



CHAPTER ONE

May, 1824
Surrey, England

“Come here, m’ lovely!” Christopher Carlisle grabbed the barmaid around the waist as she sashayed past and yanked her down onto his lap. He whispered a dirty joke into her ear about drivers and the length of their whips that made her laugh loudly enough to attract the attention of the men sitting around him in the corner of the crowded tavern.

She smiled and looped her arm around his neck, which pressed her bosom into his chest. Not that he minded. She was lively and pretty, and clearly hoping to snag him for an evening’s pleasure in one of the rooms upstairs. “Ye tell that story as if ye have first-hand experience, sir.”

“I do.” He took the opportunity to glance around the tavern’s taproom at all

the people who had crowded inside in the past two hours since he’d been sitting here. “I’m a fierce driver myself.”

She laughed at his bawdy *entendre*, just as he’d hoped, and he rewarded her with a bounce on his knee. Tonight, he wanted the kind of attention her loud laughter would bring.

With a satisfied smile, he raised the tankard to his lips and took another look around the barroom. His focus never strayed far from the door.

The tavern was filled with people seeking shelter from the fog and damp weather, which promised to unleash even more rain by dawn. Mostly local men crowded the room, those who’d gathered for a few hours of drink, cards, and escape from their wives. A handful of light skirts looking to make the rent and a few travelers who had no place else to spend the night in this part of Surrey were thrown into the mix.

Always, he kept his attention on the men. He could dismiss the women, likewise the local villagers and the handful of hostlers who’d come inside after tending to the last of the coaches for the night. Those two groups of men were easy to spot by the familiar way they strode through the door without hesitation and greeted the barkeeper and the other men they knew, who ordered their food and drink with a wave and wink to the serving wenches.

The men he watched for tonight would be outsiders. Their unfamiliarity with the place would require a hesitation at the door that would mark them as strangers. So would the length of time it would take for the barmaids to notice them and serve them, because the women’s attentions would be on those men who returned night after night, who might have paid in the past to tup them and would most likely do so again. They

wouldn't waste much effort on men who weren't important to their continuing ability to buy bread and pay rent.

His own bar wench, whom he'd spent the past hour slipping coins to and flirting with so he could disguise himself as a local, teased at his waistcoat buttons. "Yer not from 'round here."

"No indeed." He grimaced into his ale. Good to know that a decade of training as a Home Office agent had brought his skills on par with a barmaid's.

Ten years. *Good God.*

How could he have known when the Home Office came looking for new agents among the army's ranks that he'd still be working for them a decade later? But then, he'd been damned surprised that they'd wanted him in the first place. After all, he was the worst possible sort to be an officer in His Majesty's army. A man who chafed at regulations and who'd repeatedly escaped punishment by the skin of his teeth. The same man whom the generals recommended to the Home Office most likely just to be rid of him.

But to everyone's surprise—his most of all—he'd thrived as an operative, all the while keeping his work secret. To the rest of the world he was simply a shiftless younger son, wasting away his allowance on cards, drink, and women, without ambition or prospects. Only his brother Ross and new sister-in-law, the Home Secretary himself, and the undersecretary who directly gave him his orders knew that beneath his scapegrace exterior he was completely dedicated to England.

He claimed to all who'd listen that he was waiting for a living in the church to open so he could make his future there. But the truth was that his life had to be lived in suspension—no wife, no family, no commitments of any kind. No future path. Couldn't have those, not when he had to be free to be sent on a mission at a moment's notice. Not when he didn't know whom to trust, and since Peterloo, that included the crown and its administrators. Hell, he couldn't even follow the lead of other gentlemen and take a mistress because he couldn't risk that she'd learn the truth about him. Too much chance for blackmail, or to simply be handed over to his enemies. He'd certainly made enough of them on both sides of the Channel.

All of that meant that he had to lead a life that others mistook for rakish impropriety and laziness, when limited relationships and broken commitments were all that he could offer as long as the Home Office owned his loyalty.

