



*Enjoy this sneak peek of
AN UNEXPECTED EARL!*

CHAPTER ONE

London

Early August, 1816

That dress was pure sin.

Brandon Pearce, Earl of Sandhurst, raked his gaze over the woman standing on the other side of Lord Torrington's smoke-filled ballroom. No matter that her back was to him, she was still delicious to drink in. Red satin shimmered like brimstone as it draped over her curves, cinched tightly enough at the waist to highlight her full hips and cut low enough in the back to expose a delectable stretch of flesh that was rivaled by her bare shoulders. Only a hint of gauzy straps dropping over her upper arms gave assurance that the dress wouldn't fall down at any moment of its own wanton volition and reveal every inch of soft flesh beneath.

"Wouldn't that be a damn shame if it did?" Pearce mumbled against his glass as he lifted it to his lips.

Sweet Lucifer, he wished she'd turn around so he could confirm that the front of her was just as much a creation of the devil as the back.

Her face would be hidden, of course. This was one of Torrington's infamous masquerades, which meant that all the gentlemen in attendance wore the most expensive finery Bond Street could offer and all the women wore masks. As Torrington had told him when he arrived, "Makes the competition all the more interesting."

Apparently, that's what tonight was about. Gentlemen behaving badly. Anything which encouraged their debauched behavior was welcome. Including masked women.

And *this* masked woman had transformed his otherwise boring evening into something interesting.

After all, he was attending the party only to gain more information about Scepter. Certainly not for the entertainment. Although he'd have to admit that it was certainly not the usual society fare. He slid his gaze across the ballroom to watch a pair of half-naked female acrobats grab each other by the ankles and roll head over heels across the room, while no one else seemed to notice except for a violinist whose bow paused straight up in the air when they went rolling past.

Marking the approaching end to Parliament's session, Torrington's annual party was the most anticipated event of season's end. All of London's most influential, powerful, and wealthiest men clamored to attend... Well, all the influential, powerful, and wealthy men who wanted to spend the evening at what amounted to little more than a drunken orgy with some gambling tossed in.

Which was how Pearce secured an invitation. As a new earl, he ranked high enough socially to gain Torrington's notice, and because he was a former brigadier, Torrington was certain he shared the same crude tastes in entertainment.

Torrington was wrong. Tonight, Pearce was here as bait.

Of all the gentlemen at the Armory, he was the only one whom Scepter might approach to bring into their fold. So he had to make himself visible at events like this where he was certain their members would be in attendance.

He watched the acrobats roll back across the floor and blew out a hard breath. Even if events like this irritated the hell out of him.

Marcus Braddock, Duke of Hampton and former general, had gathered together the men who had served with him on the Continent to stop the criminal organization. The men worked out of a renovated armory north of the City, but the old building had also become a sanctuary, a place where they could go when they needed to be around men like themselves—all former soldiers struggling to adapt to postwar life. For some of them, fighting Boney had been easier. Only joining together to stop Scepter had given them a path forward.

What they'd discovered was that Scepter functioned like an octopus, with tentacles reaching from London's underworld to men at the highest ranks of the aristocracy and into all kinds of criminal activity. Including, most recently, what appeared to be the assassination of several government officials, all made to resemble accidents or suicide. Sir Alfred Wembley, War Office Paymaster, who stepped in front of a speeding carriage. Mr. John Smithson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, who drowned by falling drunkenly into the River Avon. Lord Maryworth, Master of the Mint, who shot himself with his own dueling pistol. And Sir Malcolm Donnelly, who died from falling off his horse...and who made the men of the Armory realize that the deaths were more than they seemed. Because Donnelly had never been astride a horse in his entire city-dwelling life.

Twelve deaths of prominent officials, twelve deaths now considered murder. All gentlemen of various backgrounds and positions, with no connection to each other except that they'd held government appointments. And that they'd all been quickly replaced in their positions, sometimes within a fortnight of the funeral. Pearce would have bet every penny of his newly acquired fortune that Scepter was responsible.

