

Excerpt from

DEADLIER THAN THE PEN

a Diana Spaulding Mystery

by

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Chapter One

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Unable to see for the darkness, Diana Spaulding paused just inside the entrance to Heritage Hall, waiting for the curtain to rise before she tried to find her way to a seat. In anticipation of the start of Damon Bathory's performance, all lights had been extinguished, leaving the auditorium as black as the inside of an abandoned coal mine.

After a moment, a faint green glow appeared at the front of the proscenium. An eerie silence permeated the entire theater . . . until it was broken by a sepulchral voice reading the first lines of a selection from *Tales of Terror*.

As an effect at the start of an evening of horror stories, that disembodied sound was nicely theatrical, but Diana deplored the icy chill that raced along her spine. She did not like being tricked into an emotional response.

Limelight came up slowly, brightening until the man in front of a black backdrop was clearly visible. Even in that intense glare, he retained an aura of mystery. The dark curtains billowed behind him as he moved, now revealing, now concealing a form attired entirely in ebony hues. An obsidian-colored mane framed his face.

For a long moment, Diana simply stood at the back of the hall and stared, mesmerized by her first good look at the writer she'd been ordered to interview. He was not what she'd expected. She'd been certain anyone whose mind could spawn such ghastly, unforgettable images, who could create such horrible, evil, memorable characters, would be equally repulsive in person. The late Edgar Allan Poe, in the likenesses Diana had seen of him, looked as if he suffered the torment of the damned in order to create his nightmare tales.

The twisted, tortured soul of Damon Bathory, however, resided in a vital, superbly conditioned body, at least six feet tall, with a muscular chest and perfectly proportioned arms and legs. His facial features were difficult to discern but were certainly not deformed. The paleness of forehead and nose stood out in contrast to jet black waves of hair above and a neatly trimmed mustache and beard below.

What struck Diana most forcibly was that he moved with leonine grace, holding a copy of his book in one strong, long-fingered hand while he used the other to gesture. Each movement was subtle but compelling. Choreographed. He rarely glanced at the text.

Tearing her gaze away from the stage, Diana located an empty seat and slid in from the aisle. As she sank gratefully into a comfortable plush-velvet chair, she wondered if being surrounded by other people would diminish the impact of Bathory's performance. One glance around her answered that question. The deep pitch and hypnotic cadence of his voice held the entire audience spellbound.

Read aloud, Bathory's words possessed even more power than they'd had on the page, and they'd been evocative enough in print to give Diana nightmares. As she listened, he reached the climax of the story, the death of his hero. There was a moment of stunned silence in the crowd, followed by a smattering

of shocked gasps and nervous, hastily muffled titters. Into that highly charged atmosphere Damon Bathory spoke the last line of his text in a voice calculated to make the strongest man's blood run cold.

Since the spectators consisted primarily of young women, the effect was particularly successful, eliciting first horrified shrieks and then tumultuous applause. In the seat next to Diana, a girl of no more than sixteen sighed in ecstasy.

How many in the audience, Diana wondered, had come here solely to gawk at the man himself? This was the last night of the six he'd been scheduled to appear. Had word spread that it was worth the fifty-cent price of admission to sit in blackness and weave forbidden fantasies about a darkly handsome and charismatic artist?

Diana tugged off her suede gloves, shrugged out of her warm wool Ulster, and fumbled at her flat, beaded bag for one of the small notebooks she always carried. At the bottom, beneath her handkerchief, cab fare sufficient for a hansom, and an essence bottle, she unearthed a pencil. By the time Bathory launched into his second selection, her eyes had adjusted to the dimness of the auditorium. Long practice enabled her to write without much light.

"Smooth, cultured voice," she scribbled, then paused to listen for any trace of regional accent. It was there, she decided, but never quite strong enough for her to place.

Setting that small puzzle aside, she concentrated on the text of his presentation. He wove a powerful spell with words and voice. She was no more immune to it than the other women in the audience.

