

Paris, the Reign of Terror

Gabrielle stood on the swaying tumbrel, the breeze tickling the nape of her neck. Her head felt oddly light, deprived as it was of her thick, heavy mane of unruly brown hair. The loose, uneven strands brushed the skin on her neck like long, pointed fingernails. Would she feel the blade of the guillotine, or would death come fast and sweet as promised?

She clenched her hands on the cart's rough rail and tried to think of something else—something other than blood and death and the swish the blade made when it fell in the Place Louis XV, now the laughably named Place de la Révolution. This wasn't a revolution. This was murder.

Her murder.

Her stomach roiled and she closed her eyes and tried to think of happier times.

Mrs. Cress would love this short hairstyle. Of course, she'd bemoan the artless way in which the hair had been hacked off by the prison guard, but Mrs. Cress could fix that. Give Cressy a pair of shears and she'd have Gabrielle's hair cleverly styled in mere moments. Gabrielle would miss her brash speech and her unfailing loyalty. She'd miss Diana too. Diana had been a good friend, someone she could count on in a crisis. If only Diana were here now, she'd turn her famous imperious stare on these raucous revolutionaries and have Gabrielle free in a moment. She smiled, and then she sighed.

She could admit it. She would miss Ramsey. Pathetic to even think of the lying, deceitful scoundrel. He was the reason she stood here, squeezed ever tighter as guards herded more and more of the condemned onto the already packed cart.

She shouldn't have trusted him. She shouldn't have believed him.

She wished he were beside her. She'd like to see him mount the scaffold, face Sanson and his assistant, who worked with that awful blood-red rose clamped between his teeth. She liked to imagine Ramsey would grovel and beg and fall to his knees as the crowd jeered. The assistant would drag him, kicking and screaming, to Madame Guillotine, tie him down, and whoosh! The blade would sing. Ramsey would be no more.

The tumbrel jolted as the horses began a slow plod toward the Rue Royale, now the Rue Nationale. Gabrielle shook her head to clear it, feeling those loose strands of hair on her neck again. She was as bad as the peasants waiting to taunt her and the other condemned as they left the security of the prison. For now, she had blood lust too.

Only she was the one who would die.

Chapter 1

London, three weeks earlier

Gabrielle hated the reel—rather, she hated her partner for this reel. She could not fault his enthusiasm, but she did protest the way he locked his arm with hers and spun her around as though she were a marionette. She swore at one point her feet had left the floor—and she was not a short woman! By the end of the dance, she was so confused and dizzy she felt as though she had drunk a bottle of champagne. And if Sir Herbert Rutherford swung her about one more time, she would grab said champagne bottle and smash it over his head. Above, the cut crystal in the chandeliers lighting the ballroom glittered drunkenly, and beneath, the polished floor swayed clumsily as she attempted to regain her bearings.

Thankfully, the orchestra's strings rose to a crescendo, signaling the end of the piece. Sir Herbert tried to spin her for a final flourish, but she caught his sleeve and held on. He gave her a puzzled look, and she disarmed him with what she hoped was a wan smile and a fluttering hand to her forehead.

"Lady McCullough, are you well?"

"Perfectly well. Only"—she allowed her smile to falter, and he leaned in, concern etched in the faint lines on his brow—"would you be so kind as to fetch me a glass of lemon water?"

"Of course, my lady." He took her arm and paraded her across the ballroom, his chest puffed up with the importance of the task she had given him. She passed a dozen couples, none without a title or a fortune, and few possessing both. Nevertheless, jewels dazzled, laughter tinkled, and the music played on. England's *haute ton* had turned out for one of the last balls of the Season in fine form. When she and Rutherford reached a row of Sheraton chairs placed against a wall, Sir Ernest reluctantly released her.

"I shall return." He gave her a deep bow, and she pressed her lips together to keep from smiling at his seriousness.

