



Prologue

*On the English Channel
April, 1823*

“Where are the documents?”

Ross Carlisle, Earl of Spalding, spit out a mouthful of blood onto the midnight-black deck of the pitching ship as the storm intensified around them. “Go to hell!”

A fist slammed into his stomach, and he doubled over in gasping pain. He coughed and struggled for breath, thankful for the pouring rain that cooled the bruises they’d already put into his ribs and face and which kept the dripping blood at his brow from stinging his eyes.

The two Frenchmen holding his arms jerked him back up straight.

The hired thug who’d been sent to find the papers Ross had stolen grabbed him by the hair.

“You are a murderer and a traitor. No one will care what happens to you.” He yanked back his head. “So I will ask you one more time before I cut off your kneecaps,” the man threatened in street

French, having to yell even at such close range to be heard over the wind and driving rain. In his free hand he brandished a knife. “Where are the documents?”

Ross glared at him, refusing to answer.

So it all came to this...a decade serving the crown as a soldier and diplomat, an unblemished reputation without even a hint of scandal, more recently a dangerous pursuit in which recognition would never have been possible—only to end ingloriously on a fishing boat being tossed about in the English Channel.

He’d been running for the past five days, fleeing for his life from Paris to the coast with hired henchmen on his heels. First on horseback, then on foot, changing identities as easily as other men changed clothes. But he’d been unable to throw them off his trail, and always they’d been less than half a day behind. Then a handful of hours. By the time he reached Calais and found a captain brave enough to take him across the Channel in this storm, they’d caught him. Now in a matter of minutes he’d be dead.

And damn the world that the last person he thought about was Christopher! Not one of his French mistresses, not one of his first loves as a boy, nor even his mother—but his brother. How the last thing Ross did in life was prove Kit right. That eventually he’d be discovered and that even his post at the Court of St. James’s wouldn’t be able to save him.

The Frenchmen released his hair and stepped back, struggling to keep his footing on the wet, rolling deck. With a menacing gleam in his eyes, he lowered the knife toward Ross's legs. "Where are the papers?"

The knife tip sliced across his left thigh. It cut through the rough work trousers he'd donned in his last attempt to change his appearance and lose his pursuers at the docks, biting into the flesh beneath. Ross sucked in a pain-filled breath through clenched teeth and bit back an ironic laugh—his *left* thigh.

The boat rose on the swell of a wave, then dropped with enough force that the men holding his arms wobbled to keep their balance. His interrogator stumbled backward a step—

Now.

Ross lunged toward the closest railing, tearing his arm free of the man on his right and catching the one on his left unguarded and off-balance. He lowered his shoulder and rammed it into the man's chest to push past. Then all went dark as he tumbled over the railing into the black sea.

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Chapter One

*Sea Haven Village on Winchelsea Bay
East Sussex, England*

Grace Alden lay in her bed, staring at the dark ceiling and listening to the storm raging around her. The wind and rain roared so loudly that she couldn't hear the beat of her own heart, but she knew it was racing because it pounded away painfully in her chest, jumping into her throat each time she heard something blow against the cottage. Broken only by the occasional thump of a slate shingle falling off the roof, the wind howled like a banshee over the cliff tops, screaming through the eaves and bringing with it a torrent of black rain that fell with the force of a hurricane.

"Please, God," she prayed, "let the roof hold."

Around her, the old limestone and timber cottage groaned beneath the fierce battering of the storm.

"And the walls, too," she added in afterthought, "if not too much trouble."

After ten more minutes of staring at the ceiling, she slid out from beneath the covers and left her room. Sleep would prove impossible tonight.

The cottage was dark as pitch in the storm, and she made her way slowly across the main room to the hearth, where a bed of coals and small flames hissed and snapped angrily against drops of rain that blew into the flue and down the chimney. She stirred the ash bed with the poker to raise a flame, then tossed in a few more chunks of coal to feed the fire enough to see her through until morning.

Taking a brass candleholder from the mantel, she bent over to light the wick on the flame, then let out a soft sigh when it took hold. After nearly ten years of fearing things that bumped in the night, would she ever grow comfortable in the darkness? But the most frightening things weren't the unseen. She'd learned the hard way that the most frightening things were the ones a person knew well.

