



CHAPTER ONE

*London, England
July 1817*

Lady Rowland.

Captain Nate Reed lifted the glass of cognac to his lips as he watched her from across the crowded club.

Her hand played delicately with a gold locket dangling around her neck as she placed her bet at the faro table. Dressed in the shimmering green satin of a low-cut gown and emerald jewels, whose bright color and cost announced to everyone who saw her that she was happily widowed, Sydney Rowland was certainly striking. Undeniably regal. Graceful. Beautiful.

And most likely a traitor.

Nate took a slow sip of brandy and narrowed his eyes on her. After two days of watching every move she made around London and trailing her from one soiree

to the next, he was still no closer to solving the mystery of her connection to Scepter's assassination attempt on the prime minister and prince regent, except that he knew for certain she was involved. What he didn't know was how deeply. Was the baroness one of the masterminds behind the group, or was she merely another pawn in their game?

Tonight, he planned on finding out.

Slowly, he made his way across the room toward her.

Barton's was filled with elegantly dressed ladies in furs and jewels, foppish men adorned just as ostentatiously, and the lot of them drinking far more than they could tolerate, smoking cigars, and flirting shamelessly. A few of them surrendered to the lure of the high-priced prostitutes lurking in the club and retired upstairs for an hour's worth of private amusement. Both gentlemen and ladies enjoyed themselves with all the pleasures offered by the club. It was one of the few places in London that welcomed women through its doors and at its gambling tables, where the uniformed attendants brought glasses of liquor to the ladies as well as the men, and where it was accepted that no one inside need fear for their reputation.

Barton's belonged to the underbelly of London society. It was an exclusive club whose name everyone in the *ton* knew but that no one would ever dare admit to having entered.

Nate was only here himself because of St James. Thanks to his half brother, Alexander Sinclair, Earl of St James, all Nate had to do to gain admittance was dress the part of a society

dandy. With the help of the earl's valet, he now wore exquisite evening clothes of black superfine and blue brocade, finished off with a diamond cravat pin that surely cost more than his captain's commission.

No more soldier. Tonight, he wore the borrowed uniform of a gentleman.

When he'd given St James's name to the doorman, the guard let him enter the club without a second glance. It had been that easy.

Getting close to Lady Rowland, however, was proving much harder.

Normally, she moved in exclusive social circles he couldn't infiltrate, so for the past few days he'd been forced to note from a distance every place she went and every person she spoke with. As a cavalry officer, he was used to reconnaissance, but he preferred rushing into the fray for a quick and decisive ending. His patience had worn thin from waiting. It was time to attack the enemy head-on, no matter that the enemy was draped in soft satin.

Nate approached the faro table, sat down on the chair next to the baroness, and tossed a coin to the dealer. He silently played out two hands, lost both, and slowly finished his cognac as he bided his time.

If Sarah could have seen him tonight, oh how she would have laughed! He was doing his best to fit in with a crowd of people who would never have given him the time of day, yet they'd all expected him to kill—and be killed, if necessary—fighting the French. Tonight, he was among them in an attempt to get closer to one of their own beautiful widows.

Well, perhaps his late wife wouldn't have laughed at *that*.

Sarah had always been a jealous woman although she'd never had any worries in that regard. He'd never betrayed her through the long stretches of separation forced upon them by the war. Not once. Not during the two years of their marriage, and not a day since it ended.

He pulled in a deep breath. He could never make right what happened to her and not being there when she needed him. But at last he had the opportunity to provide the best future possible for both their mothers with the reward money he'd earn for stopping Scepter.

The woman sitting next to him held the key.

Nate slid a slow, sideways glance in her direction. "Would you like another drink, my lady?"

Her bright green eyes blinked as she acknowledged him for the first time. "Pardon?"

"I asked if you'd like a drink." He signaled to the attendant. "I'm ordering one for myself, and in this crush, it might be a while before you can get another."

She hesitated, then conceded to his generosity. "Yes, thank you."

He held up a second finger and gestured at the baroness. The attendant nodded, then hurried behind the bar to pour their drinks.

Taking the opportunity to start a conversation, Nate murmured, "So you like to gamble?"