As the evening wore on, Diana despaired of ever being able to convey to her readers even a fraction of the primordial feelings Bathory's words evoked. His use of metaphor and symbolism made her think her own writing style pallid in comparison. And how could she possibly do justice to a description of the atmosphere of subtle, sensual menace emanating from the stage?

As a performer he was very good. With his voice alone he made her believe in eternal hellfire. Many an actor would envy him its resonance. They'd kill for his consummate skill at evoking a mood.

Diana had never enjoyed grim and distressing subject matter, but when Damon Bathory began his last selection, "The Tale of the Blood Countess," she could not help herself. There was an undeniable attraction about the thrill of being safely frightened. A delicious, anticipatory shudder raced through her.

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When Damon Bathory reached the end of the story, lights came up in the hall. Some members of the audience departed at once, struggling into coats and chattering among themselves as they headed for the doors at the back. But several of the sweet young things who'd flocked to the reading, and a few who were neither sweet nor young, surged forward to accost the performer before he could escape backstage.

Noting the strained smile on Bathory's face, Diana felt a moment's sympathy. He played the role of famous writer well, answering all but the most inane of questions. He evaded those while modestly acknowledging the praise the women wished to heap upon him. At one point he had to politely dislodge the clinging hand of a particularly eager young female from his forearm.

Head bent to hide her smile, Diana scribbled a few final comments into her notebook while he dealt with the remaining fans. When all but the last two had left, she stood, collected her coat and gloves, and started towards the stage.

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At first, Ben Northcote gleaned only a general impression of the woman moving gracefully down the aisle. She wore a pleasing costume in navy blue trimmed with embroidery and cut-work. The small bustle on her round skirt bounced as she walked, lending a certain jauntiness to her progress.

As she came closer, Ben's gaze slid upward. Her hat, a spot of color in red felt trimmed with red velvet, sported several feathers that drooped low enough to conceal her features until she was right in front of him. At last she looked at him, and he discerned wide-spaced, bright blue eyes and a pert little nose. The slightly square shape of her face gave it character, rendering her handsome rather than pretty. What little he could see of her thick, mahogany-colored hair—a strand had come loose from confinement beneath her hat—softened the effect and brought out the likeness to gardenia petals in her complexion.

She waited until they were alone before she stepped onto the stage and addressed him. She'd clearly been taking his measure while he had taken hers. When she gave him a tentative smile and thrust out a hand, he took it and shook it without hesitation, just as if she were a man.

"Good evening, Mr. Bathory. My name is Mrs. Evan Spaulding. I write a column called 'Today's Tidbits' for the *Independent Intelligencer*."

Ben dropped her hand as if he had been burnt. He made it his practice to read all the local newspapers. "Today's Tidbits" was written in epistle style and enlivened by personal asides. The previous

Friday, the columnist had skewered *Tales of Terror*, but it was not that unsigned review alone which made Ben wary. Monday's column had left a sour taste in his mouth. In that one she'd not only dissected a new production of an old play but the private business of the actresses in the cast as well.

"I realize this was the last of your public readings here in New York," Mrs. Spaulding went on, the deepening pink stain in her cheeks the only indication that she might have guessed his thoughts, "but I am sure you can have no objection to more publicity. Booksellers still stock your titles. You—"

"Sales are quite brisk, Mrs. Spaulding, and I've no desire to answer impertinent questions about my personal life."

Although she winced at his curt tone, she did not give up. "Would you rather I speculate?" She was nothing if not persistent. "Be assured, Mr. Bathory, your name will appear in my column again whether you agree to an interview or not."

"Indeed? Do you mean to drop hints to the public about my bedroom scenes?"

This second, more pointed reference to Monday's column brought another, darker rush of color to her cheeks. "I have read *The Curse of Hannah Sussep, or The Indian Witch* and I mean to evaluate it for the benefit of my readers." An involuntary *moue* of distaste accompanied this announcement.