After all, the organization was already amassing great power and murdering those it needed to silence. Wholesale slaughter of government officials to further their agenda was absolutely possible.

But no one knew Scepter's endgame or the men behind it.

Pearce frowned as he glanced around the party. At this rate, nothing new would be forthcoming tonight either. Certainly not from the gentlemen gathered here, who were all foxed out of their minds or well on their way to it, losing great sums of money in the card room and doing their best to wiggle their hands beneath the skirts of every woman in the place.

He'd been ready to leave and call it a night. But then he'd seen that flash of red and stopped in his tracks.

"Who the devil are you?" he murmured.

The longer he stared at her, the more convinced he was that he needed to introduce himself and do the gentlemanly thing of offering to help her out of her dress at the end of the evening. With his teeth.

Even from across the room, he could see she wasn't like the other women in attendance tonight. Those women treated sex like a commodity, to be bought or sold to fit their needs. They

were courtesans auditioning new protectors for the long term, less skilled light-skirts chasing the monthly rent in exchange for a few hours of bed sport, and society wives and widows escaping their normally boring lives with an evening's adventure. All safely hidden behind the anonymity of masks.

But the lady in red didn't seem to be here for any of that. Even when talking to the men, she kept herself apart in a way the other women didn't. She didn't lean in when they spoke to her; she leaned away. She didn't tap them flirtatiously with her fan; she held it between them like a shield. And she didn't view the other women as competition, giving no territorial signs toward any of them. No, she was distant. Cool. Wary. She didn't belong here, despite that dress.

Sinful *and* a mystery. And becoming more interesting with every passing moment.

Apparently, though, not just to him. His eyes narrowed on the Earl of Derby as the man ignored the dismissive way she turned away from his advance, slipped his arm around her waist, and yanked her back against him.

Immediately, she smacked the earl on top of his head with her fan, hard enough that the ivory guard bounced against his skull.

Pearce choked on his drink.

Good Lord, he'd never seen *that* before at one of these parties. Neither had Lord Derby, based on his stunned expression and the bruise undoubtedly forming on his crown.

Yet the little minx had the nerve to feign surprise at what she'd done, followed by a mumbled apology even as she attempted to sashay away.

But the earl pursued. This time, when he grabbed her fully into his arms, she gave him a hard push that sent him rocking onto his heels. Derby only laughed, still determined to find his way beneath her skirts, and grabbed her once more into his arms, this time too tightly for her to fight her way free.

Pearce's grin melted into a grimace. He snagged a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing footman and sauntered forward. That red flash of temptation not only beckoned but now also needed to be rescued.

"Scarlet," he called out. "There you are!"

Derby looked up, startled.

Seizing on the distraction, the woman shoved her way out of Derby's arms. She wheeled around to face Pearce.

At the sight of him, her green eyes flared from behind the mask that covered everything except for her sensuous lips, and she froze like a doe startled by hunters. But then, so did he...except for his gaze, which dropped deliberately over her from head to slippers.

Sweet Lucifer. The back of her might have been pure sin, but the front was simply soul-stealing.

Her hair cascaded over one shoulder in a riot of golden curls that teased seductively at the swell of her breasts, visible above the low-cut neckline of her tight bodice. But for all that the shimmering satin of her dress captivated him and those silky tresses had him longing to brush his hands through them, what struck him was the gold locket she wore around her neck on a little blue ribbon. The schoolgirl innocence of that single piece of jewelry undercut the sinfulness of the red gown in startling contradiction.

More. The sight of the locket jarred something inside him, knocking loose from the past a memory he couldn't quite place yet one so familiar that it begged to be remembered... Damnation, did he know her?

He sent her a far too intimate smile. "I leave you alone for two minutes and you slip away, sending me on a merry chase to find you."

Her brilliant eyes grew wider, but wisely, she said nothing.

"Shame on you." He winked at her. *Trust me...* Then he glanced past her to Derby, the man

standing so close to her side that surely he could see right down her dress to her navel. His smile tightened. “Ah, you’ve been making friends.”