She returned her emerald gaze to the dealer and corrected, "I like to win."

"So do I."

A quick tension emanated from her as her fingers toyed with the gold locket dangling from a simple chain around her elegant neck, oddly mixed with a necklace of expensive emeralds. "Then I fear faro is not your game." Her eyes remained focused on the cards. "Perhaps you'd find more enjoyment playing at something else."

Had he not just spent the past hour watching her outright dismiss every attempt by a roomful of men to proposition her, Nate might have thought she was inviting flirtation. But he knew better. What she wanted was for him to leave. "My game is here."

"How unfortunate, then," she commented dryly. "I don't believe you'll end up winning tonight."

"Then I suppose I'll just have to find satisfaction elsewhere."

She froze, and her fingers stilled on her locket. Nate could see that she couldn't tell whether he was propositioning her or rebuffing her. Truthfully, he didn't know himself, although getting her attention was all that mattered, and he'd certainly done that.

Her red lips pursed with irritation. She tossed in a coin for the next hand and ignored him. "This is my first time at Barton's." He'd force the conversation onto her whether she liked it or not. "Do you often spend evenings here?"

She lifted her chin, and a stray tendril of sable hair tickled against the nape of her neck. "Occasionally."

"Then perhaps you can tell me—"

"No." With a tired sigh, she turned on her chair to face him and unwittingly gave him a full-on view of her low-cut neckline. "I am sorry, sir, but—"

"Captain Nate Reed," he interrupted with a forced introduction.

She caught her breath. "I am sorry, Captain," she began again, her words a well-practiced recitation, "but I am not interested in accompanying you upstairs this evening, nor returning with you to your home, nor even enjoying your company for a few minutes in one of the alcoves along the back hall. So if you don't mind—"

"Good."

She blinked at his unexpected refusal and repeated as if she hadn't heard correctly, "Good?"

"I'm a soldier, my lady, not a rake. I have no intention of inviting you upstairs tonight nor to my home on any night." He turned back to the dealer to signal for cards. "As for a few minutes alone in an alcove, I would never ask a lady to share her pleasures in such a demeaning place." He slid her a sideways glance. "And be assured that your enjoyment would be for much longer than a few minutes."

Her red lips parted delicately, stunned speechless.

He punctuated his refusal by tossing a coin to the attendant as the man set two drinks on the table in front of them. But even as Nate silently reached for his cognac, he could still feel her curious gaze on him, as if she didn't know what to make of him.

Good. That meant he'd captured her attention, and he'd done so by purposefully behaving exactly opposite every other man in the place who'd approached her.

Fighting Napoleon had taught him the value of taking an opponent by surprise. Tonight, he'd use that to his advantage, even if down deep he was truly no better than the other cads. Even now his cock tingled at the tempting thought of taking her to any place where they could be alone. Including into a cramped alcove.

He would never act on that temptation. He'd never once betrayed Sarah, and he had no intention of doing so tonight, especially with Sydney Rowland, a woman he couldn't trust as far as he could spit. But he was still a man, for God's sake, and he still felt the pull of a beautiful woman.

It had been a long time since he'd been in a woman's bed, that was all. Three years, two months, three weeks...

"My apologies, Captain Reed," she offered quietly. "I didn't mean to offend."

He tossed in a coin for the next round of cards—and another for her, to keep her in the game and in the chair beside him. He wasn't finished with her yet. "No offense taken."

"Usually, when a man sits next to me, he's not interested in playing cards. His intentions usually lie elsewhere." She grimaced as she dryly added, "In lying elsewhere."

Despite himself, he grinned at her clever turn of phrase. She was sharp. "I'm only interested in conversation, I assure you." He handed her the second glass of cognac. "Now, shall we begin again?"

She hesitated, then took a deep breath. "All right." She accepted the drink. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Captain Reed."

He inclined his head slightly. "Baroness Rowland."

"No."

His brow inched up at that. "No? Am I mistaken that—"

"I'm never addressed as 'baroness' but simply as 'lady,'" she corrected self-consciously, her

voice low so she wouldn't embarrass him. "Lady Rowland. I am not a peeress suo jure."