Her critique would not be favorable, Ben concluded. The lady did not care for horror stories. Truthfully, he could not blame her, although he had no intention of voicing that opinion. Some of the Damon Bathory tales made even him queasy, and he was no stranger to spilled blood or grievous wounds.

"You surprise me, madam," he said instead. "What need have you to write this review when less than a week ago you gave yourself free rein to criticize other works by Damon Bathory?"

"It is my job to comment on all current books and plays." Stiff of speech, standing erect, her chin stuck out at a belligerent angle, she was an irresistible target.

"Will my reading tonight be covered in your critique?"

"Why else should I have come?"

He met that response with a sardonic lift of one brow, a gesture that produced another frown from his attractive adversary.

"I will write about what I saw and heard," she said, but he noted that her voice was not completely steady.

He knew the effect Damon Bathory had on women. During a performance he could not see his audience, and he had decided early in his four-month tour that this was a good thing. It was disconcerting enough afterwards, when the harpies descended upon him, clamoring for attention, craving a word, a smile . . . a fright to tell their friends about. Doing readings in every major city in America had become more of a burden than he'd ever anticipated when he'd agreed to the endeavor. That his readings were so popular with females of all ages never failed to amaze him.

"Far be it from me to stand in the way of freedom of the press," he said now, to this one. "I am merely curious when I ask this: do you mean to be equally fair-minded this time?"

Already defensive, she went rigid at his sarcastic tone. "I will be honest," she said through clenched teeth, "as I always strive to be. It is not only my right but my duty to express a negative opinion if I have one."

Ben watched her, reluctantly fascinated, as she visibly fought for control of her temper. He wondered if she was counting to ten. More likely to twenty, he decided as the silence lengthened between them. Both her tone and her words surprised him when she finally spoke.

"The books are not badly written."

"How gratifying to be damned with faint praise."

"You write *too* well. The images you evoke are dreadful to contemplate. All else aside, was it necessary to end with a bloodbath? In spite of myself, I came to like your half-mad heroine. I sympathized with her plight and hoped for her recovery. There was no warning before she and most of her family were brutally slaughtered. How can you expect me to recommend such a terrible story to my readers?"

Ben smiled slowly. She stood up for herself, a trait he'd always admired in a woman. He realized he was enjoying this exchange more than any conversation he'd had in months. Her dislike of the tales did not bother him at all. In fact, it had been his experience that bad reviews produced better sales than raves.

"You were moved by the story." He could hazard a guess as to the real reason behind her reaction. "I understand why you wouldn't want to confess to that in print."

Her frown created twin furrows on either side of the bridge of her nose. "I cannot recommend that any gently reared young lady peruse your book, but I will tell my readers that the story has a moral, and that the images are brilliantly crafted."

"Admit the truth, Mrs. Spaulding," he coaxed. "Just to me. These stories wreak havoc with your emotions. That is why you dislike them so much."

His perception plainly startled her, but after a moment she rewarded him with an appealingly rueful smile and a nod of agreement. "I cannot help but admire your skill in managing it so seamlessly."

"So, you applaud Damon Bathory's ability as a writer?"

"But despise the subject matter, and that opinion will not alter." The smile vanished and she was all business again. "Won't you reconsider granting me an interview?"

"I think not."

The idea of spending more time with this charmingly contradictory woman tempted Ben, but not strongly enough to offset the risk. One slip of the tongue and all his efforts would have been for naught. He could not trust her. That Monday column was proof she had no regard for privacy. She'd print anything and everything she learned about him. While it was unlikely someone from home would read this particular newspaper and make a connection, he did not want to take any chances.

"It would give you the opportunity to explain yourself, to express your views on the merits of telling such dark tales."

Ben shook his head. Her forthcoming review would generate sales without additional revelations from him.

"Such an arrangement could benefit us both," she persisted. "If only you—"

"There will be no interview, Mrs. Spaulding."

