



## ***A PRINCESS SHOULD NEVER BEFRIEND TROUBLE...***

*General Clayton Elliott, Home Office Undersecretary and new viscount, gets suspicious when London is too quiet. Everyone says that Scepter—the anarchist group he’s been fighting—died along with its leader, but his instincts say otherwise.*

*Then he meets Her Serene Highness Princess Cordelia of Monrovia. Resigned to doing her duty for her country, she is in London to make a match with a royal duke—and as a royal princess trapped in a life of duty, she has no say in which duke she’ll marry. When she is shockingly attacked, Clayton becomes her bodyguard. Is there a connection between Scepter and whoever apparently wants the princess dead? The more time Clayton and Cordelia spend evading her enemies and pursuing their individual missions, the more they realize they can depend only on each other...*

## ***CHAPTER ONE***

*London  
April 1818*

Clayton Elliott stepped up behind the porter in the dark alley. Around them, the borough lay quiet and still in the early evening shadows, as if holding its breath in anticipation of the nighttime debaucheries to come. “Hello, Burton.”

The older man spun around, startled. His meaty hands clenched into fists to defend himself, but Clayton would never let the man come close enough to land a blow. Not with his own fingers curled around the small pistol he held at his side.

Burton recognized Clayton’s face in the shadows and relaxed, yet he wasn’t at all happy to see him. “*You.*” He spat on the ground. “What the hell do you want?”

“Information.”

“About?”

“Scepter.”

Burton froze at the name. Then he laughed. “Ain’t no more Scepter.”

Clayton wished to God that were true. “That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“Then ye’ve heard wrong.”

For the past six months, Clayton had been using Burton to stay informed about happenings at the London docks, hoping to hear news of Scepter, a revolutionary group that had pledged to overthrow the British government. If Scepter was attempting to regroup after the execution of their leader, the Marquess of Hawking, then it would certainly be a dockworker who’d have heard. Few people knew the comings and goings of powerful men like the laborers who worked the quays and ships.

“Tell me what you know,” Clayton ordered.

“Scepter don’t exist no more.” Another spit to the ground, this one in capitulation. “Least not like it did.”

“You swear on your life?”

Burton croaked out a hoarse laugh. “If I tell ye anythin’ about what the men of Scepter are up to, that’s what it’ll be, all right—*my life*.”

“Not if you cooperate. I’ll make it worth your while. You know I will.”

Burton gave him a hard once-over look from hat to boots, most likely to figure out exactly how many guns and knives Clayton had hidden beneath his black greatcoat in addition to the one in plain sight in his hand. Yet he was also assessing the power that Clayton possessed as a Home Office undersecretary to fulfill his promise.

“But if you lie to me,” Clayton warned and pointed his pistol at Burton’s chest, “I will kill you myself before Scepter’s men have the chance to.”

Burton was Clayton’s last lead in his search for information about Scepter. His Home Office operatives had turned up nothing new about the group since Hawking’s execution. The lack of evidence pointed toward what Burton and Clayton’s other contacts in London’s underworld had told him—Scepter had died along with the marquess.

Clayton had come to believe that the group was a hydra that simply grew a new head whenever an old one was cut off. But how many heads did the monster have left? Or had the men of the Armory truly managed to kill the beast after all?

He needed answers, and damn it to hell that he was left with only Burton to provide them.

“There’s a ship at Greenwich leaving at dawn,” Clayton told him, “whose captain is looking for a good shipman. He’s offering twice the regular pay and might just be persuaded to give you the position of third mate if I ask him.” He paused, dangling the reward as bait. “Of course, that all depends on what information you can give me.”

Burton’s face lit with greed, and he licked his lips. “Haven’t heard much at all ’bout Scepter. They’ve done a few bits of business ’ere an’ there in the stews and warehouses, but nothin’ organized. Mostly by their old managers tryin’ to carry on the businesses without ’em. They’re like dogs after scraps, tryin’ to pick up what they can while the goin’s still good. Others are makin’ for the Continent or up north to stay one step out o’ Newgate.” He gave a ghastly grin of amusement that showed three missing teeth and a lip permanently scarred from an old fight. “Scurryin’ ’round like rats, they are, lookin’ for holes to run into an’ places to hide.”

