

A BLACK DIAMOND  
CHRISTIAN GOTHIC  
REGENCY

#1



# THE VIRTUOUS VISCOUNT

SUSAN M.  
BAGANZ

# The Virtuous Viscount

Susan M. Baganz

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**The Virtuous Viscount**  
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## *Dedication*

To Carol Hisel—

Your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life and this novel, which reunited us, is now in print. I'm beyond grateful to you and honored to be part of your journey. And no—this is not a 'bodice-ripper.'

## *Author's Note*

During the tempestuous years between 1800-1820 or the more specific "Regency" years of 1811 to 1820, it was common for the upper classes, especially the men, to drink various forms of alcohol as part of their daily life. A glass of port wine was often savored by the men after the evening meal. French brandy was considered superior and highly coveted even though England was at war with France. In these stories, my characters do at times drink, and sometimes even to excess with serious consequences for their overindulgence. This is not in any way a recommendation on the part of the author or Pelican Book Group to advocate the drinking of alcohol or to abuse any substance. Laudanum is actually an opiate that was often prescribed medicinally (although many did become addicted to the drug). The use of these in the story are merely an attempt to use this period in history and its notorious excesses as a backdrop where appropriate.

Lord, bring me a man  
who is strong, faithful, and true.  
~Miss Josephine Storm

Virtue:  
Greek ἀρετή aretē ar-et'-ay properly manliness (valor),  
that is, excellence (intrinsic or attributed): praise,  
virtue. ~Strong's Exhaustive Concordance





*And beside this, giving all diligence,  
add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge;  
~Peter 1*

# PROLOGUE

*Derbyshire*

The Black Diamond stared at the pitiful Sir Archibald Bastian. He doubted the fool could deliver to him the virgin he demanded. The potential disappointment was worth the current pleasure of watching him squirm. If he failed, Diamond would own Bastian's estate, located conveniently on an inlet with access to the ocean. Perfect for his purposes.

"I made an offer of marriage. Her father insists on giving her time," Bastian whimpered. The man perspired and mangled the hat in his hand as he stood there, fidgeting.

"She is a virgin?" Diamond pounded his fist on the mahogany desk in front of him.

"Yes. Most certainly, my lord."

"Then let this be done before the season is over. You will wed her and return her to me untouched."

"Un-untouched?"

"Do you have a hearing problem, Bastian? That is my demand, and if you expect to have your gambling

debts paid, you will deliver."

The bumbling knight swallowed hard. "Yes, my lord. It shall be as you say."

"Leave me." The Black Diamond snapped his fingers. The door on the opposite end of the room swung open.

Bastian nodded his head and backed away, bowing as he did so. The Black Diamond grinned. Sometimes his minions were far too easy to intimidate. Foolish Englishmen. They were all doomed anyway. Once he had his sacrifice, the war would turn. Soon, quite soon, the Black Diamond would equal Napoleon Bonaparte for power and wealth.

Ah, but the virgin. She was the key. He would crush his English rose and enjoy every minute. After all, it was what his own dark lord required of him. He was only following orders.

# 1

*Spring*  
*Oxfordshire*

The gray gelding reared as a flash of lightning struck the tree by the road. Lord Marcus Remington held on tight and brought his mount under control.

Weariness seeped into the marrow of his bones, much as the rain did his exposed trousers. Fatigue weighed on him. He was weary of the hunt—the balls and soirees and the pressure to dress ‘top of the trees.’ He longed for the one place he was most at ease. Rose Hill. Home. His three friends, following behind, were equally miserable in the spring storm. Should they have waited out the deluge at the pub in Didcot? It hadn’t seemed worth it when his estate was so close. They had agreed to ride on.

As he turned the bend, the Viscount’s heart sank at the vision illuminated by another flash of light. Through sheets of rain, Marcus spied a carriage teetering on its side. The top half of it hung over a ditch filled with running water from the storm. The horses were free of the carriage. They struggled against their traces as a young man tried to calm them. Their frantic neighs added to the cacophony of wind, thunder, and rain. Two figures huddled under a nearby tree. He sighed as he slowed his horse.

“What ho!” Marcus shouted. He pulled up to await an older man, most likely the groom, who limped forward. Marcus dismounted. “Is everyone out

of the carriage?"

The man pointed off the road toward the trees. "I got me mistress and her daughter out before the second wheel broke. One more lady is inside."

