



“Harrington’s alluring characters and their mysterious pasts easily draw readers into the narrative, while the looming threat of Scepter keeps the pages flying. This may be Harrington’s best yet.”

-- *Publishers Weekly*, STARRED Review

PROLOGUE

*The Armory, London
June 1817*

“Thank you both for joining me.” Clayton Elliot, undersecretary for the Home Office, stood in the center of the Armory’s main octagonal room and nodded grimly at the two men with him.

He’d called this predawn meeting here because he wanted to ensure the secrecy of what he intended to reveal to them. No one would be able to eavesdrop

through the thick stone walls where iron doors and twin portcullises guarded the only way in and out. He no longer trusted anyone who worked for the Home Office, Bow Street, Whitehall, Parliament...*anyone*.

Well, anyone except for the men of the Armory.

Even the two men standing with him hadn’t been told the reason they’d been found and brought here with less than an hour’s notice. But these two men would guard themselves. Their dislike of each other would ensure it.

That was why he’d picked them. Alexander Sinclair and Nathaniel Reed, the Earl of St James and a captain in the Horse Guards...the rightful heir and his bastard half brother. The two men would monitor each other closely to make certain the other did his part, and the blood--born rivalry between them would ensure they put forth only their fiercest effort so neither man would be seen as lesser than his half brother.

Just as Clayton was certain that neither man would have shown up if he’d known the other would be here.

“Damned early for a social call, don’t you think?” St James bit out, not bothering to hide his irritation. “What’s this about?”

Alexander Sinclair hadn’t yet been to bed, and his evening clothes still stank of cigar smoke, cheap port, and cheaper women from the King Street gambling hell where he’d been retrieved. He’d been raised to be an earl, with all the privileges that rank and wealth provided, yet he disdained English society and did his best to remain outside it. But Clayton had served with him on the Continent and knew how deeply his patriotism ran, how finely honed his fighting skills. Someone more devoted to crown and country would be hard to find.

Unless it was the man standing beside him.

The hero of the Battle of Toulouse, Nate Reed was currently a captain in the Horse Guards, although Clayton was certain he'd receive many more promotions in the years to come. As tall and broad as his older half brother, Reed possessed a haunted look that had been present as long as Clayton had known him. He was here because he was a good soldier who followed orders.

Reed and St James would work well together. *If* they didn't kill each other first.

"England needs your help," Clayton told them solemnly. "Per special request from the Home Secretary himself."

The two men exchanged puzzled glances. Clayton didn't blame them. Lord Sidmouth, Secretary of the Home Office, had half the government at his disposal to call on for help. He didn't need them.

Until now.

"As you know," Clayton continued, "two days ago, an explosion tore through the Admiralty Club."

Neither man registered a reaction, although both had certainly heard the news about the explosion that killed Viscount Waverly and injured dozens more. All of London had been talking about it.

"The new gas lighting they'd put in." St James offered the gossip that had sped through all the gentleman's clubs and Westminster in the past forty--eight hours. "The lines hadn't been properly bled, fumes had built up. When a footman lit a sconce, he sent the place up."

Clayton leveled a solemn look on the earl. "That's the story that Sidmouth wants everyone to believe."

Nate Reed frowned. "And the truth?"

"The explosion was intentional." Clayton blew out a hard breath at the memory of the carnage. He'd been among the first to arrive at the Admiralty and spent the next three hours digging bodies out of the rubble. Thank God only one man had been killed. "Explosives were set off deliberately in an attempt to assassinate the prime minister."

"Good God," Reed muttered.

"Fortunately, Lord Liverpool had been delayed." Only by sheer luck. An apple cart had overturned in the Mall and stopped traffic. Liverpool had been stepping down from his carriage in front of the club when the explosives detonated. "We believe another attack will be planned unless we stop it. One that might very well succeed."

St James cursed softly beneath his breath. Liverpool was close friends with the Sinclair family. "Who did this?"

Clayton crossed his arms, leaned back against the arm of a leather sofa, and said gravely, "All evidence points to Scepter."

The criminal organization had pledged itself to overthrowing the monarchy. It had wrapped its tentacles around men at all levels of society and in the government, blackmailing and murdering anyone who stood in its way, including the men of the Armory and their families.

