

Discipline and Diana

The Cold Hearts, Book Four

By

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Table of Contents:

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two.....	18
Chapter Three.....	31
Chapter Four	44
Chapter Five.....	57
Chapter Six.....	69
Chapter Seven	82
Epilogue	87
About Viola Morne	89
Ebook Offer	90
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	92
About Blushing Books	93

CHAPTER ONE

Winterhill, Hampshire, 1823

Diana Sinclair frowned over her sketch. Something was missing. She added some crosshatching and sharpened the line of the profile. There. It looked almost exactly like her mother. Another stroke of her pencil and Mama's resemblance to a hatchet was even more pronounced.

The caricature brought a smile to her face, the first in weeks. Two failed attempts at marriage in a row gnawed at her. Not because she'd failed, but because her mother blamed her, the same way she blamed Diana for everything else.

Diana stabbed a pencil viciously through the paper.

"I'm glad that's only a pencil, and not a blade."

The voice came from above her, cool and masculine. Diana looked up. The speaker was a young man, tall and lean, his chestnut hair pulled back in a ribbon from the sharp, elegant bones of his face. Diana considered him in silence. She would draw him as greyhound, she decided. His keen eyes were the gray of storms, and his expression made her shiver, like a kitten encountering the hunting dog he resembled.

"Cat got your tongue?"

"I was thinking that you look like a greyhound."

His eyebrows rose steeply.

"It's in the lines," she explained. Diana flipped to a blank page in her sketchbook and drew a few quick, hard strokes. "See?"

The young man took the book from her and examined her sketch. He turned over the page to look at the drawing of Mama. When he looked up, his expression had altered. Now his attention was focused on her, his gaze piercing, as if he could see beneath her skin. Diana drew the book from his fingers, and closed it with a snap.

Diana stood up. "I know who you are." Her mother would never approve of this meeting.

She had to leave, or risk being in even more trouble.

"And you disapprove of me?"

"I said nothing of the sort."

"Your expression is transparent, to say the least." He cocked his head, and examined her closely. "Let me see, lips compressed, eyes narrowed—are you related to Lady Iverly? Her daughter, perhaps?" He bowed and straightened, a wicked smile stretched across his face. "Declan Ralston, at your service, Lady Diana."

He must be older than he looked. "You're the one guarding Elinor for the major at Winterhill."

"That I am." Ralston gestured towards her sketchbook. "I must say I'm surprised. I thought the Lady Diana would be drawing flowers and puppies, not accurate and devastating caricatures of her nearest and dearest."

"You don't know anything about me."

Diana turned on her heel, and started down the hill. The stone bench she'd been sitting on was technically on the Winterhill estate, but she had always done her drawing here. Major Winter had never made any objection.

Ralston fell in step with her. "True, but now you've become a mystery, and I hate mysteries."

Diana walked on without speaking. Why wouldn't he just leave her alone? She quickened her step. Useless. Ralston's long legs simply increased his stride.

"I feel like you're running away from me," he complained. That wicked smile creased his features again.

"I can't be seen with you."

A frown flickered over his face. "Not good enough, am I?" A faint Irish accent lilted through his voice.

Diana hurried down the hill, clutching her sketchbook. "If my mother sees me alone with a man, I'll be locked in my room for a week. If she finds out it was you, she'll make it a month."

Ralston grabbed her arm, and pulled her to a stop. "Am I really that bad? You wound me, Lady Diana."

Diana pulled her arm away. "Nonsense. You don't give a toss what I think. You just want to irritate me, for some reason." She walked away. "And it's working," she said over her

shoulder.

Ralston's laugh floated over the crisp fall air. Diana smiled reluctantly. The chimneys of Iverly Grange rose into view, and her smile faded. Dinner with her parents waited, and that was always an ordeal. She wished they would go back to London, and leave her in peace.