"Is she well?" Marcus implored as three other horses drew up close by and their riders descended. Blood pounded in his ears as he kept his eye on the carriage in its precarious position.

The man grimaced, and his hands rose in the air as he took in the four gentlemen in their many caped greatcoats. He backed away. "Ye not be here to rob us?"

Marcus shook his head, and raindrops danced off the brim of his hat. "Most certainly not. Lord Remington at your service. Excuse me." He turned aside. "Phillip? Will you ride to Rose Hill and bring back a carriage? We have one passenger to rescue. She may be injured, so have Fenton send for the doctor, and inform Mrs. Hughes to expect more guests."

"Right away." The tall, blond aristocrat spun on his heel, remounted, and rode off into the stormy darkness.

Marcus headed toward the carriage as he called out to his friends. "Theo. Attend to the ladies, please." Lord Theodore Harrow would charm the women and ease their anxieties. Marcus turned aside to a man of slighter build and lowered his voice. "Michael, a woman is trapped inside."

"Then a rescue is in order." The shorter, coffee-haired gentleman gave a cheeky grin to his friend even as rain dripped off his hat.

Marcus shook his head and struggled to master the corner of his lips that wanted to curl in response. Leave it to Sir Michael Tidley to see an adventure in

what promised to be a challenging effort. He sobered. "Let's not waste any time. I do not like the way the carriage is balanced."

The two gentlemen drew closer to the equipage.

Marcus noticed the groom had gone back to removing the luggage from the boot. The horses had calmed. "I'll go in." Marcus pulled himself up to the side of the carriage. Once on top, he struggled to jerk the door open. It stuck. The carriage rocked over the culvert as Marcus balanced on the sky-borne side.

Michael grabbed hold of the underside of the carriage to add stability.

Marcus pulled at the door several times before it gave way and almost threw him off his elevated perch. He waited for the carriage to cease rocking. He knelt and peered into the darkness, barely able to see inside. The rain pelted him harder. *Could this night get any worse, Lord?*

A bolt of lightning illuminated the interior long enough to detect where the figure of the passenger rested. He ascertained an area he might stand without landing on her. After lowering himself in, he shut the door to keep out the deluge. His gloved hands moved around in the dark, searching. Oil had spilled from the lantern attached to its hook by the uppermost door. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Outside, Michael called to tie the horses to the carriage to keep it from tipping into the ditch.

"There you are." Sprawled out next to his feet, which were against the far wall of the carriage, lay a young woman. He knelt down beside her in the cramped quarters. Shadows from the skittering of lightning came in the windows. He removed his gloves and shoved them in the pocket of his greatcoat.

"Miss?" He moved lower to spy a crushed chip bonnet that at one time was probably quite pretty. "Miss? Can you hear me?" He untied the ribbons under the woman's chin, removed the hat, and tossed it aside. Dark waves of hair tumbled down, and he brushed them away to get a look at her face as his eyes adjusted to the dark. She did not respond to his touch or voice. He imagined she was pretty and sweet, like his younger sister, and his heart ached for this woman's suffering. He shook his head. This was neither the time nor the place for flights of fancy. His fingers touched something warm and sticky in her hair. Blood.

*Please, don't let her be dead.* He found her pulse weak but steady and released a breath he hadn't known he held. He glanced around and noticed the rear window of the carriage was the only space large enough to fit her through. Lifting her up to the door at the top would be nigh on impossible in her current state.

Marcus stood up and opened the door to find rain pelting him in the face. This was not how he anticipated spending his birthday. "Michael!" he growled.

"Here. How is she?" The shorter man's face popped into view.

"Unconscious, but alive. She received a blow to the head. I am going to try to break out the back window. We can pass her out that way."

"I'll be there."

Marcus sank down and closed the door. He reached into his inner coat pocket and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the moisture off his face. *Lord, help me.* Marcus felt around for a carriage blanket and

placed it over the young woman. A metal box that had probably caused her injury was near her head. The locked box most likely contained valuables, but there was nothing else to hand. He smashed it against the glass. A slight crack emerged in the thick pane. There wasn't enough space to get momentum. He tried again without success. He set it back where he found it.

Replacing his gloves, he grabbed the handle by the uppermost door and swung his feet toward the fractured glass. A resounding crack was his reward. He dismissed the sharp pain as he pulled himself out of the broken window. *Come on, Marcus, push!* He made another attempt.

