

## Prologue

London, England

March 1818

Miss Judith Pengarden should be anywhere but edging down the darkened halls of Lord Gunther's London townhouse, the chilled wall pressed to her back. Possibly having a late meal with her siblings or trying her hand at yet another card game her youngest sister insisted she learn. Or even attending the opera house. However, she was, indeed, sneaking through the drafty interior of a home long past needing a complete renovation. It was difficult to understand why her twin sister, Samantha, thought there was anything of value in this long-forgotten, ramshackle house.

In the hour Jude had scoured the musty second floor by candlelight, she'd discovered nothing but molding draperies, neglected family heirlooms, and unpolished wooden furniture. It was impossible to envision someone living within these walls, let alone storing a precious, ancient, and very valuable vase, carelessly placed on an end table.

"Oh, I should have known better than to trust you," Jude mumbled, cursing her own inability to see past her twin's many fables. It was more likely Sam hadn't even met Lord Gunther, nor overheard him boasting about his prized vase.

She searched the all-but-abandoned townhouse with only the current wing left to explore. Making one final turn, Jude looked down the short, dim corridor, knowing this was her last hope of finding what she'd come for; what she'd risked her neck to procure.

Immediately, she noticed that this hall was better kept than the rest of the home; the floors were swept clean, if not polished to shine, the long draperies were held back by finely tied lengths of cord, and a small table sat just to the left of a set of double doors.

Jude had found the lord's private chambers.

Finally.

She grasped her long skirt in her hand and sprinted to the end of the hall, pausing before the table.

Nestled securely on it was what she'd risked all to find; its porcelain surface recently wiped clean, removing any dust that may have gathered to dull its fine colors and artfully crafted exterior.

Her breath left her as she admired the piece's eternal beauty—only overshadowed by its worth.

It became increasingly difficult to draw air in as she lifted her fingers and gently touched the vase, feeling the slight ripples of the artist's brushstrokes as he—or she—used delicate hands to paint the piece. Or so she imagined.

The thought of taking the artifact in her hands and descending the flight of stairs to scurry to her carriage, which was waiting several houses down the street and around the corner, terrified her.

Not that she—and Sam—hadn't planned this ruse carefully, but never had Jude imagined herself breaking into another's home to steal something of great import. Once she held the vase, removed it from Lord Gunther's home, and traded it for enough pounds to settle her family's debts and feed all of Craven House's occupants for many years, a weight would be added to her shoulders. A line would be crossed and it wouldn't be easy to step back over.

Jude pulled her hand back as if the vase had burned her.

Maybe she could tell Sam that she hadn't found the piece, convince her it likely never existed, that their plan had been flawed from the start and they'd find another way to help their family. But she knew their options were limited and their time quickly running out.

Jude shook her head, casting out any lingering doubts. Her family needed help, and if she and Sam could provide their eldest sister with a fraction of financial security, then they owed her that.

And that safeguard, the answer to Craven House's dilemma, sat before her—waiting to be taken...all but calling to Jude to remove it from this dusty, dilapidated house and transport it to a new owner who would worship its delicacy as was deserving.

The vase was practically begging her to take hold and liberate it from its cruel circumstances.

The intricately crafted piece belonged in a museum; a place where the public could admire its beauty and historical worth, not hidden away in this dusty old house.

That Jude would also gain something from the transaction was a bonus she could live with.

Not one to turn down the opportunity to give something a freedom formerly denied, Jude grabbed the vase, surprised at its weightlessness in her hands.

She wondered if she let the vase go if it would float to the floor, gliding like a feather.

When images of it shattering as it hit the ground flooded her mind, Jude tucked the piece under her arm securely and retraced her steps to the servants' stairs.

Holding her breath once more, she descended the stairs two at a time before halting at the closed door that separated the stairwell from the hall that led from the front of the house to the kitchen.

Jude set her ear to the dull, cold door and listened.

Not a sound could be heard beyond.

No footsteps, no quiet whispers, no closing doors.

Not even a clock sounded anywhere in the house.

A shiver went through her. Her body was alert to the oddness of it all, but she pushed the door open and made her way to the room right off the main foyer. There, a window still stood ajar, waiting for her to crawl back through and lower herself to the shrubs below.

She was horrified at the exhilaration she felt as she moved through the abandoned house.

