

CHAPTER ONE

Late July 1889

The house was unnaturally silent.

Sherrinford Pike, by his own consideration the premier consulting detective in London (and the Continent as well, if not the world), paused outside the baize-green door, his gloved hand poised to take the brass knocker that was shaped like a heavy-breasted mermaid. On either side of the door, heavy Mazerine-blue *jardinières* were heaped with limp ivy helixes and dying periwinkles and petunias, their once-colourful petals seared brown and yellow by neglect. No one had watered the plants in a good long while (at least two weeks, he estimated), nor had any servant seen to sweeping the threshold, scattered with the curled husks of dead leaves. In a fashionable, respectable neighbourhood of immaculately kept homes, this lack of care was troubling.

Pike squared his shoulders, put on a brave face despite his forebodings, then seized the mermaid doorknocker by its tarnished brass fish's tail, and beat a brisk tattoo upon the panel.

There was no answer.

Frowning, Pike tried the knob and was not really surprised to find that the door was unlocked. His frown became more thunderous at this further sign of carelessness. Pushing the door open, Pike entered the darkened house and pulled off his gloves at once, stuffing them into the pockets of his jacket. The dragon-headed walking stick he carried concealed a sword blade; a twist of his wrist, and a shining, sharpened steel length slid partway from its sheath. He did not wish to fully draw the weapon unless it proved necessary; however, there was no telling what he might find inside the house, so some degree of caution seemed prudent.

Inside, the rooms were dim, the curtains drawn, the gas jets unlit. The atmosphere was stuffy and oppressive; silence hung over the house like a shroud. A quick check of the kitchen revealed that the fires which ought to have been roaring were mere cold ash and had not been lit in some time. Since June 12th, Pike deduced from the masthead on a scrap of unburned newspaper (*The Times*, he noted) that he found in the firebox of the cooking range (a "Birmingham" model made by Hassell & Singleton that had not been blacked in a fortnight, judging from the speckles of rust creeping along the edges). There was no sign of the servants; all the people who ought to have been running the household appeared to have vanished, leaving little trace behind. At least there were no signs of violence, although the complete lack of noise was eerie and not a little unnerving. Pike ventured out of the kitchen and made his way to the study. The doors were closed, but he slid them back and almost reeled as a noxious cloud of spilled liquor, unwashed body, and worse odours slapped him in the face.

Pike turned his head to the side, nostrils pinched, but that did not help, so he deliberately took a breath to accustom his nose to the smell. Silently, he reminded himself that it could have been worse — much, much worse. At least it was not the sickly sweet scent of decomposition that greeted him so harshly. As he entered the study, broken glass crunched underfoot. He glanced down and identified the detritus as the remains of whisky bottles. Pike turned a large piece over with the toe of his boot and read the label — Cragganmore, a twelve-year-old Speyside single malt whisky. As he recalled, the taste was smoky and peaty, smooth on the palate. From the amount of glass scattered on the thickly carpeted floor, he estimated that there were at least a dozen broken bottles. It was a shame to waste such good whisky on a mindless binge, he thought. Pike bared his teeth in a humourless grin. Cheap rotgut would do the job as well, if one were seeking oblivion in the grape or the grain.

The exquisite Chinese screen that normally concealed a bookcase had been knocked over but was, as far as Pike could tell, undamaged. The broad flame-mahogany desk was piled high with crumpled sheets of foolscap. Ink spots splattered a wall where a pen had been flung in what he presumed to be frustration or anger, or possibly both, given his knowledge of human nature. More aborted attempts at letters, covered in blotches of ink and what he considered were likely to be tear-faded lines, were piled in the unlit fireplace grate.

He found her unconscious on the settee, a wealth of dirty black hair hanging over the edge of the scrolled arm in a tangled, disordered mass. Her mouth hung open; there were lines of tension and suffering in her strongboned face that even sleep could not erase. She reeked of vomit and alcohol and had clearly not bathed in days. Her silk dressing gown was haphazardly fastened with a knotted sash; the garment was filthy and gaped open at the front, showing her breasts. A partially empty whisky bottle lay on its side on the floor next to the settee.

Lady Evangeline St. Claire — the second best consulting detective in London, as far as Pike was concerned — lay snoring, dead drunk and oblivious to the world.

Pike sighed. Matters were not as bad as he had feared, but they were dire enough to cause him great concern. He removed his hat and left it, as well as his walking stick, in the outstretched paws of the great, snarling stuffed bear that reared behind the door. He exited the study, found what he sought in the scullery, and returned after a few moments bearing a floral-patterned ewer. Without a moment's hesitation, he upended it and dashed cold water into Lina's face.