Or was it his soul that they now possessed?

After ten years, all the suspicions, false identities, secrets, and lies had festered into a churning blackness inside him that made it nearly impossible to trust anyone, save for his brother. Not the people he interacted with at society events and clubs. Not the women he bedded. Certainly not the other men at the Home Office. He couldn't even trust his cousins on the Trent side of the family for fear that they might accidentally divulge how he'd truly been spending his time. Hadn't he already learned the hard way that behind all the lies real lives hung in the balance?

His existence had become nothing but doubt and mistrust, detachment and dispassion. Since that night six months ago, the relentless hell of it had become intolerable. His singular focus was now set on revenge.

But if he wasn't careful, before this was all over and he could extricate himself from the web ensnaring him, the dark place would completely claim his soul.

"What's yer name?" the barmaid asked with a friendly smile as she tangled her fingers in his jacket lapels.

"Christopher." He gave her a grin. "But my friends all call me Kit."

"Why're ye here tonight?"

He took a long look around the tavern, coolly assessing the crowd. "I'm here to meet someone."

"*Found* someone already, looks like." She artfully wiggled her bottom against his lap with such enthusiasm that he couldn't stifle a genuine laugh of amusement.

Had this been any other night, he might very well have taken her up on her offer to provide sexual pleasure. She was vivacious and spirited, after all. Full of life. Exactly the kind of woman he could easily lose himself in for a few hours of precious distraction.

But not tonight. "I'm waiting for a man."

"A friend?"

The enemy.

Garrett Morgan. A less likely man to be meeting with French agents Kit couldn't imagine. For all that he'd personally seen of the man, Morgan had always struck Kit as...well, annoying. Eager to blame his failings on others. Never happy with his situation and always complaining that life had given him a raw deal. Mostly, he blamed his father, whining to his chums at the gambling hells that General Thaddeus Morgan possessed unrealistic expectations for him, ones he could never live up to.

While there might have been some truth in that last—Kit, himself, had served under the general and knew how demanding he could be—Garrett Morgan's failures were largely his own. He'd fallen short first in the army, where he didn't have the discipline to thrive, then later at university, where he lacked the intellectualness necessary to distinguish himself. Now, at an age when he should have already been established in some sort of career and a household of his own, he still resided with his father and two sisters, living off the graces of his family and shirking all sense of responsibility.

Kit grimaced inwardly. The exact same could be said of him.

The difference, however, was that Kit was a decorated agent of the crown who had to keep his work with the Home Office secret, while Garrett Morgan had murdered James Fitch-Batten in cold blood.

Fitch...His chest tightened with a sickening pang of guilt that he'd come to expect but would never grow used to. Because his long-time partner and best friend had been beaten nearly beyond recognition one night six months ago, then had his throat slit from ear to ear. Because it was Kit's fault. Because it should have been him instead.

But tonight he would finally catch the man responsible. And make the bastard pay.

The tavern door opened. A man paused in the doorway, his large frame silhouetted by the lamp hanging from the door post outside.

Awareness spooled down Kit's spine. One of the Frenchmen arriving for tonight's meeting, he was certain. As sure as he knew his own name. And early, just as expected. Just as he would have done himself if meeting with a new contact. Most likely, somewhere in the tavern crowd around him, sat more Frenchmen, waiting and watching. All of them, just like Kit, pretending to be nothing more than another man out for an evening's entertainment.

As his gaze followed the man across the tavern to an empty table in the corner, that old familiar sensation sparked inside him that nothing was as it seemed. Instantly, he grew suspicious of every man in the room, even the ones who seemed to belong there. Like him.

But tonight, there was no help for the suspicion and distrust. After six months of investigation and pursuit, events were finally in motion, and his heart pounded brutally at knowing that justice would finally be granted. If everything went according to plan, Kit would have not only the man who'd murdered his partner but also the evidence necessary to make certain he swung for treason. Now he simply had to wait for Morgan to arrive.