She lifted the candle to read the storm glass fixed to the wall. The water in the spout had been rising during the past two days, and now it stood higher than she'd ever seen it. She bit her bottom lip. It could be hours before the water level dropped and the temperature fell, before the clouds rained themselves dry.

Before she could bring Ethan home. Sending her son into the village to spend the night with Alice Walters at the apothecary shop had been the right decision, she knew that. But oh, how much it hurt to be separated from him! And for the first time. But the sailors who had come ashore all day predicted that tonight's storm would be one of the worst in memory, and Ethan was safer within the shop's thick stone walls, while she had to be here to rescue their belongings in case the roof caved in. The old cottage held everything she owned in the world, and it had been her own safe port over the past stormy decade, the place where she and Ethan had been safe since he was a babe.

But he wasn't a little boy anymore, and her heart ached to think how fast he was growing.

At nine years old, he would soon reach an age when he should be going off to school, but he would have to stay here with her. Guilt gnawed at her chest. He deserved better, was born for better...fine schools, hundreds of books, private tutors, trips across England and the continent to see in person all the wonderful things that he could only read about. Instead, they had to make do with the few books she could scrape together enough money to purchase and the tutoring sessions with the local vicar she acquired for him in trade for cooking and cleaning the vicarage.

But he could never have that other life. Not when he so closely resembled his father that at times she felt as if she were talking to David instead of his son. As far as Ethan knew, his father was a sailor who died at sea, and she fully intended to keep it that way. And if Ethan ever discovered the truth, if he ever got the foolish notion into his head when he was older to pursue what was due him...She shuddered.

But at least now he would have a life, and she would never regret her decision to keep her son safe.

A loud banging shot through the noise of the storm. She jumped with a small scream, her hand going to her throat as her heart somersaulted violently.

The pounding came again, and this time she recognized it—a shutter had broken loose and was banging wildly against the side of the cottage in the howling wind. If she didn't fix it, not only would it continue to bang all night, but it might very well smash through the window it was supposed to be protecting.

Setting the candle onto the table, she moved toward the door, where she pulled on a pair of old fisherman's boots and an oilskin coat hanging on its peg. The last thing she wanted to do tonight—oh, the very last thing!—was go out into the weather, to be soaked, chilled to the bone, and battered about. But she had no choice. She couldn't afford to replace the window if it broke. At least when she returned inside she could brew up some hot tea. Taking comfort in that, she threw back the bolt and opened the door, only to have her breath ripped away by the burst of icy cold wind and rain that slammed into her.

Drawing a deep breath and pulling the old coat tighter around herself, she shouldered her way into the wind and along the front of the house. It took only a moment to close the shutter and fasten the hook that should have held it in place but had somehow come undone.

She turned to scurry inside—

A strong arm went around her waist and swung her back against the side of the cottage. A scream tore from her, but it was lost beneath the noise of the raging storm. A forearm pushed against her upper chest, pinning her back against the wall.

Another scream ripped from her throat as she began to kick and punch with all her might at the man who'd grabbed her, who now held her a helpless prisoner as he

leaned into her, his muscular legs forcing hers to still. With one large hand, he grabbed both her arms and pinned them over her head, while the other pressed the end of a pistol beneath her chin.

“Who else is inside?” the man demanded.

She couldn’t see his face as the rain pelted down upon both of them, so fiercely that she couldn’t blink the water away fast enough. The black night hid his features, but nothing could hide the strength of him as he held her against the wall.

When she hesitated, he pressed the pistol harder against her throat. “A husband, brother—who else?”

“My husband!” she lied, so terrified that she nearly crumpled to the muddy ground. “He’s certain to have heard me scream, so you’d better leave now.”

He laughed, a low and terrible sound that scratched and screeched nearly as much as the wind howling over the bluffs. “No husband, then. Anyone else?”

She clenched her teeth together, refusing to answer. The wild wind whipped against them, and the icy rain soaked through the coat and her night rail beneath. She was terrified and freezing, but she refused to submit to this man. Not to *any* man ever again. She’d rather die than surrender.

