winced. It wouldn't do to cast up her accounts in front of the man. *That* certainly wouldn't attract him.

She glanced at her maid, who sat on the seat facing her, back ramrod straight. If the proper young woman knew what Regina was thinking, no doubt she'd be scandalized. Precisely why Regina had said as little as possible about their outing today. Genevieve hadn't asked many questions. Thank heavens.

The coachman opened the door and Regina took one more deep breath. "Wait here," she said to Genevieve. "I shouldn't be long."

After all, how long could an indecent proposal possibly take?

CHAPTER TWO

Daffin Oakleaf pushed himself away from his office desk and scrubbed both hands across his face. He was tired. Bone tired. He hated Christmastide. He'd been running himself ragged chasing a particularly nasty thief across London for the last fortnight. Daffin had nearly had him, or so he thought, when a clue he'd been pursuing had turned to nothing. He was back to the start of his investigation, and severely out of sorts.

Daffin loved his work. It was perfect for him, and it had made him a wealthy man, but days like this were frustrating as hell. He much preferred to be taking down criminals and delivering them to gaol, instead of pacing his office with little to go on while they roamed free.

He was obsessed with each one of his cases, but this one kept him up at night. This case made his blood boil. A child had been injured by the bloody thief, and if there was one thing Daffin couldn't countenance, it was a grown man being

violent with a child. He would track down this monster if it was the last thing he did.

Most of Daffin's investigations were done with the promise of a hefty purse at the end, but he was doing this one for free. He always took on a case or two for charity at Christmastide. It was the least he could do. Not to mention it kept his mind from the blasted season. Focusing on his cases made the holiday easier to ignore. Easier to forget.

He pulled a notebook from his inner coat pocket and scanned the words he'd written on the case so far. Perhaps he'd missed something, some detail that would finally lead him down the right path to Henry Vickery.

"Oakleaf!" came the voice of Paul, the secretary, who sat out in the offices' main room and fielded inquiries from people who came in off the street.

"I'm busy," Daffin called back, not in any mood to be taken away from his case. It was probably someone else who'd read about him in the paper and wanted to make his acquaintance. The papers hounded him of late. One reporter in particular. Mr. H. J. Hancock.

The man seemed obsessed with following Daffin's cases. Week after week, for months now Daffin had been mentioned in his articles. The stories made him sound like a bloody hero. They described how he chased down bad men in the dark of night, vaulting over walls, climbing up to rooftops, and taking more than one bullet. He'd never have answered the reporter's bloody questions if he'd known the man would go and write things like *that*. Being a hero wasn't Daffin's purpose. Never had been. He did his work to put the scum of society behind bars. To get evil people off the street. To spare their future victims.