With that final, curt dismissal, Ben started to leave the stage. A sharp tug stopped him. She'd caught hold of the high-swirling hem of the long, black cloak he wore as part of his costume.

"Mr. Bathory, I—"

He held up one hand as he turned, forestalling further argument, but she did not release her hold on the fabric. They stood disturbingly close to each other, a mere step away from an intimate embrace.

Mrs. Spaulding, he reminded himself. And a woman who wielded that most dangerous weapon, the pen. Few arms in any arsenal were deadlier.

With a little gasp, she dropped the cloth and backed away, eyes wide as she stared at his uplifted fingers. Her focus was on the ornate ring he wore. It was jade, carved in intaglio with a crest that showed a dragon biting its own tail. The beast encircled three wolf's teeth surmounted by a crown.

With a wicked smile, Ben lifted his right hand a little higher, until the stage lights fully illuminated the stone. There was no doubt in his mind that Mrs. Spaulding recognized the coat of arms. It was the one he'd earlier described, in loving detail, as belonging to Elizabeth Bathory, the evil heroine of "The Tale of the Blood Countess." He gave her a moment longer to recall that "Damon Bathory" claimed descent from this sixteenth-century noblewoman, a fiend who had murdered hundreds of young peasant girls in the belief that bathing in their blood would keep her eternally youthful.

He spoke in the soft, ominous tone he'd perfected for the stage. "It is not wise to try to strike a deal with the devil, Mrs. Spaulding." Then, before she could do more than catch her breath in alarm, he made a swift, smooth exit. This time she made no attempt to stop him.

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The moment he vanished from sight, Diana recovered her courage. He'd been toying with her, she realized, deliberately playing on the imaginary terrors he himself had instilled in her.

He was mysterious, threateningly virile, and wickedly attractive. But he was neither a monster, nor one of his characters. There was no fire and brimstone in the air.

She frowned. An elusive odor had been teasing her nostrils ever since she'd stepped onto the stage. A slow smile enveloped her face as she belatedly identified it. The dark and dangerous Damon Bathory smelled of Ivory soap.

She considered continuing her pursuit backstage but decided against it. Clean, fresh scent or not, the man affected her strangely and the fact that not all her reactions were negative seemed an excellent reason to keep a distance between them.

A young widow could not afford to fall prey to such feelings—either unfounded fear or lustful thoughts.

To prove to herself that she was not afraid, and that she had control of other emotions as well, Diana forced herself to stay right where she was and make a few more notes in her little cloth-covered notebook. When she'd recorded the impressions she thought might be helpful in her account of the reading, including a detailed description of that ring, she closed the book and returned it to her bag, buttoned up her coat, and made her way, at a dignified pace, through the empty theater.

Although she heard nothing, and was careful not to look back over her shoulder, she could not quite shake the feeling that Damon Bathory was watching her. He might have stayed nearby easily enough, hidden backstage, expecting to witness a hasty retreat. She felt a rush of relief when she reached the well-lit street without being accosted.

He was just an ordinary man, she told herself, as she walked back to 10th Street and her tiny rented room. He was a writer, not a ghoul. He'd probably run the other way if he ever came upon a real dead body.

She almost managed to convince herself that she'd have talked him into an interview if she hadn't reacted so foolishly to the sight of that ring. She'd let the power of his performance stimulate her fancies. That was all.

Unfortunately, her subconscious mind continued to be influenced by what she'd seen and heard in that darkened theater. Damon Bathory haunted her dreams throughout the night, appearing in guises she was embarrassed to recall in the light of day.

To find out how and why Diana continues her pursuit of a story about Damon Bathory, you'll have to buy a copy of *Deadlier than the Pen* or persuade your local library to do so. The book is available in bookstores or can be ordered by them. Libraries can order through Baker and Taylor. Individuals can also purchase this book direct from the publisher at www.pemberleypress.com.