She forced out furiously, even as she shuddered, “Go to hell!”

His eyes gleamed in the darkness. “I’m already there.”

Keeping the pistol pressed against her throat, he grabbed her arm and yanked her toward the door, which had blown open beneath the hurricane gale. He pulled her inside, then shoved the door closed with his foot. She yanked her arm away, and he let her go, only to reach behind him and throw the bolt to lock them inside.

Grace ran toward the fireplace. She snatched up the iron poker and brandished it like a weapon. All of her shook so violently from cold and fear that she didn’t know how she managed to hold onto it. But he’d have to rip it from her dead hands before she released it. And if he took a single step toward her—

But he didn’t. Instead he watched her silently from the shadows near the door where the darkness hid his face, not making a move to force himself on her.

“You need to leave. *Now*,” she ordered, praying her voice didn’t sound as terrified to his ears as it did to hers. “I will use this if you come any closer.”

“If I come any closer, I certainly hope you’d try,” he drawled dryly, as if amused at the idea. “But I have a gun. I don’t need to come closer.”

Oh God. She hadn’t thought of that! Fresh fear shuddered through her.

“But I don’t plan to use it,” he assured her calmly. “Nor do I plan on hurting you.”

A bitter laugh tore from her. “You shoved me against the cottage!” She kept the poker raised, which she now held in front of her like a sword. “Then forced me inside, to—to—” The terrified words choked her...*To rape me.*

“To get out of the storm,” he finished pointedly, as if reading her thoughts. “You never would have opened the door if I’d knocked.”

“You unlatched the shutter,” she whispered, the realization soaking through her as coldly as the rain. “It was *you*.”

“Yes.”

Her heart pounded wildly. She whispered, too frightened to find her voice. “What do you want?”

“A place to spend the night,” he said quietly. “That’s all.”

“There’s a village just past the downs, with an inn.” She gestured the poker in the general direction of the village. “You can spend the night there.”

He tilted his head slightly, as if listening to the storm and for a long moment saying nothing. The silence that stretched between them only accentuated the howl of the hurricane gales that swept in from the Atlantic like a banshee from hell.

He shook his head. "As soon as the storm breaks, I'll leave."

Her hands gripped harder around the poker, so tightly her knuckles turned white. "You need to leave *now*."

"I told you that I won't hurt you." His deep voice matched the intensity of the rain lashing against the cottage. "But I have no intention of going back into that storm."

He stepped away from the dark shadows by the door and came slowly forward toward the firelight, as if no more troubled by a woman brandishing an iron poker than he would have been by a gnat. He set his pistol down on the wooden settle yet kept it within easy reach as he peeled off his fisherman's peacoat, which was sopped with water, and laid it over the back of the settle. Then he sat down and began to remove his boots.

Her heart lurched into her throat. God help her, he was removing his clothing! "What are you doing?" she demanded, slashing the poker back and forth in front of her.

"Taking off my boots," he replied calmly and pulled it off his foot.

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion as she bit out, "Why?"

In answer, he stoically held up the boot, then tipped it over and poured out the water onto the floorboards in a puddle.

Her mouth fell open.

He tugged off the other and poured out just as much water, then looked up at her solemnly. "Only Jesus should walk on water."

She snapped her mouth shut. Oh, his audacity! She jabbed the poker at him, pointing first at the boots, then at his feet. "Put them back on this instant! And leave. Now. You are not welcome here!"

He reached beside him to rest his hand meaningfully on the pistol. Icy fingers of fear curled through her.

For one long moment, they held each other's gaze through the thick shadows of the dark cottage, lit only by the weak flames in the fireplace beside her and the flickering candle on the table. Darkness hid his face from her, but his eyes were bright as he silently studied her. Then he untied and stripped off his neck cloth, tossing it across the settle back beside his jacket. Around him, the puddle on the floor grew bigger, evidence of how exposed he must have been in that storm. And drenched through to his skin.

But that didn't give him the right to force his way into her home at gunpoint. And it certainly didn't give him license to remove his clothing...which he was still doing, now unbuttoning his waistcoat.

"Stop that!" she ordered. "Put them back on."