"A woman as regal and self-possessed as you? You should be." He boldly met her gaze. "Or perhaps the men of the aristocracy don't wish to be bested." He lifted his glass to her in a toast and purposely misstated, "Baroness."

Her lips smiled with a surprising touch of shyness at the rim of her glass. "Captain."

There. Introductions made, conversation begun. He let out the breath he'd been holding. That hadn't been so difficult...so why was his gut clenched in a knot?

Sydney Rowland was nothing more than a mission asset, after all, just another link in the chain he had to sever before Scepter could kill again. Tonight was simply questions and answers in a polite conversation...or in an interrogation session if she failed to cooperate willingly.

"You've never been here before?" she asked. Now that she knew he wasn't interested in ravishing her, she visibly relaxed into the conversation. Still turned toward him, she draped her arm along the back of her chair and smiled faintly. Her presence was as soft as her lilting voice against the boisterous club around them. "I thought everyone had been to Barton's."

With her full attention on him, she was even more beautiful now than only a few moments ago. Nate realized like a punch why Scepter had chosen her as their liaison for mathematician Henry Everett. A besotted schoolmaster who desperately wanted to be included in society's ranks would never have stood a chance against the baroness's beauty and charms.

But she'd have no such effect on him, no matter that he wondered if her lips tasted like brandy.

He cleared his throat. "A friend recommended this place. Perhaps you know him." He watched her over the rim of his glass as he raised it toward his mouth. "Henry Everett."

Her eyes flashed wide, startled. Yet within a heartbeat, she'd skillfully recovered.

She turned back toward the table. "I've met his sister, Olivia, on a few occasions. She's a wonderful woman, very dedicated to reform." She expertly maneuvered the conversation away from Henry Everett. "We're both interested in children's charities and so had a natural connection. I'm certain I've met her brother, but only in passing."

If she wasn't working for Scepter, Nate mused, then her talents were being greatly wasted. The Home Office could use someone like her, *if* she didn't turn them all double agents first.

Her hand returned to the locket at her neck. "They run a school in Westminster, I believe."

"They used to."

"Oh?" This time, she'd been prepared for his peculiar correction, and there was no widening of eyes, no catching of breath. Nothing except a heartbeat's hesitation. But he noticed.

Of course he noticed. How could any living man not notice every move this woman made, no matter how small?

"Haven't you heard?" He forced himself not to stare at her red lips. "It burned down a few days ago."

Her hand began to tremble. "Burned down?"

"Henry Everett died in the fire."

The glass slipped from her fingers.

He darted out his hand and caught it but not before the brandy splashed onto her skirt. He set the drink down, but her outstretched fingers remained empty in the air as she stared at him. A stricken expression blanched her face.

Slowly, she lowered her hand and brushed futilely with shaking fingers at the liquor as it seeped into her gown. All of her trembled as harshly as her hands, and she didn't lift her gaze from the stain. "I-I didn't know," she stammered. "I hadn't heard..."

From her stunned reaction, she was telling the truth. For once.

Nate narrowed his eyes on her. Was there more between Henry Everett and Sydney Rowland than he knew? Henry Everett had denied they were lovers when Clayton questioned him after the fire, yet her shock at hearing the news of his death was not the reaction of a passing acquaintance.

Nate knew grief—and guilt—and both flashed across her pale face.

“I’m...so very sorry to hear that.” Her voice emerged so softly from her lips that it was almost lost beneath the noise of the club. “I’ll have to...send my condolences and...”

Unable to finish, she pressed the back of her hand against her mouth.

Regret pierced him. She was truly distraught. Not even a Covent Garden actress could pretend such distress. But she could never learn the truth—that Henry Everett was alive and on his way to exile in exchange for information about Scepter, that the Home Office faked his death and left another charred body in the school’s ruins to take his place. The well-orchestrated ruse meant a few days of grief for the baroness, but the lives of countless others would be saved.

Still, Nate knew the shattering pain of losing a lover, and if she truly hadn’t known about Everett until that moment...*Christ*.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured sincerely and low enough that no one around them could overhear. “To lose someone you loved that way—”

Her head snapped up, and her glistening eyes flared in the lamplight.