The bar wench fluttered her hand temptingly over his shoulder. "Perhaps when yer through talkin' with your friend," she suggested, "ye'd like to go upstairs an' relax." Her fingers kneaded into his hard muscle. "I'm good at makin' gentlemen all relaxed, and yer in sore need of some attention."

His lips twisted at the irony. She had no idea how much he needed exactly that. Every muscle in his body was so tight that he was nothing but a ball of knots, every inch of him tensed and ready to spring at a moment's notice. Yet tonight he didn't have the luxury of losing himself in comforting arms, if only for a few hours before the harsh light of day arrived and reminded him of exactly who he was.

"That sounds enticing," he answered instead. "But what about my horse?"

She blinked, bewildered. "Your...*horse*?"

"Surely you're curious to see it." He trailed a fingertip across the top swells of her breasts, her bodice so low that she was nearly spilling out of it. "After all, you know what they say about the size of a man's horse."

"No." She toyed with his dark blond hair where it curled against his jacket collar and in her curiosity was unable to resist asking, "What do they say?"

He brought his mouth to her ear and drawled such a lewd description of horses and naked women that the barmaid shifted back on his knee to stare at him, her eyes wide with shocked horror.

Feigning innocence, he asked, "Does this mean you won't wear spurs?"

She slapped him.

A thunder of laughter erupted from the men around him who had witnessed the skirmish. She scrambled off his lap with whatever last bit of dignity she could summon, and for a moment, he thought she might slap him again, just for good measure. But with a loud *humph!* she jabbed her nose into the air and stomped away.

Kit happily watched her go. He wouldn't receive another offer by her or any of the other barmaids tonight.

Good. The last thing he needed now was distraction.

The door opened again a few minutes later, right as the long case clock in the common room struck the hour. Kit casually took a sip of ale as he watched another man pause in the doorway. Another stranger who raised the hairs on his nape, then set them to full-out tingling when the young man looked slowly around the room, searching through the crowd...and found the Frenchman in the corner.

Short and slight of build, with slender shoulders and narrow hips beneath a brown jacket and breeches that were too big for him, the young man reached between his legs to adjust himself before sauntering toward the Frenchman. His collar was turned up against the rain outside, with an old tri-cornered hat pulled down low over his ears. Just enough of his face remained visible to reveal a thin moustache.

Not Garrett Morgan.

His blood chilled. Could his contacts have been wrong, and Morgan wasn't meeting with French operatives tonight in the tavern? Could it have been another Englishman who'd arranged to pass along documents?

No. Kit had never been misled by the men who'd pointed him here.

Something else was going on, something that put him on alert as he watched the young man enter the barroom. Not more than fifteen or sixteen based on the size of him and the smoothness of his cheeks, the lad sat across the small table from the Frenchman. He hunched down, drawing up his shoulders to hide even more of his face, then wiped his nose on his sleeve.

Kit's eyes narrowed. Who *was* he? And where the hell was Morgan?

The French agent and the lad exchanged a few words. Then the young man glanced around the tavern, skimming his gaze over the room, once more searching...But based upon the frustrated tightening of his lips, he'd not found who he was looking for.

He turned back to the Frenchman and leaned further across the table toward him, tapping his finger on the tabletop in a way that reminded Kit of an irritated governess.

The Frenchman shook his head and answered curtly with a visible snarl.

Apparently, whatever the Frenchman said wasn't at all what the young man wanted to hear. Shaking his head, he reached into his inside jacket pocket and removed a handful of pages, neatly folded and tied together with string.

Kit sat up straight, his eyes glued to the papers.

Perhaps his contacts weren't wrong after all. Perhaps this young man had been sent to negotiate in Morgan's place, or had somehow gotten the papers from Morgan and took it upon himself to make the exchange. Whatever the reason, that boy was here because of Garrett Morgan and would be able to connect those pages back to him under interrogation. Or torture. Kit didn't particularly care which as long as he gained the information necessary to arrest Fitch's murderer. His heart skipped at the thought, not with vindication but absolution.