“Pearce,” Derby bit out with his own forced smile. Like half the peers in the Lords, he refused to acknowledge that Pearce was now one of them by not using his title.

The man probably considered the slight an insult. Pearce considered it a compliment.

“Derby.” Pearce stepped forward and took the woman’s arm to gently but possessively move her safely away from the earl and to his side. “I see you’ve met my Scarlet.”

“Yes.” Derby’s mouth twisted. “I didn’t realize that you’d already claimed her.”

“*Claimed?*” Pearce clucked his tongue in chastisement, then lifted her hand to kiss the backs of her gloved fingers. “Can any man truly claim a woman like this?” He saw her arch a brow above her mask at that blatant whopper of a flirtation. “God knows I’m not man enough for her.”

At that, her other hand flew up to her lips to stifle a shocked gasp. Or a laugh. With this bold woman, it could have been either.

“Something in your throat, my dear? Here.” He held out the glass. “The champagne you requested.”

Her eyes sparkled as effervescently as the bubbles in the wine. “How thoughtful,” she mumbled as she accepted it, playing along.

“Anything for you, darling.”

Her mouth fell open. She covered her surprise at his audacity by quickly raising the glass to her lips.

Biting back a grin at her expense and unable to resist, he leaned over to place a kiss to her ear. She trembled but didn’t fling the champagne in his face. *Good.* He’d take his victories however he could get them.

He wrapped her arm around his. “Shall we dance?” Not giving her the chance to refuse, he led her toward the dance floor and tossed dismissively over his shoulder, “Goodbye, Derby.”

The earl said nothing. But as he turned and stomped away, Pearce was certain the man was cursing him, his ancestry, and every stray French bullet that had somehow managed to miss killing him during the wars.

The woman began to slip her arm away.

“Not so fast.” He placed his hand over hers to keep it on his jacket sleeve. “I helped you. It’s only fair that you now help me.”

She stiffened with wariness. “How?”

“Help me put a positive end to a very boring evening by dancing with me. That’s all.” When that didn’t seem to mollify her, he gestured toward the dance floor. “It’s for your own benefit.”

“That’s a novel approach for a lord to meet a woman,” she drawled, her voice so low and throaty that he suspected she was purposefully attempting to disguise it. But she couldn’t hide the sardonic laughter that colored it.

He crooked a grin. “I’m not an average lord.” When she began to give him the cut that bit of arrogance deserved, he interrupted. “Everyone will see us together, so you can tell every other unwanted man who comes too close that you belong to me for the evening.” His gaze fixed on hers. Sweet Jesus, a man could happily drown in those emerald pools...ones that seemed so oddly familiar. “They won’t dare touch you then.”

“You’re awfully sure of yourself.”

When it came to making men fear him... “I am.”

She hesitated at his offer—one dance for the opportunity to be left alone for the rest of the evening. He felt like the devil himself bargaining for her soul.

She must have realized it, too, because when she glanced toward the dance floor, she murmured in a voice that was little more than a purr, “I don’t think what they’re doing is dancing.”

He followed her gaze. Couples who hadn’t yet left to find more private spaces where they

could be alone danced across the floor. But this wasn't a London society ball. Instead of bouncing through quadrilles or reels, these couples completely ignored the music to move to their own wanton rhythms. They touched fully along their fronts from hips to shoulders, with the women clasping glasses of brandy and port in their hands and the men clasping breasts and buttocks in theirs.

"No, indeed," he agreed. But for some reason he couldn't name, he wanted a dance with her. He wanted the chance to have her in his arms if only for a few minutes, to find out who she was beneath that mask and why she was here...and why he felt increasingly certain he knew her. "But the musicians won't mind playing for a couple who want an old-fashioned waltz."

"An *old-fashioned* waltz?" she asked, her voice breathless with irony. "Is there even such a thing?"

He called out to the lead musician and tossed the man a coin. "There is now." When the first flourishes of a waltz went up, he held out his hand with a formal bow. "Lady Scarlet, our dance." He arched a brow. "I promise to keep my hands where you can see them at all times."