Watching his retreating back with narrowed eyes, she waited until his yellow satin coat faded into the crush of people, then turned swiftly and arrowed for the door. There were no guests lingering in the vestibule. It was too early for most to send for carriages and too late for arrivals. The Prince of Wales had arrived three-quarters of an hour ago, and everyone wanted to be present in the ballroom should any drama ensue. Gabrielle almost hoped Prinny would cause a scene. It would make her absence less conspicuous to any who might search for her.

A sleepy footman straightened and nodded at her. She was glad he stood alone. The other footmen were probably outside with the grooms and coachmen, having a wee nip while the quality danced the night away.

"Call for my carriage," Gabrielle instructed the man. "Lady McCullough."

The footman raised his eyes, obviously surprised any guest would leave with the prince still in residence, but he dutifully went about his task. As soon as he opened the door and stepped outside, Gabrielle lifted her skirts and took the winding marble steps two at a time. She was out of breath by the time she reached the landing on the second floor. Good Lord, but these town houses in Grosvenor Square were huge. She shouldn't have allowed her maid to lace her corset so tightly. She struggled to quiet her breathing before padding down the corridor to the last room on the left.

The candles in the wall sconces had all but burned down. They flickered feebly, and she assisted the inevitable by leaning forward and extinguishing them. Murky gray descended,

enveloping her in a shroud of stealth. Her black satin gown—open to reveal the silver petticoat beneath and draped behind—though not festive ball attire, melted into the shadows. She quickly removed the diamonds sparkling along her neck and in her ears and tucked them into her bosom. The footman would have returned by now, but he would not yet be suspicious. She would be granted time to fetch her wrap and any other guests traveling with her. She had ten minutes at most before her absence would be noticeable. Not that she worried he would sound an alarm. Still, she did not want her name mentioned when the Duke of Beaumont questioned his staff about suspicious guests in the morning.

With time ticking away, she turned to the door and tried the handle. Locked. She'd expected as much, but it never hurt to try. She had been lucky before. She would be lucky now, she told herself as she reached into her hair and removed an extraneous hairpin fastened into one of the many thick coils. She put her hand on the door and used touch to guide the hairpin silently into the lock. Darkness surrounded her. She closed her eyes anyway, seeing the lock's mechanism in her mind. She inched the hairpin one way, then another, until she felt resistance. Then it was just a matter of a twist and a pull, and she felt the lock give. She removed the hairpin, tucked the evidence back into her hair, and turned the handle.

A low fire flickered in the hearth, but otherwise the room was shadowy as midnight. Gabrielle did not hesitate, slipping inside and closing the door behind her. She pressed her back against the solid wood and allowed her eyes to adjust.

What she saw was a typical lady's bedroom. A large tester bed hunkered in the middle of the room, taking up most of the space. The heavy curtains were not drawn, and on the far side she could see a small, elegant desk against the window beside a porcelain washbasin. A pretty dressing table stood at the far wall, beside a door that most likely opened into the dressing room and then the duke's bedroom. Brushes, combs, and cosmetics littered the table's surface. She caught a glimpse of sparkle from the jewel of a discarded earring, but she ignored it, her eyes continuing to roam. On the side nearest her, to her right, was a large clothespress. According to the servant she'd questioned, it would be locked as well. When she opened it, she would see the jewelry box. That lock might give her trouble—the more delicate ones tended to be the most difficult—but once she mastered it, Queen Cleopatra's lapis lazuli necklace would be hers.

With new purpose, she strode to the clothespress, tried the lock, just to be certain, then reached up to extract her hairpin again. She could feel her heart tap excitedly as she slid the metal into the lock. Her breath came in quick, controlled snatches as she twisted the hairpin this way and that. In her mind, a jig played, and she tapped one foot to the tune. It was always thus when she worked—the excitement and fear mixing with the pounding of her blood until she swayed, heady from the combination.

Snick.

Gabrielle smiled, knowing the lock was hers, and if the lock was hers, so was the necklace.

She swung open the door of the clothespress and stepped closer. Just as she had been told, the jewelry box sat on one of the shelves, beside a pile of white underthings. Gabrielle reached out and lifted the box's lid.