“And their leader?” Hawking’s execution would have created the perfect opportunity for an underling to seize control. “Who’s attempting to organize them?”

“No one. I told ye. It’s done fer.”

“But you’ve heard rumors. What are they saying?” When Burton didn’t answer, Clayton clucked his tongue. “Damnable shame if that boat sails from Greenwich without you.”

Spurred on by greed, Burton admitted, “Just stories floatin’ ’round the docks that a new leader’s arrivin’ soon from the Continent, ready t’ drop in an’ scoop up the reins.”

“You don’t believe them?”

“I don’t believe that anyone wi’ half a mind would risk findin’ his own neck in a noose the same way Hawking done.”

Clayton’s heart skipped. No one outside the Home Office knew that the late Marquess of Hawking had been connected to Scepter. He’d been arrested, tried, and executed for the kidnapping and attempted murder of Baroness Rowland and her son, along with a litany of other treasonous and murderous acts. But not once had Scepter’s name been mentioned in any part of the proceedings.

Clayton kept his voice controlled as he calmly asked, “How do *you* know about Hawking’s connection to Scepter?”

Burton’s eyes flared at his mistake.

Clayton slowly stalked forward until the tip of his pistol’s barrel pressed into the soft flesh under the man’s chin. “Tell me.”

“I—I know people, an’ I hear th-things,” Burton rushed out and raised his hands from his sides in a gesture of surrender. “That’s why ye pay me for information, ain’t it? ’Cause I got connections.”

“Yes, but I never realized how deep your connections ran until right now.” Clayton pressed the pistol harder under Burton’s chin. The man was forced to tilt his head backward so far that he stared up into the black London sky and the rain that fell in a steady, cold drizzle. “How do you know about Hawking’s connection to Scepter?”

Burton swallowed so hard that Clayton could hear the terrified sound from two feet away. “Had me suspicions ’bout the man when he started hangin’ ’round the docks, so one day I followed ’im. He weren’t careful enough to know I was sneakin’ after.” The rainwater drizzled down his face like tears, and his breath emerged in a cloud of fog on the cold evening air. “Followed him all the way t’ that fancy house o’ his in Mayfair. Asked a servant in the street who lived there—that’s how I found ’im.”

“Why follow him? Did you plan on blackmailing him? Tell him you’d keep his secret if he paid for your silence?”

Burton nodded, and his flabby chin rocked the barrel of the pistol beneath it.

“You damned fool,” Clayton muttered. “You were lucky he was arrested before he killed you.”

The man squeezed his eyes shut. “I needed the money. Got sick family an’ doctor’s bills to pay.”

That was a lie if ever Clayton had heard one. Most likely the man had a favorite whore he wanted to spoil, along with all the finery and ease for himself that Hawking’s money could have bought.

He stepped back but kept his pistol pointed at the man’s chest. Burton was just stupid enough to charge him, but if he tried, Clayton would kill him where he stood.

“What else do you know about Scepter?” Clayton demanded.

Looking relieved to have the gun away from his chin, Burton shook his head. “Nothin’.”

“Don’t lie to me, you son of a—”

“*Nothing!*”

Clayton pointed the pistol at Burton’s head and stared down the barrel. “One...”

“I told you! I told you everythin’ I know. I swear it!”

“Two...”

“All right! All right, please!” Burton put up his hands in a gesture of mercy and shook

violently, a coward at heart. “All the men left in Scepter are just waitin’, sittin’ low an’ waitin’ for a signal.”

Hawking had said the same to Clayton before he was hanged. “What kind of signal?”

“Don’t know, but a big one. They’ll act then, an’ the new man who’s comin’ from the Continent will step into Hawking’s shoes an’ lead Scepter, just like Boney coming back from Elba. Then everythin’ changes. That’s what I heard. *Everything* changes.” Burton chuckled nervously. “Like I said, just a bunch of stories.”

That didn’t put Clayton at ease. Neither did St Mary’s bells tolling through the fog and darkness. He counted...seven bells.

*Damnation.* He was running late.

He eased down the hammer of the pistol and lowered it to his side. It was time to give Burton his reward. “Go see Captain Smith on the *Mercury*. It’s leaving Greenwich tomorrow. He’s expecting you.” But Clayton wouldn’t forgive Burton for his betrayal. “Do *not* come back to London.”