Jude only prayed she made it home safely—and that Marce, her eldest sister, appreciated all Jude did to help support everyone who sought refuge at Craven House. Not that Marce could *ever* know where the money came from, only that it appeared in her private chambers—as if from thin air.

The cool night breeze brushed across Jude's face as she stared out the open window.

It was her last opportunity to turn around, return the vase to its rightful place, and depart with no one the wiser.

And her conscience clear of any wrongdoing.

With a deep breath, Jude made the only decision that made sense for her and her family's future; she held the vase out of the window and released it, allowing it to fall.

...Directly into her twin sister's waiting hands below.

## Chapter One

London, England

May 1818

Jude plucked at the sturdy wool of her filth-streaked pinafore as she held her breath to keep the wretched smells at bay. The stink of unwashed bodies, moldy, forgotten food, and wet animal was overpowered only by the stench of a coppery odor she knew to be spilled blood. She'd certainly need to burn her current garment as soon as she was released and able to return to Craven House—if one of her siblings ever saw fit to collect her.

To do away with such a precious thing as a dress was not something she'd always had the liberty to do. For many years, she counted herself lucky to possess several dresses—even though she shared each with Samantha. The time she and her siblings had spent at Craven House should have prepared Jude for this night; men angered by too much drink, which turned into arguing, which led to fisticuffs and blood—the smell of which was something she'd never forget, though her family had tried to keep her far from it as much as possible.

A sliver of the rising sun outside the narrow window of her cell allowed a slice of light to penetrate her dank enclosure; though Jude would have been happy to remain ignorant of her despicable surroundings. Her dress, though made from a thick material, still snagged on the rough, splintering bench below her. But after hours of standing—and pacing—Jude had to rest her aching legs. It was either the sticky, grimy, wooden bench or the more intolerable hard-packed dirt floor littered with discarded food and a pail filled with what she was told was water but appeared murkier than the River Thames.

Actually, she'd prefer a swim in the Thames as opposed to her current predicament. She only hoped her elder brother, Garrett, didn't ship her to the country for all the trouble she'd caused. The trouble she presumed herself in. A sojourn to the country would be preferable to what Marce, her imperious sister, would do to her if she found out about Jude's escapades.

She'd seen herself as invincible; above being caught—so much so that Jude should be in a complete panic. But the surreal nature of her position hadn't faded to allow in the stark actuality she faced.

It was supposed to be only once—the vase from Lord Gunther's townhouse. They were to sell the piece, give the money to Marce, and be free to live with some semblance of peace knowing their home was safe. But the vase remained at Craven House and now their family's future was in jeopardy. They should have known that a stolen vase would not go unnoticed and unreported in the post. They should not have been so delusional as to think they could take the vase and gain coin for it as easily as selling wares inside the marketplace.

As of now, she'd been left unaccompanied in this darkened room, the door securely locked, for hours. No one had come to inquire about her well-being; no offers of refreshment or fare, no blanket to ward off the night chill. She hadn't heard another person since the constable had slammed the door shut on her with his sharp reprimand to not cause him further grievance or he'd make her sorry.

She was unsure how much longer she'd be locked in this room—her stomach let out a loud growl in protest at the thought—or even if her twin, Samantha, knew where she'd been taken.

One thing Jude was certain of; she didn't relish spending another moment alone here. The window was too narrow for her to wiggle through and the door was bolted from the outside.

This led her to hours of pondering how she'd ended up here—what path she could have taken to deliver herself from such a wretched circumstance.

Her night had started off simple enough, with she and her twin devising a plan to remove fourteenth century Bible leaves from Lord Asherton's townhouse—a far less notable and traceable antiquity than the vase from Lord Gunther, but almost as valuable. It should have been easy. Samantha was to meet the lord in question at a dinner party she was attending with friends while Jude slipped into his home, collected the ancient papers, and disappeared as if she'd never been there. They'd heard during a recent outing that the man's house was light on servants as many had traveled to Lord Asherton's country estate ahead of his scheduled departure on the morrow. The perfect time for their heist.

But little had gone as planned.

