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THE ROYAL
SABOTEURS

Tales of a
SOCIETY
NOTHING
NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHANA
GALEN

Tales of a Society Nothing
A Royal Saboteurs Novella
Shana Galen

TALES OF A SOCIETY NOTHING

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Chapter One



Margaret Vaughn knew she was being watched. She sat in a public house, taking tea. She always sat by the window so she could use the light to read. Now, her book was open and her tea still reasonably warm.

And the man behind her was watching her.

Not because she was anything to look at. Margaret knew she was no beauty. She was unusually tall and, due to a very sensitive stomach, thin. She wore spectacles and freckles, and her red hair formed a halo of corkscrew curls about her head. At the moment, those curls were pulled back into a twist and then secured under a bonnet, but she had felt them loosening and springing free one by one as the day went on.

She didn't know why the man was watching her, but as an agent of the Royal Saboteurs, she had been trained to note such things. Margaret sighed. All she had wanted to do was sip her plain tea and read her book until dark, when she could slip into Seven Dials unseen. Any sane person wouldn't go near Seven Dials after dark, but Margaret had chosen a life as an agent for the Crown. Clearly, she was not sane. And, as a counterpoint to the question of her sanity, she was less likely to be seen after dark by any who might be tracking the same quarry as she.

Unless the man watching her knew who she was and who she sought.

A chair leg screeched behind her, and the man stumbled to her table. "What's a pretty girl like you doing here?" the man asked.

At least that's what Margaret thought he said. His words were slurred and his accent practically unrecognizable. But the question of who he was had been answered. He was not another agent. He was a drunken lout.

A *blind* drunken lout if he was calling *her* pretty.

Margaret looked up at the man, pushing her spectacles higher on her nose. “I’m sorry, sir,” she said in her characteristically quiet voice. “I think you have me mistaken for someone else.”

“Oh, ho, now!” the man said—or some similar exclamation. “She reads a book and talks like one too.”

Margaret looked over her shoulder to see whom the blind drunken lout—she would call him *Lout*—addressed. Unfortunately, a table of other loutish sorts were laughing and jeering at him.

Margaret knew a lost cause when she saw one. She pushed her tea aside, marked her page, closed her book, and stood. She was a good three inches taller than Lout. “Sir,” she said generously, “if you will excuse me.”

Lout stepped in front of her and said something she took to mean, “Where are you off to in such a hurry? I want to talk to you.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have the time at present. I have an appointment. If you will excuse me.” She tried to push past him, but he blocked her way and grabbed her arm.

Margaret went very still.

“Come on now, sweetheart. Don’t be like that.”

Margaret used her free hand to remove her spectacles. She closed the temples using her hand and her chin, then set her book and the spectacles on the table. “I don’t want to hurt you,” she said quietly so his friends would not hear. “Unhand me, and we can both pretend this didn’t happen.”

Lout didn’t unhand her. He wouldn’t be Lout if he had. Instead, he laughed at her and called over to his friends to tell them what she said. At least, that’s what he intended to do. As soon as he turned his head, she reversed his grip so she was holding him, stepped close to him—which was a most unpleasant experience—and, using the momentum she’d gained with her speed, bent and flipped him over her back and onto the floor with a hard *thwack*.

Margaret stepped back and looked down at Lout. He blinked up at her, uncomprehendingly. She waited to see if he would rise, but he didn't move.

No one moved.

The public house had gone eerily silent.

Not a clink of silver. Not a thump of metal tankards.

Margaret took a breath, lifted her spectacles, and donned them. She didn't need them to see everyone was looking at her. Women didn't typically best men, especially women who looked like her. Like a bluestocking.

And she was a bluestocking. She just happened to have extensive training in evasive maneuvers. Margaret lifted her book, and keeping her gaze down, walked quickly out of the public house.

No one stopped her, but that didn't mean no one would come for her. For the moment, everyone was shocked. Lout's friends would recover and want retribution. This public house being so close to Seven Dials, others inside might enjoy chasing and beating her for sport. So much for her plan to creep into the rookeries unnoticed. She might as well go now.

Slipping her book into her reticule, she walked hastily away from the public house, quickly losing her way in a warren of narrow streets and back alleys. She didn't know exactly where she was, but she was good at directions and could sense she was headed the right way. When she finally emerged, it was into a street thronged with people. On one corner, a group of men stood in a tight circle and shouted at whatever was inside their ring. On another corner, three women dressed as though they should be indoors loitered and called out at the men. Several children ran about, some looking as though they had purpose and others playing what appeared to be a game of catch-me-if-you-can. Dusk was falling and shopkeepers were closing their doors and shooing beggars off their stoops one last time. Margaret kept her head down as she passed it all, ignoring the stink and the noise and the strain practically vibrating off the streets.