In reply, Burton spat on the ground. The glob of saliva landed less than a foot from Clayton’s boot.

Clayton laughed at him, turned, and walked out of the alley.

“Don’t think you’ll be findin’ Scepter’s new leader ’mong the sailors an’ porters on the docks,” Burton called out after him. “Or anywhere in the stews or slums, that’s fer sure. Look fer him in Westminster wi’ the rest of ye snobs an’ nobs!”

Clayton didn’t slow his steps as he strode over the drizzle-drenched cobblestones toward the thick bank of fog rolling up from the river. He wouldn’t let Burton think he cared, even though the comment jarred him to his core.

“Oh, that’s right—you ain’t no nob. *Yer* pappy was a goddamned murderer!”

Clayton grabbed the knife he kept sheathed up his left sleeve, spun around, and threw it. It sailed past Burton’s head so closely that the blade nicked his ear.

Burton slammed his hand against his head with a curse, but he was smart enough not to attack.

“*Never* come back,” Clayton threatened in an icy snarl.

He continued to walk away into the dark and damp city. He knew he would never see Burton again. *Good.* Clayton might just kill him if he did.

He took measured breaths to calm himself as he strode south through the city, but the night air did little to ease the painful clenching of his chest. How dare that bastard Burton mention Clayton’s father like that?

But it wasn’t the insult that had wounded him. It was the reminder that he’d done little over the past year to uncover the truth about Charles Elliott’s arrest and execution.

Until Scepter disrupted Clayton’s plans, everything in his life had been focused on uncovering the truth—and proving the world wrong about his father. About himself. About the murders twenty-five years ago. About *everything*. Hell, he’d even joined the Home Office after returning from the wars because the ministry held the resources he needed to investigate, and the position had given him the opportunity to prove his patriotism to a country that thought his father had forsaken it.

He’d been so close to putting the last pieces into place he could taste it. But then he’d had to put it all on hold to stop Scepter.

Yet if Scepter truly was dead and gone, then he could once more turn his attention to those old murders and his father’s role in them—if any—even if he succeeded in doing nothing

more than exonerating Charles Elliott's ghost.

Around him, the evening was transitioning into a rainy night, helped along by a thick fog that blanketed the streets in eerie white. In the distance, bells clanked from ships bobbing in the Thames, and shouts and laughs went up from the poor who filled the courtyards and derelict buildings in this section of the city.

Yet he didn't dare slow down. Not that he was afraid of being targeted by some opportunistic footpad who would find himself on the wrong end of a pistol if he attempted it. No, tonight, Clayton was being targeted by someone far worse.

The prince regent.

With a roll of his eyes, Clayton hurried toward the Thames and the fastest way through London. His boots clicked on the stone steps as he descended toward the black river and stepped into the waiting boat.

"Westminster." He tossed a coin to the wherry man. "And hurry."

"Aye, sir."

The boatman used the Thames's finicky currents to glide upstream toward the wide bend where the river turned south beneath the new Waterloo Bridge and then on to Westminster. Old hulks appeared like ghost ships from the wall of fog as the wherry passed, and the drizzle and darkness lay so thick across the city that no lights could be seen glowing from any of the buildings on the banks. Only muffled noise from waterside taverns broke the silence, along with the occasional clanging of a ship's bell. Even the lamp that dangled from the wherry's rear pole barely lit up a circle big enough for the boat.

"Charon," Clayton called out over his shoulder to the wherry man. After all, there seemed little difference between this trip down the Thames tonight and one across the River Styx. Both would eventually take him to hell. "What rumors have you heard creeping around in the shadows tonight?"

"None." The boatman snorted. "No one's daft enough to be out in this damp 'cept for fools."

"True enough," Clayton muttered beneath his breath. *He* was certainly acting the fool. Tonight's wild goose chase proved it. He prayed that Burton and his Home Office operatives were correct, that Scepter was dead and buried along with Hawking.

His gut told him differently.

By the time the boat glided silently up to the steps at the base of Westminster Bridge and Clayton stepped out, he had convinced himself that Burton knew no more about Scepter's tattered remains than his own Home Office agents and that any tales of a new leader emerging to replace Hawking were just that—fairy tales.

Besides, he had a bigger nightmare to deal with at that moment.