* * * * *

Ralston watched until Diana passed from sight. He didn't meet many young aristocratic women, but, even so, there was something different about her. She was beautiful, of course. A man would have to be dead not to notice the forget-me-not blue of her eyes and her trim, elegant figure. But beneath her talent and charm, Ralston sensed a sadness that twisted his heart. His mother, too, had been a beautiful, artistic woman, until her spirit was broken by years of toil and trouble. Whatever future she might have had was destroyed when his father got her with his bastard son and then deserted her.

Not like Diana Sinclair, who had family and society to protect her from any missteps. Ralston turned towards Winterhill. The young lady was not his concern, anyway. He'd probably never see her again. Ralston pulled out his timepiece, and frowned. His agent should have returned from London with his report by now. He tucked the timepiece away and strode down the other side of the hill to the old house, mellow in the late afternoon sun. Business always came first.

"Mr. Ralston!"

Billy, his young apprentice, waved at him madly as he ran full tilt up the slope, a piece of folded paper creased in one hand. He stopped in front of Ralston, panting for breath. "Special message from London just arrived." Billy thrust the paper at him, and waited anxiously.

Ralston cracked the wax seal and skimmed over the tightly written lines. According to Corrigan, his chief operative in London, the threat to Winterhill was over. The major's enemy, the elusive French spy known as the marquis, was dead. Elinor, the major's wife, was safe. Ralston's task here was over, and he could head home.

Major Winter, when he tracked him down in the stables, was jubilant. "So the bastard is finally dead. You say Frost killed him?"

"Mr. Frost tracked him down at the Earl of Snow's residence. By the time he got there,

the marquis had already taken down the staff, including our operatives. The Countess of Snow was facing the Frenchman alone, when Mr. Frost showed up and put an end to things. The Countess was seen by her physician and is well."

"An excellent report, Ralston. You've earned your fee."

Ralston almost saluted. It felt just like old times. "It's my job, sir."

"Of course." The major clapped him on the shoulder. Ralston winced. The major didn't know his own strength. "Now where is Snow? He'll be devastated when he learns that Montroux attacked Isabelle, and he wasn't there to protect her. Poor bastard, he'll make himself suffer for this." The major called to the groom to saddle the earl's horse. "He'll be on his way back to London as soon as he finds out."

They headed back to the house.

"Where is Frost now?"

Ralston checked the report. "Corrigan says he and the marquise left London via the Dover Road soon after."

The major rubbed his chin. "Dover, eh? Angeline must have thought her husband planned to take her daughter back to France. I suppose there's no point in going after them now. We'll say a prayer for them, and hope for the best."

They were nearly at the house when Lord Snow dashed out the side door. "Chadwick told me there was word from London."

"Isabelle is safe, Julian."

The earl sagged against the porch. "Thank Christ. What of Leighton and Angeline?"

"They are riding for Dover, hoping to find Neva *en route*."

"Why Dover?"

"Angeline must believe that the marquis intended to send her daughter back to France."

"Of course." Snow stared at them. "What aren't you telling me?"

The major took his arm. "Why don't we go get a drink and we'll talk about it."

Snow shoved him away. "I don't want a fucking drink! I want to know what happened in London."

Ralston cleared his throat. "Mr. Frost followed the marquis to your house, my lord. By the time he arrived, the marquis had killed one of my agents, and wounded another, as well as your butler. They will both recover. He found the marquis threatening your wife and intervened."

The Earl of Snow blanched, as white as his namesake. "Isabelle was alone with that bastard."

"She held her own, my lord. Lady Snow defended herself until Mr. Frost stepped in and dispatched the marquis. He will trouble you no more."

"He's risen from a supposed death before."

"Not this time. Mr. Frost slit his throat. My agent verified the identity of the corpse."

A muscle jumped in Snow's clenched jaw. "So I left my wife alone, undefended, to deal with a murderer? May God forgive me, because I don't think Isabelle ever will."