At the table, the discussion grew heated, with tapping fingers turning into pounding fists from both sides. Suddenly, the lad jumped to his feet so quickly that he knocked over his chair. He snatched up the bundle of papers and shoved them at the Frenchman, demanding that the man take them, then gestured almost pleadingly at the crowded tavern around them.

The Frenchman threw the papers back with a curse and brought himself to his feet. Which brought Kit immediately to his.

Whatever was about to happen wouldn't be good. He didn't give a damn if Morgan's proxy got the pulping of his young life, but Kit needed the lad alive enough to swear out a statement. And he needed those papers to force the boy into doing it.

He started forward slowly as their voices rose, then broke into a run when the Frenchman lunged, grabbing the boy by his throat and tossing him backwards halfway across the room. The lad stumbled and fell onto a nearby table, knocking it over and spilling drinks, cards, and coins onto the floor.

A melee erupted as the roomful of drunken men and desperate light skirts scrambled after the money. Fists flew and loud curses went up, accompanied by fierce shoving and kicking, and followed by thrown tankards and plates, smashed glass and chairs, the flash of knives—

The Frenchman raced out of the tavern into the night.

The boy charged after him.

With a curse, Kit chased after the boy. *Christ*. He was getting too old for this!

He rushed out the door and into the inn yard only a few strides behind the much slower lad who ran with his arms swinging stiffly straight at his sides. With each pounding length he gained ground quickly on the boy, until he was almost close enough to reach for him.

But the boy kept running, foolishly chasing after the Frenchman who was several yards ahead and increasing the distance as he raced toward one of the horses standing at the hitching posts at the edge of the yard. He untied the horse and leapt up into the animal's back. Grabbing the reins in one hand, he spun the horse toward the road. His hand dove beneath his coat, and metal flashed in the dim lamplight.

"Get down!" Kit yelled at the boy and lunged.

He tackled the lad to the ground as the sound of gunfire shattered the night, followed instantly by the ball striking the cobblestones just inches from his head.

The Frenchman dug in his heels and charged the horse straight at them.

Kit grabbed the boy as he lay winded from the force of the tackle and rolled him over across the muddy ground. Pounding hooves flew past, barely missing them, and thudded onward to disappear into the night.

“Damn fool!” With a growl, he grabbed the lad by his lapels and threw him onto his back with no more effort than tossing a sack of potatoes. The boy was even younger and slighter than he’d thought. Damn that coward Morgan for sending a mere child in his place. “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

But the boy lay motionless on the ground. Deathly still.

Fear plunged through him. Had the boy had been injured—or worse? Straddling him to keep him pinned to the ground in case he caught back his breath and came up swinging, Kit ran his hands over the lad’s head to check for wounds, then carefully over his neck. Nothing. He swept his hands over the boy’s slender shoulders, then down his arms, feeling for broken bones.

Kit’s body and weight were so much larger than the boy’s. Worried that he might have crushed the lad’s ribs when he rolled him across the cobblestones, he slipped his hands beneath the jacket to feel for the ribcage, tracing his fingers upward along each rib, moving systematically higher.

He froze. His hand cupped around a soft fullness for one baffling moment when his confused brain couldn’t comprehend what he was feeling—

A breast.

He yanked his hand away. *What the hell?*

He grabbed for the boy’s hat to snatch it off and accidentally released a curtain of golden tresses. With a curse, he reached for the fake moustache which now drooped low over the woman’s ripe lips, ripped it away, and revealed the face beneath. The very beautiful face. One he recognized even in the darkness.

“Diana Morgan,” he murmured in disbelief as he lay on top of her, her slender hips pinned beneath his.

Her blue eyes flew open, blazing as she stared up at him.

Of all the women— *Good God*. “What are you—”

Her small fist plowed into his chin.