



## Chapter One

*London, England  
March 1816*

*I*n the shadows of the private opera box, Nathaniel Grey lowered the glass of whiskey from his lips and smiled down at the beautifully coiffed head bobbing at his crotch.

Oh, Lady Margaret Roquefort was a lovely woman with a deliciously wicked mouth whose company he enjoyed immensely. Luckily, she also shared his interest in opera, finding far more fun in the activities that occurred in the dark boxes than in whatever happened onstage.

The rising notes of the aria drowned her soft moan of pleasure as her lips closed tightly around him. Shutting his eyes, he let himself savor the

moment.

He wasn't meant to be here, two boxes down from the Prince Regent, taking pleasure in one of the most beautiful ladies in English society. Not him. Not an orphan so inconsequential to the world that the lie he chose to tell about himself—that he was the runaway son of a blacksmith—was a decided improvement over the truth.

But in his life, he'd more than earned the right to be among the gentlemen of the *ton*, having killed—and nearly been killed himself—to protect all of them, without a word of thanks. Yet while he could dress like them, gamble with them, drink their best whiskey, and bed their finest ladies, he would never truly be one of them.

And he didn't give a damn if he wasn't.

In fact, he liked it. Living on the periphery of society gave him a freedom he would never have as one of the quality, and freedom meant everything to him.

"Grey," Margaret moaned. He reached down to stroke his knuckles across her cheek.

He smiled at the irony as arousal throbbed hot through his veins. Would Lady Roquefort be pleasuring him right now if she knew the truth about him? He choked back a laugh. Knowing Margaret, she would have been sucking even more eagerly in rebellious glee.

A baroness and an orphan... Wouldn't that juicy bit of *on-dit* send scandal rippling through the *ton* if anyone found out?

But he'd made damned certain no one ever would.

Even at just ten, when he ran away from the orphanage, he knew how to lie about himself and lie well enough to talk his way into a job as a stable boy at Henley Park, where he had a roof

over his head, food in his belly, and an education thrust upon him by the Viscountess Henley. When he turned eighteen, he purchased an officer's commission and enlisted with the Scarlet Scoundrels of the First Dragoons.

*That* was the man Margaret thought she was enjoying tonight. The army officer who led charge after charge on the Peninsula, only for a single bullet to end his cavalry career and force him to once again reinvent himself, this time as a War Office agent. Losing his command had been damned hard, but the end of the wars had created a need for trusted agents, and he was good at spy work. So good, in fact, that he'd been offered a coveted position on the Continent. If all went as planned, he'd be in Spain by next month.

Success was so close now that he could taste it. He *craved* it, in fact. Everything in his life had led to this opportunity, and he planned on seizing it for all he was worth.

But for now he was here, with Margaret's eager mouth and hands on him, enjoying himself immensely.

The soprano reached her last trilling notes. Pulling a rasping breath through his clenched teeth, Grey shuddered and released himself. Margaret swallowed around him as her hot mouth milked his cock. When she'd finished, he pulled away and handed her the glass.

As she drank the remaining liquor, he fastened up his trousers. Ah, how much he enjoyed the opera! And one of these nights, he fully intended to watch a performance.

"Ugh—whiskey!" Margaret made a disgusted face as he took her elbow and helped her to her feet. "You know I can't stand the stuff, Grey. Why don't you ever drink port or brandy—something I enjoy?"

"I never drink brandy." His mouth twisted with distaste. "Not anymore." The stuff reminded him of the French, and he'd done everything in his power to put the war behind him and to focus instead on his future.

Applause thundered around them as the audience rose to their feet and filed from their boxes for intermission. The mindless chatter among the blue bloods rose nearly as loud as the opera singers.

"Port, then." She set the glass aside and smoothed her hands down her skirt to press out any telltale wrinkles. His lips twitched in amusement at her expense. Oh, how much he enjoyed women like Lady Roquefort! Those well-bred ladies of the *ton* who were always so proper and fashionable, even when on their knees. He would miss their sort when he was in Spain. "Next time, bring me port."

He gave her a charming smile, this woman who meant absolutely nothing to him except as an evening's entertainment, and stifled a contemptuous laugh because she thought she could order him about.