Major Winter clapped Snow on the shoulder. "That's a load of horseshit, Julian. We all thought Elinor was the target, and acted accordingly. You can't blame yourself, old man."

Snow stared at them both, his dark eyes bleak. "Oh, I certainly can."

"My lord, your wife was not undefended. The agents I placed in your household were two of my best. The marquis was a madman. No one could have foreseen that he'd choose Lady Snow as his target."

"His target?"

Ralston winced. "I'm sorry, my lord."

"This was all part of his plan, then, to lure us down to Winterhill to protect Elinor, while the marquis went after his real prize, my innocent wife. Christ, what have I done?"

"Right, that's enough wallowing and self-pity, even for you." The major grabbed Snow's arm and this time, the earl didn't protest. "My study, now, and a bottle of brandy. Then we'll go through the report with Ralston and see where we stand."

* * * * *

Diana pulled the brush through her hair. The beginnings of a headache stirred. Dinner had been as unpleasant as usual. Stretches of jaw-dropping boredom while her parents gossiped, mixed with periods of intense anxiety when her mother sniped at Papa and found fault with Diana.

She stared at herself in the mirror. When she was a child, her father used to caress her blond curls and tell her how pretty she was. Her mother never had. To Mama, Diana's face was a commodity, something to barter in order to achieve financial security for the family.

Diana had known since her thirteenth birthday that the family fortunes rested on her young shoulders. Papa, charming and gregarious, frittered away his time with cards and gambling. He was rarely at home. And when he was, the arguments with her mother made the household so miserable that Diana often wished he wouldn't come home at all.

Diana remembered waking up so excited on that birthday morning. Papa had promised her a party, with a new dress. He even told her she could have a puppy. But her father never came home that day, or the next. Mama gave her a present over their usual frugal supper; a book of sermons that her mother hoped would improve Diana's character. She remembered pushing back her chair and running from the room in a flood of tears. She'd thrown herself on her bed, crying out her disappointment. Her mother had come in, and sat on the bed.

"Your father is weak, Diana. All the Iverly's are fools but Papa is more. He is a drunkard and a faithless womanizer. I pray every day for God to strike him dead and relieve me of this burden, but the Almighty has not seen fit to answer my prayers." Mama sighed. "We are near bankruptcy; your father has run through all his money and most of mine. I've been able to hold onto a small sum, enough to keep me once all you children are married. I regret that your portion is gone, as well. The only lure you have for a marriage partner is your face. You *must* marry well, it is our only hope."

The brush hit a snarl and Diana winced. So many years of Mother haranguing her, telling her to smile and simper. She wasn't permitted girlfriends, who might be potential rivals. In any case, it was too difficult to keep up appearances. Any spare money went to refurbish her wardrobe so she wouldn't be a disgrace when she appeared at an engagement. And there were so many of them. Every season Diana trudged from Venetian breakfasts to picnics to luncheons and teas and evening parties and balls. She was exhausted just thinking about it.

Worst of all, it had been in vain. She was twenty years old and perilously close to being on the shelf, with no husband in sight.

* * * * *

Dinner at Winterhill was a subdued affair. Weeks of fear and uncertainty had left their mark on the household. The enemy had been defeated, but not without cost. Lord Snow had left for London within minutes of learning the news, devastated when he found out that Isabelle and

his unborn child had come so close to death, without her husband to defend her. Nothing but the sight of his wife could reassure him.

The following morning, when Ralston sat down to breakfast, his hostess informed him that Major Winter had already left for a ride. But Ralston knew the major was out patrolling his estate, to ensure none of the marquis' associates had decided to visit Winterhill after all.

Ralston finished his ale, and walked over to the fireplace, where a small blaze burned in the grate to offset the morning chill. He nudged a log with his boot.

"Now that the trouble's over, I should return to London."

"Why don't you stay for a few days, Mr. Ralston? Surely you deserve a holiday. Winterhill has some lovely rides." Elinor smiled at him. "We could have an evening party and introduce you to some of the young ladies in the neighborhood."