After searching a study on the ground floor, Jude had fled down a dark hallway when she'd heard voices coming from the kitchen, growing louder as she rushed in the opposite direction. It hadn't been difficult to slip into an empty room, rush to a door, and flee—that was until her cap was ripped from her head as she bolted by a coat rack positioned inside what appeared to be a lady's sitting room. Jude had quickly retrieved the cap, tugged it back into place to hide her red hair, and continued toward a door she hoped would open to a garden sitting area...and her freedom.

She was mere steps from the door when the alarm sounded behind her.

Not the shouts of an infuriated lord or the call to halt by a faithful servant, but rather the searing shriek of a child. Jude barely glanced over her shoulder to see her identifier before rushing through the door, along the side of the house, and around to the narrow lane behind the row of townhouses.

Several hours later, her ears still rung from the high-pitched screech.

She would never forget the rounded, frightened eyes of the young girl who'd peered at Jude from her seat on the lounge, a throw blanket lying haphazardly across her lap as she read a book. Her tousled hair fell around her shoulders, still crimped from her plaits. A pristine white night shift gathered at her throat in a bow.

Jude couldn't accurately describe the girl beyond her long, dark hair and frightened look.

All she'd thought about at that moment was getting as far away from Lord Asherton's home as possible, the valuable Bible leaves be damned.

Fleeing from the house and gaining a block's distance hadn't stopped an alarm being sounded. The night watchman was rushing around the corner, his lamp held high to illuminate his way.

The burly man, dressed in merchant's trousers and coat, was only identifiable by the shiny tin star pinned to his jacket pocket. The swinging lamp sent light reflecting off the dented piece of metal as they both stood stock-still, staring at one another. The pair was caught in the small circle of light given off by the uplighter. His expression was likely a mirror image of hers; fright.

She hadn't expected to be caught and it was probable he had never apprehended a suspected criminal on his nightly watch.

She was an unchaperoned woman, dressed in a less than fashionable gown with a cap hiding her hair. It was reasonable for the constable to question her on principle alone, for what woman would be traversing the deserted London streets at close to midnight?

Maybe she should have run. Sam would have vouched for this course of action.

Certainly, she should not have agreed to the harebrained notion in the first place. Marce would have counseled against it.

The man wasn't armed. Most night watchmen took to their route with nothing more than a billy club as protection.

And so, the standoff continued. Jude was analyzing the watchman's size and strength; concluding he would easily outrun her on foot in a section of London she was unfamiliar with.

There'd been little else for her to do but employ her twin's claimed talent for charming men. Unfortunately, her voice didn't hold the sultry depth of Sam's, nor was Jude adept at the coy behavior needed to lull a man into feeling secure enough to allow his guard to fall.

And so, she'd relented and allowed the watchman to lock her in this room—as any criminal would deserve.

Jude gave in to her exhaustion and leaned back against the grimy wall, needing to forget her many mistakes. She settled against the cold wall of her locked cell and drew her knees to her chest, allowing her dress to cover her chilled feet. As her head met the hard surface of the stone, she closed her eyes, begging her tears to stay where they belonged, unshed.

She would not cry. That right had been taken from her when she and her twin had decided to help bring extra income to Craven House—they'd known the risk they'd agreed to take with their actions.

She breathed deeply, allowing the stench of her surroundings to invade her nostrils and then expelled gradually, slowing her pulse. If she could calm herself, maybe sleep would take over and she'd wake to find it had all been an unpleasant nightmare. She'd awaken in her warm bed with Sam nestled in her matching one a few feet away, both tucked deeply under their soft, peach eyelet, down blankets. Jude would share her horrid dream with Sam. They'd laugh as they crawled from the warmth of their well-sprung beds and rang for their maid to help them prepare for their day of shopping and entertainments.

Except, Sam and Jude shared one bed, hadn't the luxury of a maid, nor the spare funds for as much as even a new pair of gloves.

Marce reminded her younger sisters, daily, each time they offered their complaints, that many women were much less fortunate than they. At least they had a roof over their heads, food in their pantry, and some hope for a more fruitful future if they minded their behavior and attracted fine suitors.

And they had love.

They undoubtedly had an abundance of love.

But love would not keep the debt collectors at bay, nor garner additional food for their table.

And a new dress or two for them all would be appreciated, especially since Lady Haversham had been so kind as to sponsor their societal debut.

Jude huffed. It was a trivial, selfish thought, especially when she was perched on a splintered bench with her head leaning against a grime-covered wall in a room that hadn't been properly swept in Lord knew how long.