"I'm cold, and I'm not going to sit here freezing for the rest of the night." He pushed himself to his feet and nodded toward her, his dark gaze raking deliberately over her. "I advise you to do the same."

With her free hand, she clutched at her coat's lapels, to keep it closed so that the villain couldn't see her night rail beneath, which was undoubtedly soaked through and most likely transparent in the firelight. He said he didn't want to hurt her, but how could she trust him?

He shrugged and peeled off the waistcoat, then tossed it onto the settle with the rest of his clothes. He stood there, his wet shirt clinging to his broad shoulders and narrow waist like a second skin. In the shadows, she could see the outline of his arms and shoulders.

He held out his arms, inviting her to look. "No hidden weapons."

But Grace knew well that a man didn't need weapons to harm a lady. She wore the proof of that in the jagged scar marring her cheek. Brute strength and rage could be enough to destroy, and although this stranger wasn't in a rage, the muscles on his broad frame seemed more than powerful enough to harm.

Not threatened at all by the iron poker she still held ready to strike, he walked slowly toward her—rather, toward the warmth of the fire beside her. His hand went to his neck to unfasten the half dozen buttons at his collar. As he approached, the dim light of the small fire chased away the shadows and finally revealed his face. A light growth of beard covered his cheeks, a cut bled at his brow—yet a distant memory triggered in the far back of her mind...but it swirled away before she could fully latch onto it.

That face...So familiar...

Or perhaps she was simply so frightened that she'd gone daft. To think she'd know a stranger who'd forced his way into her home, who even now could lunge for the gun still resting on the settle before she could strike with the poker—madness! Yet his large presence in her small cottage was enough to make her tremble, if she wasn't already freezing from the icy rain.

"You can put that poker down now," he told her quietly as he raised his hands to the fire.

"I'll keep it right where it is, thank you very much," she shot back, gripping it more tightly. *Why* was he so familiar?

In coarse and ill-fitting clothing, he was dressed like one of the sailors who filled the boats which sailed from the bay to ports all along the western coast of England. But in the ten years she'd lived in Sea Haven, she'd never seen a sailor like him. He wasn't one of the men who worked on the docks, either. Oh, he had the muscles for that, certainly, but his bearing was too commanding, too proud. He wasn't one who took orders, she could read that in every inch of him.

No, *this* man was used to giving them and having them followed. Without question. Even now, from the way his mouth pulled down, he was irritated that she still stood her ground, the poker still raised to strike.

"I'd prefer that you put that down." He nodded toward the poker. "Wouldn't want it to go off accidentally and hurt someone," he drawled wryly, quirking a dark brow.

"Yes, that would be a great shame," she muttered, not lowering it, even though her arm had begun to ache. "If *someone* got hurt because he didn't leave when he was asked."

"You didn't ask," he corrected and pulled his shirt out of his trousers.

Her heart skipped, a tendril of hope rising amid her fear. "Would you please leave?"

"No."

She bit back a cry of frustration. Oh, the infuriating devil!

The fear inside her was quickly being replaced by anger, and by that nagging feeling that wouldn't go away that she *knew* him.

He grabbed his shirt and striped it up his body, over his head and off, baring himself from the waist up.

Her breath strangled in her throat. Her gaze darted to the bare chest he'd so scandalously revealed—

She swallowed. Hard. No, definitely not anyone she knew.

Instead of tossing the shirt over the settle with the rest of his clothes, he carefully draped it over the iron arm where she hung her kettle and swung it closer to the fire to dry. The firelight played over his smooth muscles and the faint tracing of hair on his chest that narrowed across his ridged abdomen and finally disappeared beneath his waistband, hanging low around his slender hips. He wore only his trousers now, and Grace couldn't help but bite her bottom lip as she wondered if he planned on removing even those.

And then she *would* have to hit him with the poker.

He turned around to heat his backside, once more plunging that too familiar face into the shadows, the firelight behind him making him appear like a devil escaped from hell. “You need to take off that coat now and warm yourself up.”

Dangling the poker at her side in one hand, she grabbed at the front of the coat with the other to keep herself covered, even knowing that he could see nothing in the cottage’s darkness. “No.”

