

# One

*Haversham House, London – March 1817*

“Stay away from Lady Staveley.”

Marcus Gray, the Marquess of Haversham, blinked into the darkness that was his study. The silhouette of a man with a pipe, sitting in Marc’s chair sent a chill down his spine. He knew that voice, even if it had been a number of years since he’d heard it. And truth be told, he could go the rest of his life without ever hearing it again.

Marc heaved an irritated sigh. “How the devil did *you* get in here?” But before Under Secretary Galloway could reply to that, Marc bellowed for his butler, “Simmons!”

“Now, my lord,” Galloway began, “don’t take out your frustration on poor Simmons. He couldn’t really refuse me, you know?”

Simmons, his longtime butler, appeared in the threshold a moment later, unable to meet Marc’s gaze directly. “My lord, I *am* sorry. He—”

“—is a sad excuse for human excrement, and it will take you forever to air out the place once he’s gone. Don’t allow him entry again.” Marc turned on his heel and started down the corridor, stopping only when...

“St. George is in England.” Galloway’s voice drifted down the hallway after Marc, swirling around him like an asp poised to strike. *St. George*. Just hearing that name made Marc’s stomach roil and bile rise up in his throat.

*Bloody St. George*. Damn it all. Damn the man straight to the bowels of hell. Marc never thought he’d hear that name for as long as he lived, and it was a crushing disappointment to know the blackguard was still alive. And *now* on English soil. Though snakes in human form did generally tend to find slippery ways of staying alive, so he shouldn’t be surprised to learn that St. George had managed just that.

“You should really have someone do something about that, then,” Marc replied and would have continued on his way if Galloway hadn’t followed him into the corridor.

“Why do you think I’m *here*? I promise it’s not to revel in your charm.”

A snort escaped Marc. There was no love lost between him and the Under Secretary. There never had been. But certainly the jackass didn’t mean to bring Marc into the situation, not after what had happened to Howard. “I don’t work for the Home Office any longer.” And he hadn’t for nearly a decade.

“Agents never *really* retire,” Galloway replied.

“I beg to differ.” Marc turned around to face the man. “Do you recall what I said to you that day in Whitehall?” The day Marc had officially resigned was one he’d never forget himself, and he doubted Galloway had forgotten that particular encounter or the punch to the jaw Marc had delivered a moment later.

A ghost of a smile, the first one in many years Marc would guess, tipped the edges of Galloway’s lips. “You told me to jump in the Thames.”

Indeed, though he’d also laced that message with a few colorful expletives. Still it was the gist of what he’d said, so Marc agreed with a nod. “And I find those very words on the tip of my tongue once more. Do show yourself out.”

“I can’t believe you don’t want to help bring him to justice.”

St. George didn’t need to be brought to *justice*. He needed to be put down like a rabid dog, and he should have been put down years ago. But with the ineptitude or self-serving nature of Thomas Galloway leading the way...Well, Marc had no confidence that outcome would ever come to pass. And he had no intention of fighting a lost battle or for a lost cause. And certainly not for Galloway, who couldn’t be trusted.

He shook his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe Sidmouth has kept you on after all these years.”

Galloway shrugged slightly. “Home Secretaries come and they go, serving at the whim of whomever is in power at the moment. But *I* am the constant, Marc, always keeping the office running as it should.”

“Lining your pockets, you mean.” The duplicitous blackguard.

At that, the Under Secretary laughed. "I do not recall hearing *your* name spoken of in reverence these many years. Your reputation is as dark as it ever was. "

Which was precisely how Marc preferred it. There was a safety in that.

"And that well-earned reputation of yours is exactly what England has use for. There is a group of conspirators in Bishopsgate. We believe St. George is among their numbers, and—"

"I no longer take assignments from the Home Office."

The Under Secretary heaved a beleaguered sigh. "Come now, Marc. We both know you'll agree in the end. Save us both this little back and forth, will you? Time is of the essence."

If Galloway thought Marc had any intention of changing his mind, he didn't know him nearly as well as he thought he did. "Get the hell out of my house." Damn it all, he hated the edge he heard in his own voice. He generally prided himself on sounding aloof, or in the very least bored, but seeing Galloway stirred up all sorts of things Marc would rather not remember. "If you come back, I'll kill you where you stand."

Galloway's brow creased in irritation. "If you're not going to help, then can I at least get your word that you'll not be a hindrance to the operation?"