From somewhere outside the cell, Jude heard loud, angry voices. They were muffled by the wall and door separating her from other parts of the building housing her, but the aggression in the dominant voice was unmistakable.

Jude would prefer a large hole open in the room and swallow her, as opposed to the force of nature currently headed her way. Only moments would pass before the ire presently unleashed on the night watchman who dared keep Miss Judith Pengarden locked in a room, would be refocused on Jude herself.

"I will not stand for this, Garrett," Marce, Jude's eldest sister and only motherly figure, bit out harshly as a key was slid into the lock. "I will have this door opened at once or I will bring

the fires of Hades down on this *establishment*.” Marce’s emphasis on the word left no doubt in anyone’s mind what her family’s matriarch thought of the night watchman and his lodgings.

“Dear sister,” Garrett coaxed. “The man is only doing his job, earning a respectable salary while keeping the night streets free of vagabonds.”

“Judith is most certainly not a vagabond.” Marce’s voice rose three octaves until it was almost a shrill scream. “Now, release her at once or I will be forced to call on Lord Haversham or Lord Chastain. I am certain you know both the earl and the duke. They will quickly settle all this once and for all.”

Jude could picture her sister stamping her foot, her fury intensifying with each word.

No one dared defy Marce—not at Craven House or anywhere else she’d witnessed her sister in action.

“Ma’am,” the night watchman stammered, clearly resigned to following Marce’s orders. “My apologies for the mistake. The alarm was sounded and the butler in the household gave a description matching Miss Judith’s appearance.”

“And when you found nothing incriminating on her person, you decided the best course of action was to lock her up for hours in this flea-infested room? Most certainly not proper accommodations for a woman of her status.”

“Calm yourself, Marce.” Garrett attempted to soothe his sister’s wrath. “I know Mr. Newman would not purposely apprehend an innocent young woman.”

“I can assure you it was not—“ Newman tried unsuccessfully to interject.

“I will not calm down.” The door was wrenched open, its hinges groaning in protest at the swift movement. “If one hair on her head is harmed, I will have *you* drawn and quartered!”

Marce, her blonde hair falling down her back unrestrained and her coat buttoned down her front, stormed into the room with Garrett close on her heels. The night watchman remained outside, likely knowing it's safer for him to stay out of Jude's eldest sister's reach.

"Again," said Mr. Newman. "I was also worried about her being out late at night. She could have been set upon by any sort of unsavory character. She was without a chaperone and was unwilling to give me any information about herself beyond your direction, Lord Garrett."

Jude would have laughed at the use of Garrett's name spoken so formally, but that would draw Marce's attention far sooner than Jude was prepared for.

Her sister may be vehemently protective of her siblings, but that in no way meant she coddled them.

"That will be all, Mr. Newman." Retreating footsteps sounded as the poor man heeded Marce's curt dismissal. But with his retreating steps, Marce's concern also fled. "What exactly were you doing wandering London at midnight?"

Jude knew better than to speak. It was a rhetorical question meant to keep her silent, for Marce was in no way finished talking.

"I can tell you where you were *not* last night. You were not attending the Buckhams' soiree with Lady Haversham and Mrs. Jakeston, as you should have been. You also did not arrive home with Samantha. I dare say you did not so much as depart with your twin at the start of your evening." Marce's brow rose, daring Jude to refute her. "What do you have to say for yourself, Judith Pengarden?"

Marce only used the siblings' full names when trouble was afoot and she knew it could tarnish their family—as much as their scandal-ridden clan could be tarnished where they hung on the fringes of London's proper *ton*.

“Is there something you’d like to hear from me?” Jude retorted, any calm she may have achieved disappearing.

It irked Jude to no end that Marce viewed her as a mere child—always the girl in plaits and kid boots—not a mature, educated woman, old enough by society’s standards to marry and start her own home and family. However, here Jude sat: in a dank room when any proper lady should be abed, accused of stealing into the home of a member of the *beau monde*.

And all because she was attempting to help her family.

Garrett stepped between his sisters. “I beg the both of you, finish this conversation in a less public,” he paused, looking at the filth overtaking the room, as if seeing it for the first time, “and certainly more hygienic, place. After Jude is allowed a hot—very hot—bath to cleanse this awful stink from her.”