It opened easily and silently, revealing a treasure of rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds. The Duke of Beaumont had been generous to his duchess. But Gabrielle's eyes scanned the gems quickly, ignoring them, seeing the drawing of Cleopatra's necklace in her mind. It was rough piece by current standards, with large rectangles of gold circling the neck, interspersed with beads of lapis lazuli and set off by a large lapis lazuli oval that would have

rested in the cleft at the base of Cleopatra's throat. The pure blue of the mineral in the centerpiece was said to be remarkable.

The necklace was not on the box's top shelf, as she had been told it would be, but she did not allow the thought of failure to enter her mind. Instead, she lifted a few of the bulkier pieces and searched beneath them. When the necklace was still not to be found, she closed the lid and pulled open the top drawer. More gems glittered, as well as the opalescence of cameos and a collection of iridescent pearls. But no lapis lazuli.

She felt a bead of sweat trickle down her back as she slid the drawer closed and opened the bottom one. She already knew she would not find it.

"Disappointing, isn't it?" a deep voice murmured beside her.

Gabrielle's heart jumped, her nerves following, but by sheer force of will, she stilled her body. Blowing out a slow, measured breath, she turned ever so slowly toward the sound of the voice and saw only the door of the clothespress. As she watched—heart pounding so hard she feared it would burst—the door creaked closed, revealing a man on the other side.

"You," she whispered.

"Ah, Lady McCullough, you haven't forgotten me then." He cocked a brow in a gesture she had at one time found charming but now only served to irritate her. Her heart still pounded, beating in anger, not fear.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed, stepping back. She could smell him, that sweet scent of bergamot she associated only with him. She needed space to breathe, to think, to plan.

"I might ask you the same question, my lady."

She smiled stiffly. "Why, I'm fetching a piece of jewelry at Her Grace's request." She blinked innocently. "I'm certain that must be obvious."

He nodded at the hairpin, still clutched between her fingers. "And she mistakenly forgot to give you the key."

"Exactly."

He stepped closer, and she forced herself to breathe normally. She would not inhale his dizzying scent. She would not allow him to affect her.

"Do you know what I think?"

Her traitorous gaze dipped to his lips—full, soft lips with a hint of dark, rugged stubble around them. Her breath caught, and she forced her gaze back up again. But looking into his eyes—eyes she knew were as green as the emeralds in the jewelry box beside her—did not have the desired effect, and she found herself digging her nails into her palm. *Blink, Gabrielle.*

"I think," he continued, his lips so close she could feel his sweet breath on her cheek, "you are a thief."

To her credit, her gaze did not waver, held his. "What does that make you?"

He shrugged. "A lover." He backed up, catlike, toward the bed. "I'm waiting for Her Grace. A secret rendezvous." In one quick gesture, he was lounging on the bed, reclining as sleekly as a black jaguar.

As dangerous too, she knew. The necklace was not here. The duchess was not wearing it, which meant, either Ramsey, Lord Sedgwick, now reclining with deceptive innocence on the bed had taken it—or someone else had beat her to it.

She gazed at Sedgwick again, eyes narrowed. Lover? She doubted it. The fifty-year-old duchess and mother of five was not Sedgwick's usual fare. He was here for the necklace. That was the only explanation. Now . . . how to get it from him?

“How romantic,” she drawled, stepping forward and closing the clothespress door behind her. Time ticked away. She needed that necklace. “Funny that the duchess should send me to fetch a trinket when she knew you waited for her.”

He raised a brow, and she could see a thousand wicked thoughts play on his face. Men. They were so easy to read, so predictable. She stepped closer, and his gaze perused the low-cut bodice of her gown. The rounded style afforded a tantalizing view of the swell of her breasts.

“Perhaps she sent you in her place.” He patted the empty spot on the bed beside him, the invitation in his eyes clear. But behind that invitation, she saw calculation and smugness. He thought he was winning. He thought she would flee, leaving him to walk away with the necklace.

He did not know her nearly as well as he thought.