Whatever the devil that meant. In more than a decade, Marc hadn't interfered with anything having to do with the Home Office. He hadn't cared enough to do so. Any loyalty to King and Country had long been beaten out of him years ago. "I have no intention of going anywhere near St. George or *you* for that matter."

"That's all well and good," the Under Secretary began, "but I'll need you to keep your distance from Lady Staveley."

Damn it all. Galloway had mentioned Caroline, hadn't he? *Stay way from Lady Staveley*. That's what he'd said back in the study when Marc had first come upon the spymaster. His heart squeezed at the thought of Caroline being in any sort of danger, and if she'd somehow gotten herself mixed up with Galloway then she was most definitely in danger. Damn her, she was too reckless for her own good, even if that was one of the things he loved about her.

He stalked toward the man, quite ready to pound the information out of him. “What the devil did you involve her in?” Marc had withstood torture at the hands of the French, but he doubted Galloway had the same fortitude for endurance that he possessed. Though the Under Secretary was always willing to send other men to their deaths, he had the heart of a coward.

“Absolutely nothing.” Galloway held up both of his hands as though to plead his innocence. “*Lord Staveley* was decoding something for me before his untimely death, and—”

“*Staveley*?” Marc scoffed in disbelief. The late Viscount *Staveley* was a bespeckled scholar who rarely saw the outside of his library, let alone the outside of his own home. He was hardly the sort of operative Galloway would recruit. “What does *he* have to do with anything?”

“The man had a brilliant mind. And he was quite patriotic, unlike—”

“Go bugger off. What danger is *Lady Staveley* in, Galloway?”

The Under Secretary blew out a breath. “Not to worry, I have a fellow keeping an eye on the viscountess, but if you—”

“Bullocks.” Galloway wouldn’t guard *Caroline* out of the goodness of his heart. There was more than he was saying, as per usual. “Don’t forget how well I know you.”

Galloway conceded the point with a nod of his head. “True, my man is *also* searching for *Staveley*’s code. His lordship left for Derbyshire before sending it to me and....”

When *Staveley* had died on the way to *Prestwick Chase* to warn *Lady Felicity* that her not-so-dead husband had arrived in England. Something *Caroline* had begged Marc to do. Something Marc had been in the process of negotiating a kiss from the lady in question as payment in order to do so when her husband had come upon them. Never in Marc’s wildest dreams had he imagined *Staveley* would volunteer for the mission himself. He hardly seemed the sort. Though Marc supposed the man’s honor *had* been questioned, and if Galloway was to be believed, *Staveley* might have been the heroic sort after all, even if in a very scholarly way.

“Well,” Galloway continued, “That piece of information could be extremely helpful in deciphering correspondence for this particular band of conspirators.”

“You’ve set up a man *in* her house,” Marc said, knowing he was right. He did, after all, know how Galloway operated. And his operatives were not usually of the honorable variety.

“If you start chasing her skirts again, it’ll bring undo attention to her ladyship and—”

“And you think I would leave her safety up to *you*?” Marc spat. “One would think you’d know me better than that.”

“I remember the young man you once were. The idealistic one. The—”

“That man is dead. You helped kill him,” Marc returned evenly. “I will thank you to see your way out, or I will be happy to toss you out on your ass.”



Caroline, Viscountess Staveley rested a hand on the library door. David’s domain. Or at least it had been for all the years of their marriage. If she squinted just so, she could still remember how he looked sitting amongst the books he adored. But no matter how much she wished it, David was never coming home. She would never lay eyes on him again.

It felt so strange being back in London without him. Of course, it had felt strange being at Benton Park without him too. It didn’t matter where she was. Life hadn’t been the same since David’s death. How could it be? She’d known her late-husband more than half her life and she had no more of an idea about how to go on without him now than she had been right after his murder. Hollow. That was the word. She still felt hollow.

“Mama!” Rachel, her eldest daughter, called from the corridor. She looked so much like Caroline, as they shared the same features, all except for Rachel’s darker coloring, which she’d inherited from her father.

Caroline pushed away from the library door and feigned the same smile she’d been feigning for her children the last several months. “Good morning, darling.”

A genuine smile, at least Caroline hoped it was genuine, spread across her daughter's face. Lovely as Rachel was, she had been difficult of late. "Kitty asked if I wanted to head to Bond Street with her and Mrs. Greywood today. May I?"