He paused for a beat. Then shrugged. “So freeze. Makes no difference to me.”

Her lips fell open at the callous cut. Why that arrogant—

Then the realization sank through her. It *did* make a difference to him, or he wouldn’t be asking her, repeatedly, to remove it. She bit back a laugh. The same strategy she used against Ethan—tell him to do what she didn’t want in hopes that he’d do the opposite. Well, years of mothering had taught her that the strategy failed more often than it worked, and she wasn’t some nine-year-old boy refusing to do his chores. If he thought—

She sneezed.

The stranger arched a brow.

Her shoulders sagged in defeat. Oh blast the devil! “I cannot take off this coat,” she explained with a haughty sniff to cover the flushing in her cheeks, “because I’m wearing my night rail beneath.”

“Then go dress.” He turned back toward the fire. “Because we’re going to be up all night.”

Her chest pinched so brutally that she gasped. “You need to leave, please,” she pleaded in a whisper. “Just go. I won’t tell anyone you were here.”

He said nothing to that.

“I don’t have any money, I swear—Search through the cottage if you’d like, you’ll see.” When he continued to remain deaf to her pleas, her frustration changed to panic. “Take whatever you’d like. Just take it! And leave. Please.” A tear fell down her cheek. “Please just go!”

He stiffened at the sight of her tears, yet he made no move to reach for his shirt, to dress and leave. “I cannot.”

“Please!” Each pleading word sliced into her heart. She’d sworn to herself long ago that she’d never again beg any man for mercy. But tonight, the old feelings of helplessness surged to the surface, and she hated herself for feeling them. *Hated* him for stealing away the strength that had taken her years to find.

“I needed shelter from the storm,” he told her calmly and quietly, “and yours was the first cottage I came across.” His gaze pinned hers with a gravity that made her shiver. “If I go back out into the night, I’m dead. And several other good men with me.”

He faced her, and she reflexively took a step back, once more raising the poker. His dark gaze never left her face.

“So you can stand there all night holding that damnable poker if you desire,” he continued in the same quiet, controlled voice, “and I’ll sit there on the settle with my pistol pointed at you to make certain you don’t get some fool idea about hitting me over the head with it.” His eyes flickered with steely resolve. “But I am not leaving until it’s safe for me to travel. So go dress if you’d like, or stay in that coat and freeze. As I said, it makes no difference to me in getting what I want.”

He reached toward her—

With a fearful cry, she swung with all her might. The poker arced through the air toward his head.

Startling her with how fast he moved, he grabbed the poker in mid-swing with one hand while the other seized her arm. He twisted the poker from her grasp and held it away so she couldn’t grab for it, then yanked her against him.

Grace stared up at him, her eyes wide with panic and her heart pounding so hard that each beat shot an electric jolt of pain through her.

He tossed the poker away, and it clanged against the stone wall. Then he lowered his face until his eyes were level with hers, his mouth so close that his warm breath shivered across her lips. "I told you I wouldn't hurt you."

"You were reaching for me," she choked out, all of her shaking violently as the old memory of that last conversation with Vincent came crashing over her, one she'd thought she'd long ago buried. Now it crashed over her with the same fierce intensity as the storm raging outside.

"Because I hate to see a lady cry." He slowly raised his hand to her cheek and finished the gesture he'd started moments before—to wipe away the tear with his thumb, as gently as his other hand held her like an iron manacle. "I have no intention of doing anything to you. But if you try that again, I *will* tie you up for the rest of the night. Understand?"

Blinking hard to keep another tear from falling and giving him cause to touch her cheek again, she nodded silently.

"Good." He released her.

As Grace shoved away from him, her breath caught in her throat. A gaping gash in his right bicep bled a trickle of blood down his arm...But she hadn't hit him. Her eyes narrowed on him, now that she was standing close enough to notice not only the bleeding wound on his arm but the small cuts and bruises on his face that that his growth of beard and the black shadows inside the dark cottage had hidden before. Bruises dotted his arms and chest, and a hideous purplish black-and-blue spot on his right side marked a bruised rib, if he were lucky. More than likely a broken one. Dear God, the pain he must have been in...