Mockingly, he brought a loose tendril of her hair to his nose and sniffed, disgust masking his teasing nature.

She swatted at his hand and allowed her curl to fall from his grasp.

Jude looked to her sister, silently pleading for Marce to take Garrett’s suggestion.

Marce’s narrowed stare said she wasn’t convinced they need move their conversation. “I have a mind to leave you here.”

“Leave me here?” Jude gulped.

“Leave her here?” Garrett said at the same time.

“Why not?” Marce set her hand on her hip as she stepped around her younger brother to face Jude once more. “I am unsure what you—and likely Sam—are up to, but I will not allow you to run about London with no regard for the consequences. Both for you and our family as a whole.”

“I despise when you speak rationally.” Jude crossed her arms and stood, signaling her desire to depart. “It would be best to return home before we are spotted leaving a place of such ill repute.”

“Thank you for thinking of someone and something other than your own pleasures,” Marce said before turning on her heels and leaving the room with as much fanfare as she’d entered it. She left Garrett and Jude staring blankly at one another. “Come along, you two.”

The comment stung, but the truth in Marce’s words was undeniable. Her sister may not admit when she needed help, but Jude’s actions were risky and not as thought out as she’d hoped. It was highly likely Jude would never be adept at such things. Thankfully, she had no interest in repeating her actions. Not until their financial situation became increasingly dire, at least.

She vowed to refocus on being rid of the vase and not entangling herself in any more harrowing escapades about London.

“I have no doubt your reasoning for tarrying about after the midnight hour is very compelling, yet less than savory.” Garrett took Jude’s elbow and guided her from the dirty room, both of them squeezing through the doorway. “Sam’s note of warning did not find me abed either.” He winked with his words, letting Jude know he was concerned about her but would not pry—as he loathed his siblings prying into his affairs.

Jude turned rounded eyes on her elder brother—the lone wolf of a family full of females. She’d often wondered what occupied his many leisurely hours, but her need to respect his privacy outweighed her interest.

“Do not dally.” Marce’s call floated down the long corridor leading to the front of the establishment, her sure footsteps keeping time. “I have no qualms about leaving the pair of you to secure your own transport home.”

Jude allowed Garrett to walk her down the hall as she suppressed a sigh at her sister’s ire.

The situation seemed drastically less dreadful now that she was among the free again.

She and Garrett nodded to the watchman as they crossed the threshold into the cool morning air. A little bird chirped in the tree bordering the front walk.

“You will owe her answers when you arrive home,” Garrett confided.

“I am aware.”

“I hope you have thought up a plausible explanation in your hours spent locked down.”

“I have not,” Jude said.

Both remained quiet as a man came down the path before them. The stranger removed his hat and nodded to Marce in greeting. If her sister issued any response, it was too quiet for Jude to hear.

“Good morn,” the man greeted Jude and Garrett, a grim smile on his face as he looked away. His hair fell across his forehead at the movement, but he quickly brushed it aside. As he did, Jude noticed the youthfulness of his face.

She glanced over her shoulder as the man pushed his spectacles farther onto the bridge of his nose and strode into the night watchman’s home, his trousers and coat wrinkled as if he’d either slept in them or was against bothering his valet this early in the day.

“And to you, good sir,” Garrett called as the door closed behind the man, her brother’s shoulders lifting as he steered Jude toward their waiting carriage. It was very much like Garrett

to puff his chest when faced with a gentleman of peerage, something he longed to be but had given up on years before—the forgotten younger son of a deceased lord.

Garrett's horse stood tethered to a post nearby.

Jude's heart sank. "You will not return to Craven House with us?"

"I fear not, mop," he said, handing her up into the carriage where Marce was already arranging her skirts. "I have much to attend to."

Marce chuckled softly from inside. "I'm certain he does."

He turned a peeved look at their eldest sister inside the dim conveyance before continuing, "However, I will be round this afternoon to discuss...things."

Jude hoped they could discuss "things" without her present, for she was certain she would be excluded from any and all talks of punishment due her.

"I shall be canceling my trip," Marce said when Jude seated herself across from her. "There is something afoot and I will not let this family go to ruins in my absence."

There was certainly something happening, but it was far more concerning than Sam's and Jude's antics.