Ralston played with an ornament on the mantle in the breakfast room. "Perhaps."

"Unless there is a young lady that you've met already?"

Ralston cleared his throat. "I did meet one yesterday, up on the hill. A young woman with a sketchbook."

Elinor looked puzzled for a moment, before her face cleared. "You must mean Diana Sinclair. I'm surprised she let you see her work. She is normally very private about it."

"We rather stumbled over each other." He smiled at the memory. "She thought I looked like a greyhound."

"Really. Was Diana alone?"

"Yes, she was. She was sketching and I had gone for a walk. I assure you, Mrs. Winter, there was no impropriety. We spoke briefly, and then she went home."

Ralston could feel Elinor watching him. His collar felt suddenly tight.

"And you liked her."

"I did. She made me laugh."

He set the ornament back on the mantle and strode out. Winterhill seemed very quiet since the earl and Ralston's own men had returned to London. There was always a flatness, a sense of ennui, once an assignment was finished. He had done as the major asked, and kept Elinor safe, though the threat from the marquis had appeared in London, and not at Winterhill. They had all miscalculated, and put the Countess of Snow at risk. He would send Billy to notify the family of the man who'd been killed, and there was the matter of compensation. At least his

agents had slowed down the marquis, giving Mr. Frost time to save Lady Snow. A near thing that, which made it hard to see this assignment as a victory.

Ralston continued down to the stables and asked for his horse. A good gallop would settle him, and erase the memory of Lady Diana Sinclair's angelic blue eyes. If his status in society as the bastard son of Lord Freer did not make him a target for the young ladies of the Marriage Mart, his fortune might, if he ever bothered to accept any society invitations. Ralston wasn't interested in marriage, at least not right now. He was obsessed with building his business and securing his fortune. His free time, and there was dashed little of it, he spent racing and playing cards, though gambling bored him. His other needs were assuaged by several lovely widows of his acquaintance. In fact, Ralston's life was pretty much ideal. So why did a chance encounter with one girl leave him feeling so unsettled?

But the ride only increased his feeling of restlessness, particularly when he arrived back at the bench on the hill where he met Diana, and found it empty. He dismounted and stood looking down at the chimneys of Iverly Grange. Why was he here? A friendship between them would be impossible, yet he'd been drawn to revisit their meeting place. Was he just another fool for a pretty face? No, Diana did attract him, he would admit to that, but what intrigued him was the woman beneath the surface prettiness.

A glimmer of white caught his eye. A handkerchief was caught in the wooden slats on the back of the bench. He picked it up. The letters D and S were entwined by some very inexperienced embroidery. Not so perfect then. A thread of tenderness twined through his reluctant heart, and he lifted the handkerchief to his face to catch her scent.

She smelled like roses, not the hothouse kind, but the wild roses that grew in the hedges of Ireland. He should return it to her, it was only polite. After all, what was the worst that could happen? The doors of Iverly Grange might be slammed shut in his face, but, hell, it wouldn't be the first time. Ralston tucked the handkerchief in his pocket and climbed back into the saddle. A cool breeze stirred through his hair and his heart suddenly lifted. A new mission beckoned.

* * * * *

"Oh, miss, can you come? The kitty is up a tree again!"

The little kitchen maid scuttled away like a nervous beetle. Diana put down her

sketchbook with a sigh. The dratted cat, though a renowned mouser who kept Iverly Grange free from vermin, had a penchant for climbing the oak tree nearest the drive and forgetting how to come down. There was no one else to rescue it. The manor was run with a skeletal staff when her parents were in town. With the exception of the kitchen maid, who had a morbid fear of heights, the butler, the cook and the maids were all elderly.

Diana found her old cape hanging in the back hall. The air was brisk and the fitful sun did little to warm it.

"Meow! Miiiaow!"

"I'm coming, Mittens."