An ironic smile tugged at her lips. "With a request like that, how could a lady refuse?"

Pearce took her into position and twirled her into the waltz, making certain to maintain a proper distance as he led her through the steps.

She followed lightly in his arms, just as he'd suspected she would. Refined and polished to the bone, she gracefully placed every step, including the perfectly positioned tilt of her head that showcased her elegant neck. Just another reason he knew she didn't belong here tonight. She was far too good at waltzing to be someone who made her living on her back, and she lacked the hard-edged bitterness that marked the society ladies.

So who the devil was she? And why couldn't he shake the suspicion that he knew her?

He led her into a half turn. "Now that I've rescued you from Derby, tell me... What's your name?"

She stared at him in surprise, as if he should know her. And damnation, if he didn't feel the same. "Apparently, it's Lady Scarlet."

He turned in the opposite direction, hoping to catch her off-balance. "Your real name."

She hesitated, then dodged. "You first."

"Pearce."

She sized him up with a sliding glance in his direction. "Just Pearce?"

"Just Lady Scarlet?"

"Yes." The determined sound of that told him she'd obstinately cling to her defenses even as she teased, "But my friends call me Red."

He laughed, a warmth stirring inside him. He wasn't making any headway in solving her mystery, but heavens, she was amusing.

"And what do your friends call you?"

"Brigadier."

She missed a step and stumbled, but he caught her, solidly righting her again.

Her eyes darted to his. She repeated in an incredulous whisper, "Brigadier?"

He *knew* her. He was certain of it now. But from where?

"Brandon Pearce, current Earl of Sandhurst and former brigadier in His Majesty's army, Coldstream Guards." He lowered his mouth to her ear as he spun her through a tight circle and started back across the dance floor. "But most people call me Pearce."

"Pearce." The soft sound of his name curled heatedly along his spine. And around another more sensitive place.

His memory couldn't place her, but his body somehow knew what he didn't. He'd been intimate with her. He would have wagered in the book at White's on it. But when? Where?

Beneath his concentrated stare, she nervously cleared her throat and looked away over his

shoulder. “Do you often go around rescuing women?”

“Constantly,” he drawled dryly. “Do you often need to be rescued?”

“Never.”

He arched a disbelieving brow.

“I would have handled Lord Derby just fine on my own.”

His brow inched higher.

“I’m handling *you* just fine, aren’t I?” Her green eyes gleamed mischievously, sparking a yearning desire in his gut. “And you’re a brigadier.”

He grinned at her cheekiness. They weren’t dancing. They were dueling. And he was enjoying it immensely. She was the kind of woman who could easily keep a man on his toes, or leave him lying in the dust without a second thought if he couldn’t keep pace.

“I’m not like the other men here tonight.” He hid the gentle warning of that behind a tease of arrogance.

She smiled, just as he’d hoped. “So I’ve gathered.”

He changed direction in their waltz. And in their conversation. “And you’re not like the other women.”

She tensed in his arms, her smile tightening. But this time she didn’t miss a single beat and continued to match his steps, her eyes never leaving his.

“So why are you here tonight, Lady Scarlet, when you so obviously don’t belong?”

“Why are you?” she countered, sending back the next shot in their volley. But the husky tone of her answer told him that he’d rattled her.

“So I could rescue you.” He had no intention of answering that honestly. “Why are you here?”

“Apparently, to be rescued.”

He smiled grimly. Their waltz was coming to an end, and so was his opportunity to learn the truth about her. “You’re not a light-skirt looking to make rent, and you’re not a courtesan searching for a protector.” His eyes searched what little of her face he could see beneath the mask, looking for answers. “You’re also not some jaded society widow looking for an evening’s entertainment.”

“I might be.” The trembling in her voice undercut whatever assurance she’d aimed for. “You don’t know.”

“But I do.”

To make his point, he stepped forward and brought the front of his body in full contact with hers.