"It is one week, Marce." Garrett entered the carriage, his own transport forgotten as he motioned Jude to scoot over and allow him room to sit.

Their sister left her siblings for only one short week every year. Sometimes it was immediately following the holiday season, other times it was during the summer months, but she always returned a bit lighter in nature. They'd come to relish the short time Marce was gone, never asking her destination. But Payton—Jude's youngest sister—had assumed for years that Marce traveled to Bath for several days of rest before returning to her obligations. Jude's sisters envied Marce's travels, thinking they were excluded from something enjoyable, but Jude could

only imagine the weight on her sister's shoulders. She cared for so many—receiving nothing in return. If she sought a few days to live a normal, carefree life then Jude could not blame her for taking it.

Many days, Jude wished she had the fortitude to do the same.

Take her life and future into her own hands, provide for herself instead of partaking in what Marce worked tirelessly to provide for them. Instead, she'd been told continually that at her tender age, she was still to be taken care of. Far too young and innocent to take on any further responsibilities.

And that had led to finding another way around Marce's ban on Jude being anything more than a debutante—protected, sheltered, and treated as a delicate thing.

A way to help support their large household and push the debt collectors back. One time. That was to be the end of it, but when they'd been unable to sell the stolen vase, they'd had to alter their plans slightly, which included Jude taking the Bible leaves.

Another failure and setback for them.

"I can handle things at Craven House in your absence."

Garrett's declaration snapped Jude back to the present.

"That is not necessary," Jude snapped. "We are of an age to care for ourselves."

"In a fashion similar to last night?" Marce asked. "I think not."

"Then it is settled—" Garrett started.

"Nothing is settled," Marce refuted, turning a sharp look on the pair. "I no more trust you to keep Craven House from burning to the ground than I trust the twins. It's bloody insane, but I think Payton has a better handle on herself than the lot of you."

"Payton?" Jude and Garrett said at the same time, once again.

“Do stop doing that,” Jude hissed at her brother. “People will think you and I are more closely related than Samantha and me.”

“Is that so awful?” he teased. “I am undoubtedly more attractive than she.”

“We look identical, you cad!” Jude felt her temper rising as it did on most occasions when she and Garrett were in the same place.

“Then I will be the pretty twin.” Garrett fluttered his eyes, his long lashes being one of his most notable features—if not as manly as he’d like. “I am certain to have many offers for my hand. Our dear eldest sister will be fighting off my hungry suitors!”

Jude swatted at him and he hurriedly scooted out of her reach on the bench seat, fluttering his hand as if fanning the heat from his face.

His actions were at odds with his purely masculine, deep chuckle at his lark.

It only took a moment for her annoyance to fade and a smile to appear.

He jested with Jude constantly. She should feel honored to have their only brother’s undivided attention so regularly when he rarely noticed Payton or Sam, but that also meant he kept better watch over her.

He loved his sisters, but Jude especially. Though he was a man about town, he never went long without visiting Craven House, no matter how often Marce insisted she did not need his concern over their well-being.

“You two will certainly send me to an early grave with your mischief,” Marce declared, her voice thin with exhaustion.

The trio settled into a companionable silence as their carriage traversed the bustling morning streets. A footman followed with Garrett’s mount. Each was lost to their own musings as the carriage found its way quickly home.

Mr. Curtis opened the carriage door with a flourish befitting a man half his age.

“M’lady.” He bowed to Marce as she exited, his back creaking with his effort. “This missive came for ye when ye was out.”

“Not another one,” Jude heard Marce mumble. “This has to stop.”

“You will rectify this shortly, will you not?” Garrett asked as he stepped down and turned to assist Jude. But she rebuffed his assistance and he turned back to Marce. “I do hope this is the last time.”

“For all of our futures, I certainly hope so.”

Jude hopped down from the carriage, snapping a quick glance at the letter before it disappeared into the folds of her sister’s gown. The envelope was labeled as clearly as the others Jude had seen: *Notice: Delinquency—Funds Due!*

She couldn’t help but feel she’d been privy to a conversation that was not meant for her ears.

In that instant, Jude regretted her decisions for the night, yet at the same time, knew the ends justified the means. She must remember she was, indeed, helping Marce and everyone who called Craven House their home. Though she needed to focus more on not getting caught if her great measures were to help and not hinder everything her family had worked so hard for.