She trudged down the drive, which needed a good raking. The oak was over a hundred years old with low-lying branches that made it an irresistible lure for Mittens. Diana peered up through the foliage, turned golden with the season. A small gray-striped face looked back. How had it climbed so high?

Diana hitched up her skirts and grabbed the nearest branch. She pulled herself up.

"Here, kitty. Come on, Mittens, do be a good girl."

The cat stared at her stonily.

Blast. She stood on tiptoe and wrapped her arms over the next branch. She hoisted one leg over the branch and drew up the other until she straddled it. The cat hadn't moved. She continued climbing until she was about twenty feet off the ground.

"You do realize that if you just leave the cat alone, it will climb down by itself."

Diana shrieked and nearly fell off the branch. "Ralston! What are you doing here?"

"I came to return your handkerchief. You left it at the bench yesterday. By the way, you have lovely legs."

"You are most improper, sir!"

"True, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate a good view when I see one. Why don't you come down?"

"Because the blasted cat is still stuck. You aren't acquainted with the beast. If I don't retrieve it, it will stay up here all night."

Ralston sighed heavily. "You are too kind-hearted, Lady Diana. Come down and I'll fetch the damn cat myself."

"Would you?"

"Yes, I would, though I don't know why. Unless you want to raise your skirts even higher?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Ralston."

"A disappointment, but I'll survive."

Diana sniffed, but she climbed down anyway. If Ralston was willing to climb the tree, she was willing to forgive his rudeness. She jumped off the lowest branch and straight into Ralston's waiting arms. He was warm, his lean chest firmly muscled. His hands on her waist were...exciting.

"I don't suppose you would consider kissing me."

"Mr. Ralston! Put me down at once." How dare he?

Ralston let her body slide down his before her feet found the ground.

"Pity," he whispered in her ear. He smelled like clean linen and cold, fresh air. She closed her eyes for a moment. If only she dared.

Ralston flashed her a grin as he took off his coat. He pulled himself up onto the branch in a smooth, easy motion. The strong muscles of his calves and thighs bulged beneath his doeskin breeches and... My, how wonderfully shaped the man was. Ralston climbed the tree quickly, his movements confident. She heard a brief meow of protest, and he climbed back down, leaping onto the ground. He pulled the cat from his shirt and handed it to her with a flourish. The fabric hung open to reveal a glimpse of smooth skin and a smattering of dark hair. She wanted to touch him.

Diana accepted the cat. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your assistance."

He bowed with exaggerated politeness.

"Diana! Where are you? Diana!"

"The devil! It's Mama. Quickly, you mustn't be seen here."

Ralston retied his cravat and bent to pick up his coat. "I've been thrown out of finer places than this."

"No doubt, but I'll be the one to suffer, not you."

His eyes narrowed. "What will she do to you?"

"Never mind, please just go."

Ralston nodded, not pleased, but he walked back up the hill. Diana watched him as he moved away, his stride lithe and controlled. Why couldn't she meet men like him in London? No

use in pining, he was not for her. Mama would see to that.

* * * * *

Ralston scowled down at his soup plate. He should have left for London when he had the chance. Instead, intrigued by the beautiful Diana Sinclair, he had accepted Elinor Winter's invitation to stay on. So when the major and his wife accepted an invitation to dinner at Iverly Grange, Ralston was included.

He wasn't having a pleasant evening. Not that the food wasn't good, it was. What bothered him was the little scene being played out at the other end of the table. Diana was seated next to Lord Merton, a widower with four children, deep pockets, and a wandering eye. Instead of keeping a polite distance, Diana simpered and smiled at his every word. It was sickening. He had wanted to see Diana again, but not like this.

The girl Ralston watched was nothing like the spirited lass he'd encountered up the tree this morning or on the hill yesterday. That Diana had been clever and quick, her drawings wonderfully rendered. The caricature of her mother, Lady Iverly, had been both cruel and accurate. Did Diana hate her mother? Was that the reason for this skin-crawling display? Did Lady Diana really want to be Merton's third wife, especially when rumor had it that the last one had died from the pox she'd contracted from her husband? Ralston's hand clenched around his glass.