She stiffened immediately with a surprised gasp, her hand at his shoulder flattening against the kerseymere of his jacket as if catching herself before she pushed him away. Or before she cracked him over the skull as she’d done to Derby. No courtesan or light-skirt would have done that. Just more proof of how far out of her element she was.

His point made, he shifted away to a respectable distance. Regrettably. The part of him that remembered her desperately wanted to rekindle old acquaintances.

“So why are you here?” He frowned as the last notes of the waltz floated away. “If you’re in some kind of trouble, I can help.” When she hesitated to reply, he added, “And I won’t even ask your real name.”

She paused a moment before muttering, “You *do* rescue women, don’t you?”

“A man needs a hobby,” he replied, deadpan.

When her shoulders eased down and she bit her bottom lip, he knew he’d won her over, if grudgingly. “If you truly want to help…” As the orchestra fell silent, she stopped dancing and searched for any sign that she could trust him. Either convinced of his trustworthiness—or simply desperate—she said, “I’m looking for Sir Charles Varnham.”

His eyes narrowed on her. "Why?"

"Business."

And none of yours. The unspoken words lingered on the air.

She dropped into a curtsy, which seemed as out of place at Torrington's masquerade as the formal waltz had been only moments before, and the curious stares she drew confirmed it. "I need to talk to him. Alone." She held his hand lightly in her fingers, but urgency pulsed in her touch. "Have you seen him?"

The dance had ended. He'd saved her from Derby and any other man who wanted to prey on her tonight. She was no longer his concern.

Yet he couldn't stop himself from attempting to rescue her again. What could she want with Varnham? If rumors were to be believed, Sir Charles was here only to keep watch on his younger brother, Arthur.

"Please, Pearce."

The familiarity of that soft plea pierced him. Damn the world that he couldn't place the distant memory it stirred in the dark corners of his mind, couldn't put that voice into a context that would tell him who she was.

He also couldn't refuse. Reluctantly, he told her, "Varnham was lingering in the stair hall a few minutes ago. He might still be there."

"Thank you." Her eyes shone with gratitude. "It was a pleasure seeing you, Brigadier."

He suspected she'd wanted to say something more but thought better of it. Instead she slid her hand from his sleeve.

He reached for her arm, stopping her. "Who the devil are you? Your real name."

"You said you wouldn't ask if—"

"How do we know each other?" Her eyes flashed from behind the mask in an eruption of alarm and suspicion, yet he pressed. "Tell me."

"I—I can't... We don't—" Unable to hide the immediate quickening of her breath and the pounding pulse at her wrist beneath his fingers, she forced out instead, "I have to go."

Unexpected jealousy swirled up his spine. "Whatever you're planning with Varnham, it isn't a good idea. Going off alone with any man in a place like this—"

"Thank you," she repeated and persisted in pulling away, yet something about her reminded him of a rabbit caught in a snare. "But as I said, I don't need to be rescued."

She turned to leave.

Oh no. She wasn't getting away that easily. Pearce started after her—

"Sandhurst!" His name carried in a loud shout across the room. "Lord Sandhurst—Brandon Pearce!"

He ignored the calls and chased after her. Just as he was about to reach for her elbow to stop her, a man stepped into his path and blocked his way.

He slid to a halt to keep from slamming into the nodcock.

The woman glanced back at him as she fled. When she saw the man standing in front of him, she stumbled. Her hand went to her face, to check that the mask was still in place, still hiding her identity. But she never slowed in her flight.

Pearce tried to follow, but the man grabbed his hand to shake it, stopping him before he could take another step to pursue her.

"Frederick Howard." The man pumped his hand hard in that irritating American fashion that had become popular in certain circles in London. "We've met before."

Vague recollection flashed at the back of Pearce's mind, but he was too preoccupied by the woman in red to immediately recognize the name. "Not now," he growled and began to move around Howard, only for the man to step in front of him again.

"I was hoping for a word with you tonight." The man forced a too-bright laugh. "How

fortunate that I found you.”