"Damnation!" Lina spluttered, going from horizontal to vertical in a single jerk. Water dripped off her face. Her bloodshot gaze fell upon Pike, and she grimaced. "What do you want?" Lina croaked, not bothering to be polite.

"How's your head, St. Claire?" Pike asked, his voice sharp enough to make her wince. Some petty sense of triumph that he would never have admitted aloud took satisfaction in this proof of his friend's delicate condition. "I've complied with your wish for solitude long enough, for I see you've been overindulgent to a fault. From the empty bottles and the stench of drunken debauchery, you're turning into a veritable Silenos. Good God, woman...have you been sober even a day since you returned from Paris?"

Lina pushed dripping locks of hair away from her face. "What business is that of yours?" she muttered, eyeing him sullenly.

"None, I suppose, except that due a friend from a friend." He stared down at her. "When will you cease this abominable display of self-pity and cowardice?" he asked bluntly. "It has been three weeks..."

"Three weeks and five days," Lina replied, still sounding hoarse. She reached for the whisky bottle on the floor, either unaware of or not caring about her partial nudity.

Pike gritted his teeth, reached down, and yanked her dressing gown closed. "For God's sake, St. Claire! Miss Moore is in London, comfortably ensconced in Swiftways Hotel, not dead and buried!"

"She might as well be dead, Sherrinford, for she is *not* here with me!" Lina roared, then turned pale, clutching her head with both hands and whimpering.

"Go to her," Pike urged.

Lina gazed at him with red-rimmed eyes. Her face was stark with pain. "I cannot. Rhiannon has made herself painfully clear — she does not wish to see me or have any contact with me. Every day, I have a nosegay sent to the hotel, the only way I may remind her of my continued existence, but she does not reply or acknowledge my overture. I am reduced to donning disguises and lurking about the Embankment in the hope of catching a glimpse of her. I dare not approach, do you understand? Not until she gives me leave."

"And in the meantime, you intend to kill yourself with excessive drink. Bah!" Pike's lips twisted, and he gazed at her in disgust. "Where are the servants?"

"A paid holiday," Lina sounded sulky. "I wish to be alone, Sherrinford. Go away."

"Not until you solemnly swear to abandon this scheme of yours to drain Scotland dry of its whisky supply. It will lead to the grave, St. Claire. You know it will."

Lina hesitated, peering at him sidelong. Pike went on, his tone as unyielding as steel, "If you'll recall, when you thought that Victoire had died in the warehouse fire, misplaced guilt drove you to embrace the bottle. Must I remind you of the torments you suffered when you were forced to put drink aside? The severe anxiety and agitation, the mental confusion and hallucinations, the tremors and violent convulsions...I could go on, St. Claire, but we both know the consequences if you refuse to keep your demons leashed."

"It is the only way I can forget her, though liquor is not as effective as the mythical river Lethe in that regard," Lina said. She rested her elbows on her knees, her head bowed. The half-empty whisky bottle dangled from her left hand. She shrugged. "Perhaps I ought instead to drink of the Styx, since I prefer death to abandonment," Lina half-whispered, staring at the balled-up papers in the grate.

"Oh, Lord...I have had enough!" Pike cried, impassioned by fury. He removed a revolver from his jacket pocket — a .45 calibre snub-nosed British Bulldog, the most reliable short-range man-stopper produced by the Webley factory. He tossed the weapon at her bare feet. "If you mean to die, St. Claire, then you should go about it properly instead of wasting away by inches and causing trouble for all concerned."

Lina's gaze transferred to the revolver, and she shivered, her emerald eyes dull.

The tension broke when Pike blew out a weary breath and scrubbed a hand over his face. "Between our mutual histrionics, St. Claire, I believe we comprise an entire amateur dramatics society. Be so kind as to give me the Cragganmore, if you please. I feel in dire need of a restorative for my poor shattered nerves."

Lina pursed her lips but gave him the whisky without protest or comment. Pike put the bottle to his mouth and took several healthy swallows, not bothering to take the time to savour the taste. A pity, really. It bordered on painful, treating a twelve-year-old whisky in such a cavalier fashion, but sheer need overrode more aesthetic considerations.

Pike lowered the bottle. "These are the times that try men's souls, if I may borrow a phrase from our American cousins," he said, wiping his mouth uncouthly on his sleeve. "I cannot fault you for showing some degree of heartache; that is natural under the circumstances. You love Miss Moore, and the pain of losing her is extreme. I can only imagine how I should feel if Ormond were to...well, that is understood, I suppose." He paused to pick his words carefully before continuing, "Do you truly believe that Miss Moore will never see you again?"