And what better way to start a revolution than by assassinating the prime minister?

During the past six months, Scepter had placed into government positions more than enough of their own men and those they could control through blackmail to easily replace Liverpool with one of their own and with resounding cries of support throughout the empire...enough support to turn even more public opinion against the mad king and his debauched sons, seize power, and end the monarchy. A second Glorious Revolution. Who would be able to stop them? As the recent riots had proven, the regent lacked the strength and spine to put down a rebellion of any substantial size. It was up to the men of the Armory to save him.

A new leading minister who had the backing of the military, a large portion of the government, and a significant number of reformist Englishmen could far too easily come sweeping into power. For God's sake, Oliver Cromwell had certainly proved the possibility of

doing just that. Now, with revolutions that were replacing monarchs with elected governments spreading across the world, the average Englishman would simply think the time for change had come.

But Scepter would never give true voice to the people. They'd seize power just as tyrannically as Napoleon, slide their own corrupt dictator into place, and change the election laws to make certain he remained in power.

Yet in the last year since the Armory's group of former soldiers had pledged to find Scepter's leaders and arrest them, they were still no closer to their goal.

But now, it seemed Scepter had finally made a mistake.

"Sidmouth put me in charge of the investigation," Clayton told Reed and St James. "It led me to an inn where the men responsible for the explosion had been meeting, but they'd already tossed all their documents into the fireplace and fled by the time I arrived." His mouth twisted. "I believe they were warned of my arrival."

"Then you have a mole in the Home Office," St James drawled.

Clayton confirmed that with a curt nod. "Which is why I've called upon you two. This investigation needs to remain secret. Only the three of us and Lord Sidmouth know about it. No one else inside the Home Office, Bow Street, or any of the offices in Whitehall are aware of this meeting." He paused to make certain they understood the importance of their mission. "Not even General Braddock and the other men of the Armory have been told. Nor will they be. Not by me. Not by you."

The two men exchanged assessing looks, but neither was willing to refuse the mission in front of the other, just as Clayton had hoped.

He straightened to his full height and announced, "By authorization of Lord Sidmouth, Secretary of the Home Office, you have been charged with stopping the men responsible for the bombing by any means necessary." He paused before adding, "And with complete legal immunity."

Reed and St James stilled. Both pairs of identical hazel eyes turned somber with understanding. They had just been sanctioned to commit murder if necessary.

"But how do we find them?" Reed asked. "You said that all the evidence had been destroyed."

"Except this." Clayton reached into his jacket's inside breast pocket. "I found this buried in the ashes of the inn's fireplace. No one at the Home Office knows it exists, not even Sidmouth."

He held up a tiny scrap of paper. Its edges had been burned black from the fire, but enough of it remained legible to identify it as a building plan. It was filled with mathematical symbols and calculations along with a single scribbled name—*Everett*.

Clayton handed it to St James. "You start with this."



CHAPTER ONE

Olivia Everett stared at the three men coming toward her and Mrs. Adams in the dark alley and choked back a useless scream. No one lingered near enough to hear, and even if anyone did, they wouldn't come to her rescue. Not here. Not at this time of night. And certainly not in a part of London where screams were as common as rats.

"Get behind me," she whispered to Mrs. Adams and slid herself between the men and the woman who served as the Everett School's housekeeper. The older woman had insisted on accompanying Olivia when she found her trying to sneak out just after midnight to look for her brother. Olivia had tried to talk her out of it, and now—oh, how she regretted not trying harder!

Their hired hackney waited two streets over. The rig had been unable to navigate the final hundred yards up the dark narrow alley to her brother's last known location before he disappeared two days ago. If they could slip past the men who leered at them with toothless smiles as they came closer, they might have a chance of escape. Olivia inhaled a deep breath for courage. If she could only get Mrs. Adams to safety—

She pulled the kitchen knife from her skirt pocket and shoved Mrs. Adams away. "Run!" Mrs. Adams shot off down the dark alley.

Olivia remained to fight and give the housekeeper time to flee. She slashed the knife back and forth in front of her in warning.

The three men laughed. Helplessness rose sickeningly like bile into her throat. "Stay away from her!"