He shifted his glance to her mother. Lady Iverly was three steps past plain. Diana's drawing had not been far off the mark. Her father, Robert Sinclair, Baron Iverly, was a roué, known for his love of gambling and women. He sipped his wine, considering. Perhaps Lord Merton's resemblance to her father was no coincidence. Some women did marry men like their fathers, no matter how bad they were.

Merton's hand fell on Diana's arm in a furtive caress, before his attention was diverted by the woman sitting on his other side. Diana didn't pull her arm away, but an expression of distaste crossed her face, as if a slug had crept along her sleeve. Interesting. So Diana wasn't dazzled by Merton's dubious attractions. Why was a beautiful titled girl like her so desperate for a husband?

Rumor had it that Iverly had gambled away most of his inheritance. Diana's recent engagement to the wealthy Leighton Frost had fallen through, and he was sure that must have cost Frost a pretty penny. Diana was supposed to have changed her mind. Many had labeled her

flighty and capricious in consequence, but Ralston wondered. The girl he'd met was nothing like that. Of course, first impressions could be wrong.

Diana spoke with her other neighbor, an elderly woman. Ralston's hand tightened around the glass. She really was beautiful. Ah, well. She was not for the likes of him. He drained his wine, and wished this dinner was over.

Finally, Lady Iverly rose, giving the signal to the other ladies that it was time to depart for the tea tray. The gentleman stood while the ladies filed out, and then sat down. Immediately, the atmosphere lightened. Iverly, though a sot and a womanizer, was an excellent host. The port was first-rate. He wasn't working anymore, so Ralston filled a glass.

The rest of the evening passed in a haze of discontent. He wasn't even given the chance to speak with Diana. Her mother kept her too closely guarded for that. There had been a moment when their eyes met over the tea tray. Diana's blue gaze was wistful. Damn it, somehow he hurt to see that beautiful girl so unhappy, and there was nothing he could do about it. He didn't have the right.

* * * * *

The next morning, after hearing Elinor's plans, Major Winter crossed his arms, and favored her with a stony stare, the same cold look that used to reduce his subordinates to quivering heaps of jelly.

Elinor merely sniffed. Impossible man.

"Stop sulking, my love. We are having an evening party two days hence. I've been cooped up here for weeks while that horrible man was on the loose. Now he's dead, and I'm not. I want to have a party."

"Well, my dear Elinor, I want to pull you over my knee right now, but your delicate condition is curbing my instincts."

Elinor pressed her hands to her belly, where that sweet new life laid hidden deep inside her body. "It should, especially since you are the one responsible for that condition." She let her hands slide upward to cup her swelling bosom. Her nipples tightened, and she gasped at the sensation in her newly tender breasts.

The major's eyes gleamed. "A dim memory is coming back to me." He crossed the room

in a few, long-legged strides to grip her around the waist.

"Was it something like this?"

He suckled her nipple through her dress, his mouth hot and wet, while she moaned at the pleasure-pain of it. He moved to her other breast and she gripped his hair. One hand left her waist to pull up her skirts, skimming along her thigh to caress the waiting wetness between her legs.

"Or this?"

One finger slid into her, and then another, probing and twining until she panted. His thumb rubbed against the nub of her pleasure with sure, firm strokes and she climaxed abruptly, sinking against her husband's tall form.

"You'll have your party, my sweet girl. That and anything else you want."

The major pulled away for a moment, before plunking her on the top of the table. He unbuttoned his breeches and stepped between her thighs. He slid slowly inside her with one smooth stroke. It felt like heaven. His hot breath stirred her hair. "I think I remember everything," he whispered, and started to move, gliding in and out with gentle, teasing strokes.

"I love you, Caine."

His hands tightened on her thighs as he plunged deeper. "I love you more."