She knew now that she didn't need the poker to defend herself. Even if he tried to attack her, she could drop him to his knees in agony with a poke of one finger into the bruise on his side. How he'd found the strength to hold her immobile only moments before she had no idea, or how he managed to keep standing upright on his feet even now.

"You're wounded," she whispered, surprised out of her fury and no longer frightened. "Your arm...it's bleeding."

He glanced down curiously at the wound, as if he'd forgotten it was there. Then he turned back to warm himself at the fire without comment.

Her lips parted as she stared at him, stunned. A cut that deep, the bruises and broken ribs—it wasn't the storm that had done that to him. *Good God*, what had he been through tonight? And who were those other men he said would lose their lives if he headed back out into the storm?

Who on earth was this man?

"Go dress," he said quietly into the fire. "I need your help, and you can't help me if you catch fever."

"I won't help you anyway," she whispered defiantly. "I might be stuck here with you, but I won't—"

He turned his head and pinned her beneath a look so black, so intense that she gasped. Her hand went to her throat.

"Go," he ordered, his low voice slithering down her spine. Then he turned back to the fire.

Her hand rose to her cheek, to cover the pink scar with her trembling fingers. Nodding, she backed away. Her heart raced at the desperation she now sensed in him, which made him more dangerous than she'd first realized.

"I'll trust you enough to remain here," he called after her as she slowly retreated toward her bedroom, not turning her back on him. "But keep the door open."

Grace froze in her steps. "You expect me to change in front of you?" She whispered, too startled to find her voice, "I'll do no such thing!"

"The door stays open." He glanced past her into the bedroom. "It's dark enough in there to keep you covered by the shadows." Then he looked at her, and his lips twisted grimly. "And I won't risk that you might keep another poker hidden beneath the mattress."

"You are not a gentleman," she breathed out, her hands pulling the coat tighter around herself. Her words were so soft that they were nearly lost beneath the rain pounding against the roof. "You are despicable."

She held her breath and stood her ground, waiting for him to unleash his fury on her for insulting him. It was what Vincent would have done. Just like her brother-in-law, would this stranger have enjoyed hurting her?

But instead of a cutting warning—or making good on his threat to tie her up—he forced a tight smile and turned back to mutter into the fire, "So much more than you know."

He was quickly lost in his own thoughts, but Grace knew he was still aware of her and every move she made. If she attempted to run, he would be on her before she reached the door.

Entering her bedroom, she hesitated in the doorway. Part of her contemplated defying him and closing the door anyway. Would serve him right! But a shiver down her spine told her not to press him. So far he'd kept true to his word and not attempted to hurt her, and the last thing she should do was provoke his anger. The night was half over now; by dawn the storm would be weakening, and then he'd be gone. She only had to wait him out until then.

Even knowing that, though, her fingers trembled as she shrugged out of the wet coat, then reached for her dress and undergarments in her dresser. The room was dark, and the shadows hid her from view, yet she took repeated glances over her shoulder to make certain he still kept his distance, still standing at the fireplace with his eyes focused on the fire.

After she'd changed into her dress and wrapped a shawl securely around her shoulders, she blew out a deep, silent breath of relief. Both at finally being warm and dry again and at being properly dressed. And that the stranger hadn't moved from where she'd left him, warming himself in front of the fire.

Her hands fumbled with putting up her damp hair as she emerged from the bedroom, with two of the hairpins between her lips. Grudgingly, she mumbled around the pins, "Thank you for not—"

He glanced up from the fire as she stepped from the shadows, and she halted in mid-step, her breath catching in her throat at the intensity of his stare as it trailed slowly over her. Not lasciviously, not predaciously—she'd expected that. Instead, he gazed at her in an assessing manner, a look filled with such deliberate aloofness that she couldn't help but see the arrogant reserve beneath, the cool detachment.

At that moment, she saw past the three days' growth of dark beard and his coarse workman's clothes, and the long-forgotten memory rushed back to her like a tidal wave. She placed him in her mind, as clearly as the moment she first saw him over ten years earlier at that crowded ball in London, and she shuddered.

Ross Carlisle, Viscount Mooreland, heir to the Earl of Spalding.

Dear God—so much worse than a stranger!