This time, both legs pierced through, and glass sliced his trousers at the knees as he drew them back. He picked at the shards in his trousers. The third time, he shattered most of the glass. He dropped down to the unconscious woman and grabbed the metal box to finish off the sharp edges around the window frame.

Michael peered in. "Your valet will not be happy with you, Remy."

Marcus rolled his eyes. "Max will recover. I can always get a new pair of boots." Marcus removed the glass-covered blanket and set it aside before he squatted down to lift the woman. Time crawled as he gathered her in his arms. Her head rolled back as he moved her to the window. He glanced down as a flash of lightning illuminated her face. Marcus's breathing labored, and he swallowed hard. *Steady on.*

"I'm ready," Michael called, breaking the moment.

Marcus glanced up to see his friend there, waiting with one eyebrow raised.

Marcus struggled to wrap her in her cloak. The woman in his arms gasped. "Miss? Miss?" Marcus

resisted the urge to shake her, fearing he would cause her pain. Her eyes fluttered open, and she gazed up at him. He couldn't ascertain their color. She gave a weak smile before her eyelids closed. He passed her through the window to the waiting knight. Once she was safe in Sir Tidley's arms, Marcus placed the safe-box outside the carriage. Due to his larger size, he could not exit the same way she had. He opened the door and pulled himself up into the stormy night.

Michael had brought the injured woman over toward the people standing under the tree to keep dry.

Lord Theodore Harrow stripped his greatcoat and spread the garment so they wouldn't place the young lady on the wet ground.

The rain abated for a moment, and Marcus strode over and handed the box to the older woman under the tree. "This is yours, I believe."

The matron with graying hair and imperial bearing, wearing a wet fur hat and fur-trimmed cloak, grabbed the box from his hands. She resembled a drowned dog. In spite of that, she managed to give Marcus a glare reminding him of a short-lived governess he once had. He shoved the unkind thoughts aside as the woman spoke, her voice strident.

"I am Lady Widmore, and this is my daughter, Lady Heticia Widmore."

"Lady Widmore, Lady Heticia, Lord Remington at your service. This is Lord Harrow and Sir Tidley. Our friend has ridden to my estate nearby to get help."

Lady Widmore nodded her head. "That was well done of you. This has been a most vexing evening. My carriage is ruined. It's bad enough that I have to replace two wheels, but now the glass too?" Her nose rose a fraction as her eyes snapped as much as a ruler



to the knuckles.

The three men glanced at her nonplussed.

Lady Heticia simpered and batted her eyes at Marcus. "I'm cold and wet. How much longer before the carriage arrives?"

Marcus gave her a quick glance before he turned away. "Lord Westcombe will be here soon enough." He moved to kneel next to the unconscious form on the forest floor. "What is her name?"

"Miss Storm," Lady Widmore replied with a snort.

Marcus commenced checking the young woman's arms and legs to assess any broken bones. He watched her face as the clouds began to move past and the moon started to shine bright. Blood oozed from a gash on the side of her head. He loosened his cravat. "Michael, can you help me hold up her head while I bind her wound?"

Michael was next to their patient before the question was complete and lifted her head.

Marcus smoothed away the dark tendrils of hair stuck to the blood. He proceeded to wrap the linen around and tie it off. He brought the hood of the cloak up to cover Miss Storm's bandaged head.

"Max will have another charge against you, Remy." Michael gave a cheeky grin.

"There's a reason I left my valet in London, Michael. So I would not have to be hounded about boots, cravats, and my lack of dash." The flat tone delivered a warning to his friend. Marcus looked down again at the young woman.

Dark hair outlined her heart-shaped face, half covered with the white bandage across her forehead surrounded by the rich burgundy of her traveling cloak. Long, dark eyelashes splayed against pale

cheeks. "Sleeping Beauty."

"I don't think a kiss will do the trick, though," Michael whispered.

Lord Remington startled. Had he spoken aloud? His cheeks grew warm. He was grateful to hear the rumble of a carriage coming from the west. "Phillip has arrived."

Marcus rose and strode to the road only to gape at the old, small gig his fastidious friend drove. Lord Phillip Westcombe pulled past and managed to turn the horse and buggy around before he came to a stop next to them.

"Sorry, ol' chap. Stickney is getting another carriage ready, but this one we were able to hook up in record time. I figured with an injured party, speed might be of the essence."

Marcus nodded before he turned and strode over to the group under the trees. He knelt to gather up Miss Storm in his arms. "I apologize, ladies. Another carriage will arrive posthaste."