Lina looked more defeated than ever. She seemed to crumple in on herself, and her face, already pale, turned an unhealthy shade of grey. "I do not know," she finally answered.

"What you mean, St. Claire, is that you have no faith in Miss Moore's ability to forgive." Pike scowled. "Look at yourself! You frankly stink. You haven't been eating properly, either, or taking care of yourself. I've known beggars in Calcutta and opium eaters in Shanghai with healthier habits. If I were not your friend, I should give you the widest possible berth!"

For a moment, something of Lina's old temper shone through her grief. "And I have known men who were better able to keep their opinions to themselves!" she snapped.

"Do you think your lady-love wishes to return to this?" Pike swept a hand at the mess. "Or this?" Another wave indicated Lina's state of dishabille and dirtiness. "Does she want a snivelling coward who crawls into a whisky bottle at the first sign of trouble? Or do you think Miss Moore might prefer a strong lover and protector, one who does not crumble in the face of adversity? Are you a woman of straw, St. Claire, or flesh and blood?"

Lina did not so much as glance at him. "You do not understand. I betrayed her, Sherrinford. I betrayed Rhiannon in the worst possible way, and I do not blame her for hating me."

Pike took hold of her upper arm and hauled Lina off the settee. She was unusually tall for a woman; they were almost the same height and build, both being slender, but Pike was stronger by virtue of being a man. Ignoring the acrid, offensive odour of stale sweat that poured off her skin, he shook her a little, appalled by the wasted flesh beneath his hand. "Damn you!" he cried. "I refuse to stand aside and watch you destroy yourself again! You claim that I cannot comprehend the matter, but here is a trifling bit of information that seems to have escaped your notice — without you, without your love, Miss Moore will surely perish."

That statement caught Lina's attention. Her head swung up; she transfixed Pike with a glare. "Do not speak such rubbish."

"It is true," Pike insisted, releasing her. "I speak not of literal death, but a metaphorical slaying of her soul. You've broken her trust; that fact cannot be denied. Nevertheless, she still loves you. I'm certain of it, and you know that I never state a conclusion unless I can prove my statements are true. The sort of devotion I have perceived in Miss Moore's character is not easily cast aside, regardless of the provocation. Do you not think she will feel responsible if you lose yourself to a drunkard's folly? Guilt may well drive her to desperation." His voice lowered to its most persuasive tones. "Go and see her, St. Claire, I beg you."

For a bare second, Pike thought that he had convinced her. His heart sank when at last, Lina shook her head. "No," she said. "No, Sherrinford, I will not incommode Rhiannon with my undesirable and unwanted affections."

He decided to try the last piece of ammunition in his arsenal. "It's just as well, I suppose," Pike said in his most cutting tones, shrugging a shoulder, "for I doubt she'd much admire a craven who is too weak to curb her selfdestructive habits!"

Lina's arm swung back and snapped forward; Pike easily deflected the blow. Exhausted by that simple act, she stumbled and fell back on the settee, her dishevelled hair covering her face. His patience at an end, Pike went to collect his hat and walking stick from the stuffed bear behind the door.

"Get out," Lina rasped.

Pike could not resist a final sally. "Think of the woman that Miss Moore fell in love with, St. Claire. Surely you can recall her to your memory? It was not an abject crawling worm. It was not an alcohol-ridden hag who reeks of her own *vomit*. The St. Claire with whom I have crossed swords many times in the past is not in this room. *She* was a foeman worthy of my steel. This pallid shade that you've become is but the reflection of a disgusting indulgence, an unbecoming orgy of self-pity, and I wish you the full, seething misery of it. I shall refrain from bidding you good day, as I doubt you would even take the sentiment under advisement. I will tell Ormond that you send him no compliments. *Adieu*, St. Claire. Do not bother to see me out; I know my way."

Without a backward glance, Pike made his exit, drawing about him the hauteur of a stage tragedian — which he had, in fact, learned from a leading actor of the day. The stiffness in his back and shoulders was, however, not entirely counterfeit. He held himself rigid as he walked out of the house in Grosvenor Street because he was not sure if he would ever see his friend (closer than a friend, really, closer than a sibling; he could admit that only to himself, only in the secret depths of his soul) alive again.

There was not a thing he could do about it.

Behind him, Pike heard the crash of shattering glass and supposed that Lina had thrown the bottle of whisky at the wall.

He shut the front door behind him and made his way down the street, not daring to look back lest his resolution be tested. Lina's survival was in her own hands now; he had at least given her food for thought to counteract the poison that was destroying her mind and body. The rest was up to the woman herself.

Pike was not a religious man, but he prayed that she would get over her sickness; not only for her sake, but for Miss Moore's as well.