A man dropped into the alley from an overhanging roof and landed on the balls of his feet as gracefully as a panther. Dressed in all black, he'd covered the upper half of his face behind a black silk mask that revealed only the cold gaze of his eyes and a jaw clenched in anger. In his right hand, a blade the size of a bayonet glinted in the dim moonlight.

The three attackers hesitated, as startled at his sudden appearance as Olivia. Then their expressions hardened, and they charged.

The masked man slashed his sword. The blade caught one of the men in the forearm, and the sharp steel sliced through coat sleeve, shirt, and flesh beneath with a sickening slide. Howling in pain, the attacker fell back. Another man clenched his fists and swung.

The masked man ducked. A fist sailed harmlessly over his head.

"Go!" he shouted at Olivia as he lunged forward and thrust his blade.

But Olivia was glued in place from terror, unable to tear her eyes away from the fight. Fear strangled in her throat and sent her heart pounding wildly. With one hand gripping the handle of the knife at her side, she pressed herself against the stone wall and watched as the masked stranger expertly dodged the threatening blows.

His blade flashed as it swung low and struck the second attacker's thigh. The man screamed and fell hard to the cobblestones, then crawled away toward the street and escape. A trail of blood colored the stones in his wake.

The masked stranger stepped back to ready himself for a new charge from the remaining attacker. The brute swung, and a lucky fist landed against the side of his masked face. The hard blow snapped back his head and sent him reeling.

But as the masked man staggered back, he dropped onto his rear foot, spun in a circle, and slashed the short sword in a fierce arc. The tip of the blade sliced through the attacker's jacket and into his waistcoat beneath, but the carefully controlled thrust stopped a hairsbreadth from touching flesh.

The brute froze and paled instantly. His only movement was a jerking, terrified breath and a wet spot that formed at his crotch. He turned and ran.

The masked man's shoulders sagged from the exertion of the fight. His arm dropped to his side, and his broad chest rose and fell beneath his black tunic with each heavy pant as he

labored to catch his breath.

When he finally turned to face her, his eyes gleamed like the devil's own.

Olivia's breath strangled in her throat. He'd saved her from the attackers. But who was going to save her from *him*?

Terrified, she ran.

He caught her before she reached the end of the alley. He grabbed her around the waist, swung her off her feet in a circle, and pushed her back against the stone wall. He shifted forward to trap her between his large body and the building as he quickly sheathed his blade in the thin scabbard at his waist.

With a cry, she shoved at him. *Useless!* All her strength wasn't enough to move him back, not even enough to make him sway off--balance.

"I've got a knife," she warned as fiercely as possible despite her shaking knees. "I *will* use it!"

He laughed at her. The deep sound only angered her more.

Olivia raised the knife over her head. The blade was poised ready to slash downward if he reached for her, if he dared to touch her. Closing her eyes, she steeled herself for the sickening puncture of flesh--

He clasped her wrist and pinned her arm to the wall above her head. She gasped. God help her, she couldn't move!

But the blasted devil only grinned, as if he found her threat to stab him simply adorable.

"Never strike with a knife from overhead," he instructed in a rough whisper that Olivia instinctively knew was meant to disguise his voice, just as the mask hid his face. Yet the deep sound trickled through her like a warm summer rain. "You're a petite and slender woman...delicate and fine--boned."

She swallowed. Hard. He certainly didn't mean that as flattery, yet the words fell from his sensuous lips so easily, so smoothly, that a corresponding pull triggered low in her belly. Oh, this man was dangerous! In so many ways...

"You're not strong enough to score more than a glancing blow, and you'll put yourself off--balance. Always strike low instead. Like this." He lowered her arm and positioned the knife between them until the tip of the blade pointed at his stomach. "Let the attacker use his own force against himself. Let him run into the knife."

Her chest squeezed as his hand covered hers on the handle and kept the knife positioned low between their bodies. He turned her hand slowly back and forth to show her how to work it.

"Do you feel that?" he murmured. "How smooth and steady to stroke the blade?" His mouth was so close to hers that his breath tickled warmly against her lips, even as hers came fast and shallow. "As soon as you feel the tip puncture the skin, twist the blade and slash hard."