Lady Widmore blocked his path to the carriage. "You cannot mean to leave us here? She will be fine waiting." Lady Widmore's spite-filled eyes glanced at the woman in his arms.

"Unless you would like the indignity of riding in the wagon of the gig, you will have to wait. The inconvenience cannot be avoided. You will have the company and protection of Lord Harrow and Sir Tidley. It's the best I can do." Marcus moved around her and strode to the carriage.

Michael followed.

"Let me help you, Remy." Michael took the woman from his arms while Marcus leapt up into the front seat of the open gig next to Phillip. Once settled,

he lifted her up to him.

Marcus leaned the woman against his chest, with her head resting on his shoulder, before he gave Phillip the nod to drive off. Miss Storm's hair tickled his cheek, and he detected the sweet scent of roses emanating from her in spite of the damp. Something unexplainable stirred deep inside him. *Lord, how can I be attracted to an unconscious woman?* He shivered. He pulled her limp body closer to his own. Every protective instinct was aroused.

Through the uncomfortable ride, Marcus fought to keep his charge secure against the strength of the jolts as the carriage wheels hit dips in the road. Marcus's back ached from the strain.

"Sorry your respite from town life has eluded you once again," Phillip began. "You don't think—"

"—this was intentional?"

Phillip nodded. "I tend to be suspicious."

"Two wheels? Why, when one would suffice? Her traveling companions show little concern for her."

Phillip shrugged.

"Don't worry, Westcombe. With the four of us working together, I suspect we can manage to avoid being compromised."

Lord Phillip Westcombe glanced at the girl. "Are you sure she's really unconscious?"

"Yes, Phillip." Marcus glanced down at the pale face. "She cannot attend to our conversation."

Phillip drew the gig up to the front door and tossed the reins to a waiting groom. He jumped down from the equipage and hurried around to help Remington descend with the woman in his arms.

Marcus strode up the steps, and the doors opened to allow him entrance.

"Marcus?" Phillip called.

"Yes?" Marcus turned.

"I'll head back to help the others."

"Thank you." Marcus nodded and proceeded into the house and up the stairs as a frantic Mrs. Hughes urged him on. His dog, Charlie, yipped at his heels. At the top, they took a right turn, headed down the south wing of the mansion, and slipped into the room his housekeeper indicated.

Mrs. Hughes frowned at the damp state of her master and the woman in his arms. "Here, let me help you get her wet cloak off, and we will set her in the bed."

Together they managed to remove the garment, and Marcus placed her on the mattress by the pulled back counterpane. He stepped away as water dripped from his hat.

Mrs. Hughes moved to remove the girl's shoes and noted Marcus's continued presence. She chided him. "Young man, you need a hot bath, some salve for your legs, and something to eat. At least drip yourself dry in the hallway and not on the carpet." She turned her back on him in dismissal.

Marcus drooped. "I will leave her to your care." He strode to the door and paused. "Her name is Miss Storm."

"How appropriate," she muttered as the door closed behind him.

He stood in the hallway. Water dripped on the wooden floor in a sad rhythm. His terrier sat by his side looking at the door, waiting for her master's next step.

Drip. Drop. Drip. Drop. Drop.

For a moment, he did not know what to do. *Happy*

*birthday, Marcus Allendale, Viscount Remington. Happy birthday, indeed.* He shook his head and grimaced. He didn't want to leave but became more aware of how cold and damp he was. He strode down to another hallway, followed by the dog, toward his own suite of rooms to dry off and tend to his wounds before he returned downstairs to welcome his unexpected guests.

A short time later, Marcus paced in his study as Charlie watched. Fresh clothes and a sip of brandy warmed him, but he was restless. That was nothing new. For weeks, he held a conviction deep inside that it was time for him to seek a bride. *What would it have been like to come home tonight to someone other than paid servants? To have a wife minister to my wounds?*

He snorted. If only he might find a woman he liked, who had a perfect combination of purity as well as the ability to preside over his home and be a political hostess. If she were attractive, that would be a bonus. He longed for the kind of marriage his parents had. They had been in love. He understood such unions were rare amongst the *beau monde*. Hollowness ate at him from within.

But the girl upstairs. Something unsettled him when he looked at her. In a brief moment when her eyes had opened and she had gazed into his eyes, he was undone. Intrigue and hope vied for a place in his heart. Perhaps her unexpected visit here would give him opportunity to explore that further.