Kitty Greywood was hardly a good influence. The girl was slightly wild, especially the older she got, but David had been an old friend of the girl's father. She and Rachel had known each other all of their lives. And her daughter did need some normality returned to her life. Still... "Mrs. Greywood *will* be with you?" she asked. At Rachel's nod, Caroline continued, "And you're headed to *Bond Street* not *Covent Garden* looking for that masked fellow who throws daggers again?"

"Mama!" Rachel seemed to sag a bit. "It was *one* time. Last year. I'm certain Kitty has found more interesting things to occupy her time these days."

*More interesting?* That was a frightening thought. Losing Staveley was one thing, but Caroline could never go on if she lost her children. "Promise me you will not be reckless, Rachel."

Her daughter's eyes widened slightly. In years past, recklessness was not something Rachel had ever been accused of, while Caroline herself had been called that most of her life. Though her daughter was certainly coming into her own these days. And without David's steadying influence, Caroline would have to find a way to be less reckless, herself, and more steady if only for her children's sakes.

"Rachel," she prodded.

"I promise."

Caroline nodded. "Take Nelly with you and be sure to tell Mrs. Greywood hello for me, then."

"Thank you," Rachel said quickly before darting back around the corner, leaving Caroline quite alone, standing next to the library.

"I will always miss you," she whispered into the empty library.

"Lady Staveley." Tindle, her butler, cleared his throat, and the sound nearly made Caroline jump from her skin. "The Duchess of Kelfield has called. I placed Her Grace in the white parlor."

Livvie. Here, no doubt, to see how Caroline was faring upon her return to London. At least she wouldn't have to feign a smile for Livvie. Her dear cousin would

see through such a ruse and doing so would only worry her more than she probably already was. "Thank you. I'll attend her shortly."

Caroline took a steady breath and then went directly to the white parlor. Upon Caroline's entrance, Olivia, the Duchess of Kelfield, pushed off the settee, grinning from ear to ear.

"Caroline!" she gushed. "I'm so happy to see you." Then her cousin threw her arms around Caroline's shoulders and held her tightly. "How *are* you?" she whispered in her ear. "How are you really?"

"Managing," Caroline replied, squeezing Livvie to her before taking a step away to inspect her cousin who'd always been more like a little sister than anything else. "You look well." And she did. Livvie's hazel eyes twinkled and her smile was bright and she practically... "You're..." Heavens! Was she really? "Livvie, you're *glowing*."

A blush stained Livvie's cheeks. "How in the world could *you* tell so easily? I haven't even told Alex."

A baby. Something happy and joyous to look forward to. And Caroline's heart did lift a bit at the thought. "Oh, darling, I'm so happy for you." But then the rest of her cousin's words sunk in. "Wait. You haven't told Alex?"

Livvie slid her hand into Caroline's and towed her back to the settee. "You know how he is. The most overprotective duke in all the realm. He'd send me back to Everett Place and I would miss any excitement there is to be had," she said as they sat. "I am *not* ready to be confined to the country, not yet." She shrugged. "I'll tell him before I start showing, I promise."

Caroline laughed. "Yes, well, he *would* notice at that point."

"With any luck, I have a few months."

Livvie was delusional if she thought she had that long. Alexander Everett, the Duke of Kelfield, was a most loving and attentive husband. Livvie probably only had a few weeks at most before Alex realized that *something* was different.

"Speaking of Alex," Livvie began. "Am I an awful wife to wish he had more respectable friends?"

Alex had plenty of respectable friends. These days all of them could be called as such except...*Marc*. Caroline heaved a sigh as that familiar bitterness that had been

so much a part of her life these last few months swelled within her once more.

“What has Haversham done now?”

Livvie rolled her eyes. “What hasn’t he done?”

Well, that was a valid question. Of course, Caroline didn’t *really* have a reason to hate Marc. After all, had he gone to Derbyshire when she’d begged him to, he could just as easily have met his end at the hands of that murderous Captain Pierce as David had done. But Caroline didn’t really believe that, not in her heart. David was mild-mannered. David was soft spoken and believed the best in everyone. He’d never had a chance against Pierce, but Marc... Well, Marc was not mild-mannered nor did he believe the best in anyone. And Marc was more than capable of handing himself. He was a survivor. Caroline had no doubt that not only would he have survived an attack from Captain Piece, but Marc would have killed the villain before the man could have hurt anyone else. But he hadn’t gone to Derbsyshire as she’d begged. He’d let David head off there instead. And Caroline could never forgive him for that.