She reached the bed, leaned over, and stroked a hand down his cheek. The rough texture left her fingertips tingling enticingly. She ignored the feeling, instead concentrating on where he might be hiding the necklace. His coat? His breeches? Both were scandalously snug . . .

At this angle, she knew he had a distracting view of her bosom, but his eyes never left her face. She smiled seductively, leaned down farther, and pressed her lips to his.

It was easier than she thought it would be. No jolt of heat, no memory of what had passed between them all those years ago, rushed back at her. This was simply a new direction in her plan. She would kiss him, run her fingers along his body, distract him, until she located the necklace. She was an excellent pickpocket. It would take little to extract the necklace—then extract herself.

But just as she reached out to begin her exploration, his mouth slaked over hers and his arms came around her. Before she could protest, she was on the bed, on her back, and he bent over her, kissing her hungrily.

Oh no.

The flash of heat tore through her belly, infusing her limbs with warmth and sensitivity. It seemed every part of her was too warm and too *aware*. And he—he was touching her everywhere, stroking the fire, making her gasp and moan against her will.

She had to think. She had wanted something from him—not this. Not this!

The necklace. Yes. If only that magic mouth would stop its assault for one second she could focus and—

Suddenly he broke away. Confused, she blinked up at him, saw him gazing down at her, that irritating smile in place once more. “I fear I’ve had an attack of conscience.”

She almost laughed out loud. The Earl of Sedgwick having an attack of conscience? Ha! The man had no conscience. He was playing her—and he was winning!

“As lovely”—he slid his gaze down her body—“and delectable as you are . . .” His finger trailed a path of heat down her neck and over her collarbone. She willed her body not to react. “I cannot betray Her Grace. I couldn’t live with myself.”

“No, I’m sure you couldn’t.” Where was that necklace? She could not, would not, allow him to leave with it. Sedgwick rose and strode toward the door. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her last hope.

“Good night, my sweet. Until we meet again . . .”

She rapped the pistol’s handle on the bed’s footboard and he froze in place. Now he was the one turning slowly.

“Give me the necklace, Sedgwick, or I’ll be forced to take it off your cold, dead body.”

He cocked one arrogant eyebrow, seeming not in the least perturbed by the fact she had a pistol trained on him.

“That is a charming toy,” he drawled. “Do you even know how to use it?”

She kept her gaze and her pistol locked on him. “My aim is extremely accurate. Now hand over the necklace.”

Instead of rushing to do her bidding, he leaned against the doorframe, crossed his arms over his broad chest, and seemed to consider her order as though it were a mere request to pass the cream or sugar. Annoying man! Would she have to shoot him to prove she was serious? She did not want to go that far, but she would if necessary.

Wouldn't she?

She didn't really know how to fire the pistol. Cressy had told her to point it at anyone giving her trouble, and the mere glimpse of it would frighten even the most stalwart. But it didn't frighten Sedgwick.

“Hand over the necklace,” he murmured, as though turning the idea around and over in his mind. “To what necklace are you referring, madam?”

She clenched her jaw and seriously considered shooting him somewhere trifling—a knee or a toe. Could she manage it? Had Cressy even primed the thing?

“You know exactly to which necklace I refer,” she ground out, eyeing his shoe with longing.

“No, madam, I am afraid I don't. Is this a necklace you lost? Why do you assume I possess it?”

She lowered the pistol, aimed it at his foot. Even if she missed his foot, she would hit him somewhere. He was one of the tallest men of her acquaintance. She could not miss. “Stop the games or you won't be dancing anytime soon. You know as well as I do that I want Cleopatra's necklace.”

“Cleopatra's necklace? How would I know anything about such a piece?” But he must have seen something in her eyes as she prepared to take a chance and pull the trigger, and he moved his foot back an inch and held out a hand. “We both know you will not shoot me.”

Her head snapped up at his tone. It had a slight tinge of concern in it. “Why is that?”

“Because I know you. You're not that kind of . . . viscountess.”

“You forget my humble beginnings, my lord. I'm full of surprises. After all, you didn't expect me to walk in here tonight, did you?”

He lifted his brows, seemed to consider. “You have a point.”