“You are mistaken, Captain. Mr. Everett was nothing more to me than a passing acquaintance. I am grieving for his sister, that is all.” She paused, and her hands rested lightly against the table to steady herself as she took a deep breath and began to rise from her chair. “If you’ll excuse me, I must see to my dress.”

“Stay.” He put his hand over her wrist and stopped her, forcing her to remain unless she wanted to cause a scene and draw the attention of everyone in the room.

Stiffly, she eased down onto her seat. “Release me this—”

“Only an acquaintance?”

“Yes.”

“Then why did you give him money?” He forced a pleasant smile for anyone who might have been watching them. He wanted to appear to be nothing more than another in the long line of men determined to persuade her to visit his bed tonight.

Everyone would believe it, too, from the way she glared at him. “I did no such thing.”

“A great deal of money, in fact. You bought up his gambling debts. Twelve hundred pounds in all.”

She stared down at her hand, which now trembled beneath his, not with anger but fear. Years of watching soldiers march into battle had taught him the difference. But who was she afraid of—him...or Scepter?

“Let go of me, or I’ll scream.”

“No, you won’t.” He coolly dismissed her weak threat. “Everett brought attention to himself, and look how that ended. You’re far too smart to do the same.”

The tops of her breasts rose and fell rapidly over her low neckline as her breath came shallow and quick. She looked up at him in a heated mixture of fear and fury that left no doubt she’d scratch his eyes out if given half a chance.

“You bought up his debts, then asked for immediate repayment even though you knew he couldn’t pay. Not a poor schoolmaster.” When Nate was convinced she wouldn’t flee or cause a scene—or attack him—he slowly released her wrist and leaned back in his chair. His eyes pinned her. “Why?”

She pulled her hand out of his reach, then rubbed at her wrist as if his touch had scalded her. “Who told you that?”

“I have my sources.” He had no intention of telling her that those sources came from within her own household or that she should pay her groom a larger salary in order to ensure his loyalty. “You’re wealthy already. Why bother with a few hundred pounds from an indebted mathematician?”

Her stormy eyes gleamed as she tried to see through the carefully controlled expression he wore like a mask. “You’re not one of the messengers, then?”

“What messengers?”

She started to reply, then snapped her mouth shut. Whatever she was about to say vanished.

Nate turned cold. She knew far more than he and St James suspected.

Without warning, she shot to her feet before he could stop her.

Damnation. His gaze darted to the mountain-sized men standing at the sides of the room who provided security for the club. He'd be tossed into the street on his arse if he made a grab for her now, and all the ground he'd gained tonight would be lost.

"You're not leaving this club," he warned as he rose to his feet, as if he were truly a gentleman instead of the soldier set on arresting her.

She sniffed haughtily. "You spilt brandy on my dress."

He'd done no such thing, although he strongly suspected *she* would have tossed her drink directly into his face if she didn't have to brush past him to reach it.

"I have no intention of leaving before I'm ready," she informed him coldly, then snatched up her reticule from the table. "But even you, Captain, must be enough of a gentleman not to prevent a lady from visiting the retiring room to clean up a spill."

He bit back a curse. She'd cornered him. By standing, she'd shown the front of her dress to the crowd. Anyone watching would think it peculiar if she remained at the table instead of attending to the stain, and she would draw the type of curiosity neither of them wanted.

He had no choice but to let her go.

For now.

"Very well," he conceded. She may think she'd won, but the battle had just begun. "When you return, we'll continue our conversation."

"Right where we left off?" Her brow rose in mocking challenge. "With you accusing me of extorting money from Henry Everett?"

Oh, this woman was a handful! If she and Everett had truly been lovers, Nate suspected, she would have devoured the scrawny schoolmaster in a single gulp.

"If you'll excuse me, Captain."

She slid past him as she stepped away from the crowded table. The side of her breast brushed against his arm and shot heat straight down to his groin.

He sucked in a mouthful of air through clenched teeth.

With a sashay of her hips, she slipped her way through the crowded club, not toward the retiring room in the rear but straight toward its front doors. By the time she reached the steps, she was running.

Nate blew out a frustrated curse. *Stubborn woman.* Why did she have to make this so damned difficult?

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