"Of course, my lady." He reached out to trail his fingers over the top swells of her breasts, revealed by the daringly low neckline. Her breath quickened beneath his fingertips as he purred, "Anything you desire."

She trembled against his exploring hands. "All the ladies were gossiping about you earlier in the retiring room."

"Hmm...and what did they say?" She expected him to ask, so he indulged her, yet he couldn't have cared less about those gossiping hens.

"They wondered what Major Grey was like as a lover, if he'd singled out anyone to be his mistress or if he prefers being promiscuous."

"Promiscuous," he murmured with mock solemnity, dipping his head to trace the tip of his tongue into the valley between her breasts. "Definitely promiscuous."

With a flirtatious laugh, she swatted at his shoulder and forced him to step back as the noise of the milling crowd grew louder. She adjusted her long gloves. “How do I look?”

“Stunning.” He raised her hand to his lips. “As always.”

The flattery was empty, but it pleased her. Which was all that mattered. He needed to keep her happy only so he could enjoy Mozart again with her next week.

Her eyes shining at the compliment, she leaned back against the wall. “Quite a coup, securing a private box all to yourself. However did you manage?”

“I’ve always appreciated the privacy of a reserved box,” he expertly deflected her question.

He’d long ago grown used to the backhanded compliments leveled at him by her sort. They no more bothered him now than getting caught in a warm summer rain. But he wasn’t foolish enough to open himself to further criticism by admitting that the box belonged to Edward Westover, Duke of Strathmore and his former colonel in the Scarlet Scoundrels.

No doubt Margaret thought she’d been utterly scandalous tonight by having her mouth on him. She was right, of course. Even the rank of major wasn’t enough to gain status among the quality when he had no fortune or family name to accompany it. Neither did he care. He was free to bed whomever he wanted, whenever he wanted—and in the case of Lady Roquefort, *wherever* he wanted—and answer to no one but himself.

“Now, be a good girl—” He turned her toward the box entrance, happily done with her for the evening. “—and return to your husband before the old baron discovers you’re missing.”

With a satisfied grin and a playful slap to her ass that made her jump, he was gone, stepping through the curtain into the milling crowd in the hallway and leaving her behind without another thought.

The hour was still early. Plenty of time yet for cards at one of the clubs since he no longer had any reason to linger at the opera. After all, he certainly hadn’t attended to hear the music.

Maybe he’d rouse Thomas Matteson from whatever dull evening he’d planned and bring him out with him. After all, Thomas had mellowed too much for Grey’s tastes since they’d served together in Spain, where they’d saved each other repeatedly from both French soldiers and Spanish husbands.

Grey’s brows drew down slightly. Odd to think how much their lives had changed in the past two years. He had become an agent while Edward and Thomas had both moved into the ranks of the peerage, with Edward becoming Duke of Strathmore and Thomas gaining the courtesy title of marquess when his father unexpectedly inherited a duchy. Yet their lives were going to change again. Grey was heading back to Spain, and Edward—God help him—was going to become a father.

Best to squeeze in as many good nights as possible now, Grey decided as he made his way downstairs, slipping between groups of operagoers gossiping in the hall and on the wide stairs curving into the grand lobby below. He nodded his head at the handful of acquaintances he knew among the crush, but they only returned bewildered stares, as if surprised to see him.

As he skirted a group of pastel-donned debutantes at a safe distance, a shocked whisper rose from behind a flutter of fans. “The marquess!”

Lots of marquesses among the quality, Grey dismissed. He paid the comment no mind as he descended the stairs and passed a group of gossiping hens with the same shocked expressions, the same frantic flitting of their fans in agitated excitement as they stared in his direction. Just as with the debutantes, he gave the hens a wide berth. The last thing he wanted to sour his mood

tonight was those disapproving glances that society matrons were so skilled at sending rakes like him.

Snippets of conversation wafted up to him as he reached the lobby. “So terrible...the marquess...dying like that...”

Hmm. A dying marquess. So *that* was what stirred such excitement tonight. Fresh news about the Marquess of Dunwich. The old man had taken to bed a few days ago with the same fever that had claimed both his son and grandson, leaving the title without an heir apparent, and the entire *ton* buzzed with speculation over what would become of the title when he died. Based on the titillated anxiousness floating through the crowd tonight, the old man must have finally given up the ghost.