“Give me the necklace, Sedgwick. I *will* shoot you.” *If I can deduce how to cock this bloody hammer . . .*

With a shrug, he held up both hands in apparent surrender. “Very well. I'll give you the necklace, though I assure you, I need it far more than you do.”

“Too bad.” Holding the pistol steady with one hand, she moved forward and held out the other. “Move slowly.”

He did as she said, reaching into his tailcoat and withdrawing something. She kept her gaze on his face, his eyes. She was no amateur to allow him to divert her attention. She held out her hand, and he dropped something warm and heavy into it. She curled her fingers around it, moved back, and saw in her peripheral vision that it was indeed the piece she sought.

She pocketed it through a slit in her gown and motioned to the door with her pistol. “Move away from the door. I will leave, and you will wait at least ten minutes before you follow. My carriage awaits. Don't bother searching the ball for me.”

Again, he shrugged and moved aside. He was far too compliant, far too affable, but she did not have time to question it. She opened the door, slipped through, and started down the

corridor, tucking the pistol into a pocket through the slit on the opposite side of her gown. But she had taken no more than five steps when she saw a light approaching from the far end and then heard the duchess's door open behind her. Muttering a curse, she paused, uncertain whether to continue forward or turn back.

From behind her, she heard Sedgwick. "That footman will wonder at your presence up here. And he will remember seeing you when the duchess questions the staff about her missing necklace."

She glanced over her shoulder and shot him a glare. Did he think she didn't know all of that? And did he think she didn't know what had to be done?

He grinned at her, the glint in his eyes wicked. Of course he knew, the snake. Still, better to try her luck with a snake than to face a magistrate in the morning.

Quickly, as the footman was drawing closer, she turned and stepped into his arms. He drew her into the embrace immediately, bending her back slightly before pressing his lips to hers. She responded, but only enough to make the embrace look believable. Inside she seethed. He bent to kiss her neck as the footman drew closer.

"Not very nice of you to pull a pistol on me," he whispered. "I suppose what they say is true."

Ignore him, she ordered herself. *Do not respond*. But, as was always the case with him, she could not stop herself. "And what is that?"

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

"What?" she sputtered. A woman scorned? "*I rejected you!*"

"Did you?"

"Yes!" And if he thought she carried some foolish tendre for him, she would set him right immediately. She began to push him away, but he pulled her closer.

"Now, now. Be careful."

The light from the footman's candle was upon them. She had no choice but to return Sedgwick's kiss even as the footman slowed to move around them. She was so angry it barely registered in her mind that she was kissing Sedgwick—that was until he parted her lips and invaded her mouth with his tongue.

At least it felt like an invasion at first. She would have struggled if the footman had not been so close. She would have struggled if Sedgwick was not holding her so tightly. She would have struggled—

Oh, who was she fooling? She wrapped her arms around him and sank into the kiss, allowing oblivion to descend for just a moment.

But somehow her wits pushed through the warm, murky waves of passion and resurfaced. She would not allow him to kiss her senseless again. With a shove, she separated from him. The footman was at the other end of the corridor, a safe distance. Sedgwick grinned at her like a cat who had stolen the cream.

She poked his cravat. "Don't touch me again. In fact, don't ever speak to me again." With a whirl, she turned and glided down the hallway, not pausing until she reached the vestibule and the waiting footman. He raised a brow at her, but she ignored it. So what if she had forgotten her wrap? She would send a servant to fetch it tomorrow. "Is my carriage ready?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Good." A moment later, she was inside with the curtains drawn and the carriage lamp casting a soft glow on the plush interior. She would not think of Sedgwick now. She was on her way home, and she had the necklace. That was all that mattered.

She reached for the necklace, intent on admiring it now that she had a moment alone, but when she felt inside the gown's slit, her fingers touched only the soft fabric of the pockets she had tied on.

There was no necklace.

Panicked, she reached into the other side.

There was no pistol.

A cat who had stolen the cream. As she fell back onto the squabs, she uttered a curse.

"Sedgwick."