Biting back a curse, Pearce leaned to the side to look past him—

The woman was gone. She’d vanished into the dimly lit town-house as mysteriously as she’d appeared. He’d lost her.

Damnation. He rolled his eyes. Tonight was proving to be frustrating in all kinds of ways.

Blowing out an irritated breath, he slid his narrowed gaze at the dandy in front of him, who didn’t seem to realize—or care—that he’d just interrupted something important. Although what it was, exactly, Pearce couldn’t have said, except that he’d wanted it to continue. He’d barely scratched the surface of Lady Scarlet’s mystery, her identity still unknown.

But she was gone, and all chances of learning more right along with her.

“Howard, you said?” Pearce ground out. After all, it was only polite to learn the name of the man he was about to pulp.

“Yes. *Frederick Howard.*” Irritation pinched his face that Pearce didn’t recognize him. “Our families knew each other years ago. In Birmingham.”

Unlikely. Pearce’s parents died long before he was shipped off to his innkeeper uncle in Birmingham, and this man didn’t seem the sort that frequented inn yards.

“You recently inherited the Sandhurst estates, and we now have neighboring properties.” As if realizing he was stirring up more acrimony than memories, the dandy changed tack. To bluntness. “I want to discuss a joint business venture.”

“Business?” Pearce repeated, unwilling to believe that he’d been stopped for something so unimportant.

“Exactly.” The man smiled tightly. “The best kind, too—capital development!”

“No such thing as the best kind of business.” He peered past the man, still hoping to catch a glimpse of red satin. No luck. “All business is—”

“Turnpike.”

That caught Pearce’s attention, if only for its unexpectedness. He blinked. “Pardon?”

“I intend to put through a new turnpike, and you’re the perfect man to help me realize it.”

Oh, he sincerely doubted that.

“A turnpike has the potential to leverage all kinds of possibilities for property that is otherwise worthless. Imagine the funds that…” Beneath Pearce’s stone-cold stare, Howard’s voice trailed off. Realizing that he was losing the battle, he cleared his throat. “If I could set up a time to call on you—”

“Fine.” Pearce dismissed the man with a wave of his hand. He couldn’t care less. He had more important concerns at that moment. The woman had been after Varnham, and Varnham was in the stair hall. Maybe he could still catch her there. Pearce stepped around the man before he could stop him again and strode toward the front of the house.

He hurried through rooms that were all piled into each other like Russian nesting dolls. She should have been easy to spot in that dress, but a sea of jewels and satin filled the rooms—

A flash of red slipped through the front door and out into the night.

“Scarlet!” He chased after her.

Pushing his way through the crush, he stumbled through the handful of men gathered at the front door and out onto the footpath. He stopped to glance down the rain-drizzled street. His breath clouded on the cold night air, and his heart pounded as loudly as the rumbling of horse’s hooves over the stones. He *had* to find her—

There. Her dress showed a muted blood-orange in the yellow lamplight as she hurried across the wide street toward a waiting carriage.

He started after her.

Without warning, a phaeton turned onto the street at breakneck speed, so fast that it lifted off its rear right wheel, careening nearly uncontrollably behind its racing team. The rig hit a rise in

the pavement and jumped into the air, sending the team darting to the left—right toward the woman, who froze in fear.

“Look out!” Pearce shouted and sprinted across the street.

He grabbed her around the waist and hurled her forward with him. The wheel of the phaeton spun past so close that it shaved against his calf.

Momentum propelled them forward. Just before they crashed into the building on the other side of the street, Pearce turned so that his shoulder slammed into the stone wall instead of her soft body, so that his arms protected her from the blow.

The jolt came so hard that it ripped the air from his lungs. Yet he held onto her, even though his grasp had loosened, even though she’d fallen against him, momentarily stunned and breathless. Her hair had escaped its ribbon and now spilled freely around her shoulders. The mask slipped, revealing her face.

Recognition slammed into him as hard as the stone wall.

“Amelia?” he whispered hoarsely. *Good God...* he was staring at a dream.

She pushed herself out of his arms and ran.

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