His velvety smooth voice contradicted the violence of his instructions, as did the smooth way he continued to work his hand over hers at the handle. The gesture was indecent...and thrillingly irresistible.

"Cause as much damage as possible, and keep causing damage until you're certain the bastard is unable to hurt you." His gaze dropped to her mouth, and she caught her breath, suspecting for a heartbeat that he wanted to kiss her. "Then, when you have him down, kick him."

Her head swam. Was he giving her a lesson on fighting or attempting to seduce her? With the way his hand continued to stroke suggestively over hers on the knife handle, for the life of her she couldn't have said which.

"And if you're going to bother bringing a knife with you"--he wrenched it from her hand and held it up in front of her with a sarcastic twitch of his lips--"make it a real knife. Not something you'd use to carve a roast chicken."

He dropped it. It clanged against the stones at their feet.

"Who are you?" she whispered hoarsely, too unsettled to find her voice to speak properly.

"I should ask the same of you." He straightened away from her yet didn't step back far

enough that she could escape, and the amused gleam vanished from his eyes. Apparently, the time for play—and fighting lessons—was over. “And why are you in a dark city alley where you don’t belong?”

Her lips pressed tightly together. She had no intention of telling him anything. He might have saved her life tonight, but he was just as dangerous as the men he’d chased away. Worse—the men who’d attacked her hadn’t worn masks.

What was he hiding? Was he connected to Henry’s disappearance?

“After all, you’re a long way from Vine Street in Westminster, Miss Everett.”

The ground dropped away beneath her, and she grabbed at the wall behind her to keep from falling away. How did he know...? “*What did you say?*”

“What brought you out of the safety of your bed tonight and led you here?” His gloved fingers stole a caress across her cheek, but his touch wasn’t at all flirtatious. It was a subtle warning. “You should have stayed in your schoolroom where you belong.”

His first comment had surprised her. *This one* angered her, and she shot back, “Obviously, I wanted to carve a chicken.”

His mouth twisted at her impudence. He lowered his face until it was even with hers and placed both palms flat against the wall on either side of her shoulders.

“Where is Henry Everett?” he demanded. “Where has your brother gone?”

An electric jolt slammed through her that stripped away her breath. “How do you— -Who *are* you?” A deafening rush of blood pounded in her ears with every terrified heartbeat. *No one* but she and Mrs. Adams knew her brother was missing. Not even the other school employees or the students. “What do you know about Henry?”

The hard set of his face told her he wouldn’t answer. “Where is—”

A clamor went up in the darkness. Shouts and the sound of racing hoofbeats striking over the cobblestones reverberated off the stone walls until the noise seemed to come from everywhere at once.

The man turned away from her as a rider on horseback charged into the alley toward them.

Olivia shoved him. She caught him off-balance, and when he staggered back, she darted away, hitched up her skirts, and ran as fast as she could toward the far end of the alley and the safety of the darkness beyond.

* * * * *

“Damnation!” Alec Sinclair ripped his mask off as Nate Reed rode toward him.

Two days of nonstop searching—*ruined*. The name on the charred slip of building plans had led them to Westminster, to a man named Henry Everett, who was a schoolteacher and mathematician vying for fellowship in the Royal Society. But Everett had gone missing. So the two men had split up. Reed was tracking down Everett’s last known movements, and Alec had taken watch over Everett’s sister. But for both to collide here—

Fate must have been laughing.

“You have lousy timing,” Alec muttered.

“I saved your aristocratic arse,” Reed shot back. “Those men had grabbed up clubs and were headed back this way.”

Alec grimaced. The last thing he wanted was to be in Reed’s debt. “You also chased away the sister.”

Alec glanced toward where the alley emptied into the street to the south and where Olivia Everett had fled into the darkness. God only knew where she’d gone in the rabbit warren of

streets and alleys that formed this part of the City.

Reed's black horse pranced anxiously in a circle. The beast was as eager as his master to give chase. "I'll go after her."

"No." She was already frightened from being attacked--and from Alec's botched rescue. Even if Reed caught her, she was in no state to offer up the kind of information about her brother they needed to drive their mission forward.

Yet.

But he would gain that information from her, no matter what he had to do.

He crumpled the mask in his fist. "Olivia Everett is mine."

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