"To the front door of Carlton House," he called out to the jarvey of a hackney stopped on the embankment.

The driver's eyes grew large. "Where?"

"You heard me." Clayton swung inside the compartment, rapped his knuckles against the roof to signal to the man to drive, and muttered, "Onward to hell."

The jarvey cracked his whip over the heads of the horses and started the old rig down the street. He kept them clipping along at a quick pace, possibly because it was his first fare to a royal residence...or more likely because he was convinced Clayton was mad as a hatter and wanted to be rid of him as soon as possible.

"God knows I'd have to be mad to being going to Carlton House," Clayton muttered to

himself as he watched the gas lamps pass by in the thickening fog.

But did he have a choice? Since the incident last summer at Waterloo Bridge and Clayton's well-coordinated cover-up that kept the public from learning how Scepter had nearly assassinated the prince regent, Clayton had become one of the regent's favorites, much to Clayton's chagrin and to the suspicions of the prime minister and Home Office secretary. He'd only been half teasing the prince when he'd claimed he wanted to be rewarded with a generalship.

But damn if the royal fool hadn't gone and given him exactly that.

*General Clayton Elliott.* That unexpected and rapid promotion up the ranks had raised eyebrows across the empire, and it galled him that others thought he hadn't deserved it, that he'd received it not in the heat of battle but in the backrooms of Westminster. Worse—that he couldn't say a word in his own defense to prove he'd earned it because the incident had to remain a state secret. Other gossip had been swirling about his connection to the regent, too, especially as he was now invited to all kinds of events that even a general had no business attending. Like tonight's audience with the visiting royals from Monrovia. No mere Home Office undersecretary and son of a convicted murderer should have been considered special enough for that. The regent most likely knew it, too, and invited him more to aggravate those men who were left off the invitation list than to reward him.

Clayton rubbed at the knot of tension in his nape. Always, what he had wanted most was to prove the true worth of the Elliott name. From the moment he'd left the family brewery and scraped together enough money to purchase a lieutenant's commission, that had been his goal. His path had been grueling—nights spent sleeping on bare ground frozen hard in winters and oozing mud in summers, terror-filled days fighting on the battlefield, his life endangered at every turn, his best friends slaughtered as they fought beside him... He'd worked himself nearly to death in the army camps to earn recognition, then volunteered for every dangerous mission he could, and always with the goal of proving his patriotism and loyalty to England, proving that the Elliott men weren't lawless. *Always.* The wars provided opportunity for quick advancement, and peacetime provided even more with the Home Office.

Now he stood at the pinnacle of his career with all he'd wanted held firm within his grasp.

*Almost.* He had yet to uncover the truth about his father, and he couldn't stop until he put his father's ghost to rest. In every way.

With a grimace, Clayton pounded his fist against the hackney's roof. The time for his command performance had arrived.

"Stop," he called out the broken window to the driver. They were still several streets from their destination, but he wanted to avoid the tangle of traffic that undoubtedly awaited them. He also wanted to avoid the attention he would draw by arriving at the royal residence in a hired hackney. "Let me out here."

The jarvey pulled the team to a stop at the side of the avenue. Clayton jumped down to the street, tossed up a coin, and headed on foot toward Carlton House.

The traffic was as bad as he'd feared, with a long line of carriages snaking its way back toward Mayfair. Their lamps lit dim halos in the damp fog and gave the entire scene an eerie, unworldly feel, but past experience with the regent told Clayton that the inside of the royal residence would be just as fantastical. The regent would have cut no corners for tonight's festivities. The Monrovia reception was the palace's first public event since Princess Charlotte's official mourning period had ended, and everyone of any importance was attempting to cram themselves into the house's grand reception rooms.

Yet tonight's event wasn't even the grand ball that would take place in a fortnight to

mark the culmination of the royal visit. No, tonight's event was only a small welcome ceremony.

Clayton stopped in front of Carlton House's sweeping entrance and stared at the gold cages erected on both sides of the portico that held dozens of swans, the hundreds of guests streaming inside, and an army of servants at the ready to help them.

A small welcome ceremony? *Good Lord.*

He took a deep breath to summon his courage the way he'd never had to before any of the battles on the Continent. Then he hurried up the steps, handed his invitation to the footman guarding the entrance, and stepped inside.

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