“Last week there was an incident with an actress,” Livvie began.

That was hardly surprising to hear. Marc did have a taste for actresses, much as Alex once had. “An incident? “

“Screamed at him so loud from her dressing room, Phoebe said they could hear her in their box.” Livvie shook her head. “And this week he ruined the Bramley earldom.”

Marc was a callous, selfish blackguard who only cared about himself, but Caroline wasn’t sure how he could possibly have brought down the Bramley earldom all on his own.

Her expression must have said as much because Livvie continued. “Hazard. Bankrupted Bramley. They fished him out of the Thames just yesterday.”

Bramley had killed himself over a gambling loss? Caroline’s mouth fell open. “Oh, good heavens.”

“Honestly, I can’t understand what Alex sees in him.” Then she shrugged. “Cordie either for that matter, but she’ll defend him with her dying breath.”



“He *did* take a bullet meant for Clayworth,” Caroline replied, not wanting to defend Marc of anything. But he *had* saved Cordie Clayworth’s husband a number of years ago. It only stood to reason the countess would forgive any of his transgressions.

“Anyone can do one decent thing.”

“And he *did* warn Cordie when that awful Mason fellow was looking to kill Philip.”

Livvie winced at the memory. “Philip still ended up with a bullet in him.”

He had, but that hadn’t been Marc’s fault, though Caroline wouldn’t say those words aloud. She hated Marcus Gray, she hated him with everything in her and she wasn’t about to list every decent thing he’d ever done, even if the list would be short.

“Bye, Mama,” Rachel said from the threshold of the parlor.

“Oh, heavens!” Livvie breathed out. “Rachel, I can’t believe how grown up you are.”

And neither could Caroline. Sixteen. A year older than Caroline had been when she’d married David. And then Rachel had come along nine months later. How had time flown so quickly by? At 32, she still felt young, or at least she had until David died. “Be careful,” she said to her daughter. “No dagger throwing fiends.”

Rachel rolled her eyes, much in the same way Caroline would have done at her age if given the same warning. “Not even Kitty could talk Mrs. Greywood into *that*, Mama.” Then she waved from the doorway. “See you soon, Livvie.” And then she was gone.

Livvie’s eyes were still wide when Caroline looked back at her. “On my life, I blinked and she’s grown up.”

“She thinks she is,” Caroline corrected.

“Adam’s doing well at Eton?”

“His marks are good.” Though he was still adjusting to coming into the viscountcy at such a young age. Her son had been silently stoic about the whole thing, reminding her completely of David.

“And Emma?” Livvie asked.

Caroline swiped at a tear before it could trail down her cheek. "She's having the hardest time adjusting," she admitted softly. "She loved David more than anything in the world."

"And he adored her," Livvie agreed. And then she closed her eyes as though composing herself before opening them to pin Caroline with a most serious expression. "Is there anything I can do? Anything at all? I owe you so much, so many people do. And I just feel helpless. But if there's something you need—"

Caroline hugged her cousin to her and squeezed Livvie tightly. "You've always been here for me. That's all I need."

"It doesn't seem like enough," Livvie whispered.

"It has to be."

After securing Caroline's promise that she and the girls would attend Astley's Amphitheatre with the Kelfields later that week, Livvie departed for her own home and Caroline was left alone, staring at the walls of her white parlor, fending off the familiar grief that had become so much a part of her life.

How everything had changed since she'd last sat in this room! Once upon a time, she would have never just *sat* in a parlor. She would have been plotting and planning and devising schemes, mostly of the matchmaking variety. She would never have just sat in her white parlor feeling sorry for herself. And she didn't want to spend the rest of her years doing that either. It wasn't in her nature. There had to be more than that. There just had to be.

She just wasn't sure how to find it. How to go on. But sitting alone in her parlor wasn't the way to go about it, whatever it was. So...a stroll. A stroll somewhere, *anywhere* was called for.

With that immediate thought in her mind, she pushed off the settee, bid a farewell to Tindle, and made a direct path out of Staveley House and down the steps onto Curzon Street. But she only made it a few paces before she felt something...almost as if someone was watching her. Caroline stopped on the walk and glanced across the street to find *Marcus Gray*, of all the villains in the world, watching her with such a serious expression, her stomach tightened in response.