



A Secret Disgrace

By Penny Jordan

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A shocking Sicilian secret...Louise Anderson's heart pounds as she approaches the imposing castello. Only the Duke of Falconari can grant her grandparents' dying wish - but this is the same man who said arrivederci without a backward glance after their night of unadulterated passion...Caesar can't believe the woman who almost ruined his precious reputation still fiercely fires his blood. Discovering that their union created more than just salacious memories, he agrees to grant Louise's request...in exchange for a demand of his own. That she wears his band of gold! Penny's final Mills & Boon is a classic. Intense, brooding and dramatic.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

After reading a serialized Mills & Boon book in a magazine, Penny Jordan quickly became an avid fan! Her goal, when writing romance fiction, is to provide readers with an enjoyment and involvement similar to that she experienced from her early reading – Penny believes in the importance of love, including the benefits and happiness it brings. She works from home, in her kitchen, surrounded by four dogs and two cats, and welcomes interruptions from her friends and family.

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'You say it was your grandparents' wish that their ashes be buried here, in the graveyard of the church of Santa Maria?'

The dispassionate male voice gave away as little as the shadowed face. Its bone structure was delineated with strokes of sunlight that might have come from Leonardo's masterly hand, revealing as they did the exact nature of the man's cultural inheritance. Those high cheekbones, that slashing line of taut jaw, the hint of olive-toned flesh, the proud aquiline shape of his nose—all of them spoke of the mixing of genes from the invaders who had seen Sicily and sought to possess it. His ancestors had never allowed anything to stand in the way of what they wanted. And now his attention was focused on *her*.

Instinctively she wanted to distance herself from him, to conceal herself from him, she recognized, and she couldn't stop herself from stepping back from him, her ankle threatening to give way as the back of her pretty wedged shoe came up against the unseen edge of the gravestone behind her.

'Take care.'

He moved so fast that she froze, like a rabbit pinned down by the swift, deathly descent of the falcon from which his family took its name. Long, lean tanned fingers closed round her wrist as he jerked her forward, the mint-scented warmth of his breath burning against her face as he leaned nearer to deliver an admonishment.

It was impossible for her to move. Impossible, too, for her to speak or even think. All she could do was *feel*—suffer beneath the lava-hot flow of emotions that had erupted inside her to spill into every sensitive nerveending she possessed. This was indeed torture. Torture...or torment? Her body convulsed on a violent surge of self-contempt. Torture. There was no torment in this man's hold on her, no temptation. Nothing but self-loathing and...and indifference.

But her whispered, 'Let go of me,' sounded far more like the broken cry of a helpless victim than the cool, calm command of a modern and independent woman.

She smelled of English roses and lavender; she looked like an archetypical Englishwoman. She had even sounded like one until he had touched her, and she had shown him the fierce Sicilian passion and intensity that was her true heritage.

'Let go of me!' she had demanded.

Caesar's mouth hardened against the images her words had set free from his memory. Images and memories so sharply painful that he automatically recoiled from them. So much pain, so much damage, so much guilt

for him to bear.

So why do what he had to do now? Wasn't that only going to increase her deserved animosity towards him, and increase his own guilt?

Because he had no choice. Because he had to think of the greater good. Because he had to think, as he had always had to think, of his people and his duty to his family line and his name.

The harsh reality was that there could be no true freedom for either of them. And that was *his* fault. In every way, all of this was his fault.

His heart had started to pound with heavy hammer-strokes. He hadn't built in to his calculations the possibility that he would be so aware of her, so affected by the sensual allure of her. Like Sicily's famous volcano, she was all fire, covered at its peak by ice, and he was far more vulnerable to that than he had expected to be.

Why? It wasn't as though there weren't plenty of beautiful, sensual women all too ready to share his bed—who had, in fact, shared his bed before he had been forced to recognise that the so-called pleasure of those encounters tasted of nothing other than an emptiness that left him aching for something more satisfying and meaningful. Only by then he'd had nothing he could offer the kind of woman with whom he might have been able to build such a relationship.

He had, in effect, become a man who could not love on his own terms. A man whose duty was to follow in the footsteps of his forebears. A man on whom the future of his people depended.