He nodded at the Earl of St. James and his mother as he passed, doing his best to catch the eye of Baroness Sydney Rowland, standing next to them. The young widow was beautiful and exactly the kind of woman he preferred—

A man stepped directly in front of him, stopping him abruptly.

Grey couldn’t remember the man’s name but recognized him as a distant friend of Thomas Matteson’s from university. “I daresay, major,” the man said, perplexed. “I’m damnably stunned to see you here tonight.”

Grey shrugged. “I enjoy the opera.” He grinned with private amusement. “Especially the arias.”

The man’s face scrunched into a deep frown. “But I thought, with today’s events—surely, you’d be at Chatham House tonight.”

Ah, of course. That’s why everyone was eyeing him so oddly. Alistair Crenshaw, Marquess of Dunwich, had been distantly related to the Matteson family through the marriage of Thomas’s sister, and most of Mayfair knew that he and Thomas had served together on the Peninsula. It was Thomas who had shown him the intricacies and potential of a rake’s life among the quality once they’d returned to England, and their friendship gave him a grudging acceptance within the *ton*. Everyone must have thought Grey would be giving his condolences to the family tonight.

He shook his head. “Decided on the opera instead. I’ll pay my condolences tomorrow.”

The man blanched. “But—but the marquess!”

“Dead, apparently. Terrible shame.” Then he moved on through the crush, ignoring the completely astounded look on the man’s face.

He neared the door, longing for the coolness of the night outside—

“The marquess was so young.”

He stopped instantly, his head snapping up. A *young* marquess?

The man who uttered that news stood only a few feet away with a group of bejeweled ladies and gentlemen. Grey forced a lazy half smile that belied the rising unease inside him as he sauntered over. “Which young marquess?”

“Chesney.” The man blinked, surprised that anyone in the opera house could possibly not have heard the news. “Shot in the street at sunset. No one knows—”

*Thomas.* For a moment he stared in disbelief, his stunned mind unable to comprehend the words falling from the man’s mouth. Then his blood turned to ice as panic sped through him and the air squeezed from his lungs. *God no...* it couldn’t be. Not Thomas—but the expression on the man’s face was too certain to be wrong.

Grey ran for the street.

When he reached Chatham House, the town home was ablaze with candles and lamps, and his heart stuttered with dread. Two saddle horses stood tied in the front, along with the massive black carriage marked with the Duke of Strathmore's coat of arms.

He raced up the front steps of the stone portico and pounded on the door. Jensen, the Chatham butler, opened the door but did not step back to let him pass.

"The house is closed tonight, Major," Jensen told him, his ashen face drawn and his gray brows knitted with worry. "Please return tomorrow."

When he tried to shut the door, Grey shoved his shoulder against it and pushed his way inside, forcing the butler to stumble backward to make way for him.

Had it been any other night, he never would have caused such an uproar. He would have returned the next day as asked, just to keep peace. But tonight, he refused to stand on politeness.

"Where's Chesney?" Grey demanded. "Is he here?"

"Major, please!" Jensen glowered at him. "The house is closed upon order of His Gr—"

"Jensen." A commanding voice from the upstairs landing cut through the scuffle. "Let him pass."

The butler glanced up at Edward Westover, Duke of Strathmore. With an aggravated *humph!* beneath his breath at having his authority undermined, he stepped back to let Grey into the house.

He raced up the curving marble stairs, his heart pounding with fear. "Thomas?" he rasped out.

"He's here," Edward informed him solemnly, keeping his voice low so he wouldn't be overheard by the servants. "The surgeons are with him."

"He's alive?" Grey gripped the wrought iron banister to steady himself.

A grim solemnity darkened Edward's face. "Barely."

He exhaled a long, shaking breath. "Jesus...what happened?"

With a glance at Jensen still lingering in the foyer, Edward nodded toward the nearby billiards room. Grey followed him inside and accepted the scotch his former colonel poured from a bottle on the table just inside the door, the half-filled glass beside it telling him that Edward had already sought out his own liquid strength.

As he raised the glass, he tried to hide the shaking in his hands. "Was it the French?" he asked quietly.

Edward and Grey were two of a handful of people who knew that Thomas had continued to dedicate himself to his country after leaving the army, signing on to work secretly with the War Office. If the French had discovered he was spying, they might have attempted an assassination.