It was that duty that had been instilled into him from childhood. Even as an orphaned six-year-old, crying for his parents, he had been told how important it was that he remember his position and his duty. The people had even sent a deputation to talk to him—to remind him of what it meant to stand in his late father's shoes. By outsiders the beliefs and customs of his people would be considered harsh, and even cruel. He was doing all he could to change things, but such changes could only be brought in slowly—especially when the most important headman of the people's council was so vehemently opposed to new ideas, so set in his ways. However, Caesar wasn't a boy of six any more, and he was determined that changes *would* be made.

Changes. His mind drifted for a moment. Could truly fundamental things be altered? Could old wrongs be put right? Could a way be found.?

He shook such dreams from him and turned back to the present.

'You haven't answered my question about your grandparents,' he reminded Louise.

As little as she liked his autocratic tone, Louise was relieved enough at the return of something approaching normality between them to answer curtly, 'Yes.'

All she wanted was for this interview, this inspection, to be over and done with. It went against everything she believed in so passionately that she was patently expected to virtually grovel to this aristocratic and arrogant Sicilian duke, with his air of dangerously dark sexuality and his too-good looks, simply because centuries ago his family had provided the land on which this small village church had been built. But that was the way of things here in this remote, almost feudal part of Sicily.

He was owner of the church and the village and heaven knew how many acres of Sicilian land. He was also the *patronne*, in the local Sicilian culture, the 'father' of the people who traditionally lived on it—even if

those people were members of her grandparents' generation. Like his title and his land, it was a role he had inherited. She knew that, and had grown up knowing it, listening to her grandparents' stories of the hardship of the lives they had lived as children. They had been forced to work on the land owned by the family of this man who now stood in front of her in the shaded quiet of the ancient graveyard.

Louise gave a small shiver as she looked beyond the cloudless blue sky to the mountains, where the volcano of Etna brooded sulphurously beneath the hot sun. She checked the sky again surreptitiously. She had never liked thunderstorms, and those mountains were notorious for conjuring them out of nothing. Wild and dangerous storms, capable of unleashing danger with savage cruelty. Like the man now watching her.

She wasn't what he had expected or anticipated, Caesar acknowledged. That wheat-blond hair wasn't Sicilian, nor those sea-green eyes—even if she did carry herself with the pride of an Italian woman. She was around medium height, fine-boned and slender—almost too much so, he thought, catching sight of the narrowness of her wrist with its lightly tanned skin. The oval shape of her face with its high cheekbones was classically feminine. A beautiful woman. One who would turn male heads wherever she went. But her air of cool serenity was, he suspected, worked for rather than natural.

And what of his own feelings towards her now that she was here? Had he expected them? Caesar turned away from her so that she wouldn't be able to see his expression. Was he afraid of what it might reveal to her? She was a trained professional, after all—a woman whose qualifications proved that she was well able to dig down deep into a person's psyche and find all that they might have hidden away. And he was afraid of what she might find in him.

He was afraid that she might rip away the scar tissue he had encouraged to grow over his guilt and grief, his pride and sense of duty, over the dreadful, shameful demands he had allowed them to make on him. So was it more than just guilt he felt? Was there shame as well? He almost didn't need to ask himself that question when he had borne those twin burdens for over a decade. Had borne them and would continue to bear them. He had tried to make amends—a letter sent but never replied to, an apology proffered, a hope expressed, words written in what at the time had felt like the blood he had squeezed out of his own heart. A letter never even acknowledged. There would be no forgiveness or going back. And, after all, what else had he expected? What he had done did not deserve to be forgiven.

His guilt was a burden he would carry throughout his life, just as it had already been, but that guilt was his private punishment. It belonged solely to him. After all, there could be no going back to change things—nor, he suspected, anything he could offer that would make recompense for what had been done. So, no, being here with her had *not* increased his guilt—he already bore it in full measure—but it had sharpened its edge to a keenness that was almost a physical stab of pain every time he breathed.

They were speaking in English—his choice—and anyone looking at her would have assumed from the understated simplicity and practicality of her plain soft blue dress, her shoulders discreetly covered by simple white linen, that she was a certain type of educated middle class professional woman, on holiday in Sicily.

Her name was Louise Anderson, and her mother was the daughter of the Sicilian couple whose ashes she had come to bury in this quiet churchyard. Her father was Australian, also of Sicilian origin.

Caesar moved, the movement making him aware of the letter he had placed in the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

Louise could feel her tension tightening like a spring being wound with deliberate manipulation by the man watching her. There was a streak of cruelty to those they considered weaker than themselves in the Falconari family. It was there in their history, both written and oral. He had no reason to behave crue...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Georgia Hernandez:

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