Edward shook his head. "He'd been visiting at Strathmore House and was on his way home when a footpad shot him." He reached for his glass and took a long swallow. "A groom heard the report and found the man rifling through Thomas's pockets."

Grey steeled himself. "How badly is he wounded?"

Edward's face turned to stone. "Gutshot."

The air rushed from his lungs, and Grey leaned against the wall, squeezing his eyes shut against the mix of fear, dread, and fury swirling inside him, unwilling to believe the worst. *Dear God...* not Thomas, not like this. Not after they'd faced down death together in Spain, only for him to be killed two streets from his own home.

"The surgeons are operating now. Thank God that groom came upon him when he did, or he would have bled out right there." Edward studied the amber liquid in his glass. "Jensen sent a

messenger to the house. When Kate heard, she insisted on coming with me to attend the surgeons.”

New worry spun through him for the duchess. “In her condition?”

Edward’s lips pressed together grimly at the reminder that his wife was expecting. “You try stopping her when she’s set her mind on something.”

Taking careful breaths, concentrating on the air filling his lungs and forcing back his growing grief, Grey tried to steady himself. But his heart kept pounding harder, his stomach roiling. *Gutshot*... Thomas was alive, but he’d most likely be dead by dawn.

“Damnation!” Edward slammed down the crystal tumbler so hard the liquor splashed onto the table. He rubbed his thumb and forefinger at his forehead, at that moment appearing as if he’d aged decades. “I sent him away tonight. Kate asked him to stay with us for dinner, but I wanted an evening alone with her.” Guilt stiffened his shoulders as he shook his head. “If I hadn’t—if I had just invited him to stay, offered another drink...”

“It wasn’t your fault, Colonel,” Grey assured him.

“I know,” he agreed quietly, “but it damned sure feels like it.” He shoved his glass away. “I’ve sent a messenger to his parents at their country estate.”

“He has a sister, too, near York—Emily,” Grey reminded him as an image from five years ago flashed through his mind of a stick of a girl with blond braids who had adored her doting older brother. She’d want to know, would want to be by Thomas’s side... “We need to send a messenger to her, too.”

Edward nodded grimly, although both men knew the harsh reality of the news that wouldn’t reach Thomas’s family for days. By then, he would likely be past whatever comfort they could give. “I’ve hired Bow Street to track down the footpad and ordered Jensen to close the house to visitors. There’s nothing else to do but wait.”

Grey stared at him, the grief inside him turning into fury. *Wait?* Like hell he would. Downing the rest of the scotch in a single, gasping swallow, he shoved himself away from the wall and charged toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Edward called out after him.

He glanced over his shoulder as he strode from the room, his calm outward appearance belying the white-hot rage burning inside him. “To find the man who did this.”

Edward followed him. “Let Bow Street take care of this. They have access to Mayfair.”

“I have better contacts. I’ll have my men in the streets within an hour.”

“Grey.” Edward put his hand on Grey’s arm as they reached the stairs, and repeated pointedly, “Bow Street has access to Mayfair.”

Grey clenched his jaw at the unspoken meaning undercutting Edward’s comment. The runners would be allowed into any house in Mayfair if they said they were investigating the marquess’s shooting, while he and his War Office men wouldn’t be allowed past the front door.

His eyes narrowed icily at the reminder that he would never belong to English society, no matter how hard he worked, no matter how many promotions he earned. He’d never cared before tonight, and the truth had never cut more deeply than at this brutally frustrating moment when being an outsider made helping Thomas impossible.

“I will find that man,” Grey repeated, wrenching his arm away from Edward’s grasp and charging down the stairs toward the front door. “I might not have the same access to Mayfair as a Bow Street runner or a blue blood,” he bit out, “but I also have nothing to lose. And if Thomas dies, I’ll make that bastard regret the day he was born.”

“Grey—”

“I have to, Colonel. I have to do something to help, however I can.” He paused at the bottom of the stairs to glance back at Edward. His chest tightened with anguish and helpless frustration as the adrenaline coursed through him. “I won’t simply stay here and wait for him to die.”

Then he strode out the front door into the black night.

## *ALONG CAME A ROGUE*

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