That hum of tension was the feeling she always associated with places like this. At any moment, violence was possible. The tinder was everywhere, and all it took was one spark. She'd spent a great deal of time in places like this—not in London but on the Continent. Before going to the Farm to train with the Royal Saboteurs, she'd been stationed in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine in Paris. It had been the center of the uprising during the French revolution of the last century, and when she'd left there had been stirrings of another revolution. Now it was June and the Faubourg Saint-Antoine had risen up and fought tooth and nail, despite artillery shelling from the Bastille area and taking heavy casualties.

This was if the newspapers were to be believed.

Margaret believed them. Her reports had predicted all of it.

She worried about her friends in Paris, but she had a duty to her own country too. Baron had sent her to Liverpool to track down a missing agent. She'd gone, mixing with the factory workers there and listening to their talk of unions. She'd made friends with some of the women, heard the stories of the abuse and harassment they'd faced in the factories. She hoped their union succeeded and they were able to obtain better working conditions, but she couldn't allow herself to become entangled in their fight or their struggles.

She asked about the agent, heard various contradictory stories, sorted out the fact from fiction, and had made her way to London with reasonable certainty that the man she sought was here. Finding a man who didn't want to be discovered in London was like finding a grain of salt in a bowl of sugar. But Margaret had spent years in the great cities on the Continent ferreting out double agents and spies as well as traitors and assassins. Her experience and knack for tracking was the reason Baron had given her this mission.

Well, one of them.

And so after three days in London and hours of asking the right questions and bribing the right men, she knew where the man she sought was hiding. Maybe he'd come to this London rookery thinking he could disappear. Maybe he'd come here

because he too was tracking someone. Or maybe there was a more nefarious reason he had abandoned his mission and disappeared without any explanation.

She'd leave London with either answers or the man himself. Baron was counting on her.

Margaret turned onto a narrower street, and the crowds of people thinned considerably. Here two dogs fought over some find so meager she couldn't make it out. A hollow-eyed woman peered down at her from a windowsill above as she hung gray fabric on a clothing line. If the buildings had ever been numbered most of that paint had worn away years ago, but Margaret sensed she was coming closer. Finally, she turned down one last street, little more than a muddy lane, if truth be told, and stopped before a stooped, ugly building that was gray with years of coal dust. Most of the buildings in London were similarly gray, but this one looked as though it might sink under the accumulation of grime.

Margaret took a breath, shoved open the door, and stepped inside.

The smell assaulted her first. She didn't want to make the effort to identify the individual scents that made up the overall smell, but she caught illness, decay, and excrement. She reached into her bodice and extracted a lavender-scented handkerchief she carried for just such occasions and pressed it to her nose. As her eyes adjusted to the windowless gloom, she spotted a small figure on the floor. It was a child holding some sort of furry animal. Dear God, she hoped it wasn't a rat. In the silence, she heard the purring and realized it must be a cat, which was a relief.

"Who are ye?" asked the child.

"My name is Margaret. Who are you?"

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

Odd, Margaret thought. The child, a female who looked to be seven or eight, had spoken to her first. "I introduced myself," Margaret said. "We're not strangers now."

“Oh, good.” The little girl gave Margaret a grin that showed a missing canine and another almost grown in. She pushed her matted dark hair back. “Me name is Victoria, but everyone calls me Vicky.”

It seemed every little girl had been named Victoria since the queen ascended to the throne. “Are you hungry, Vicky?”

“Yes.”

Margaret opened her reticule. It was a large reticule as she always needed room for a book. Inside she found the slices of bread and cheese that she had planned to eat for dinner. She pulled them out and handed the paper-wrapped food to the little girl. The child opened it, sniffed, and took a bite. Then she immediately gave a bit of cheese to the cat. Margaret waited until the child had swallowed a few bites. She wished she had more to give the girl, but perhaps she could come back later with an offering.

“I’m looking for a man,” Margaret said.

Vicky shook her head. “Me ma says to stay away from lightskirts.”

“I’m not a lightskirt. This man is a friend, and another friend told me he is living here.”

The little girl bit into the bread again and pinched off another morsel of cheese for the tabby cat.

“He’s a tall man,” Margaret said, though he was only a couple of inches taller than she. Still, that was tall in the rookeries, where lack of food and disease often stunted growth. “He has brown hair and very pretty eyes.”

The little girl stopped chewing.

“You know him then.”

“I didn’t say that.”

But she had. Her actions had given everything away. As soon as Margaret had mentioned the man’s eyes, Vicky’s expression had changed.

“Is he living here?”

“Me ma says to stay away from ‘im. ‘E’s not natural.”

“His eyes are rather unusual, but I assure you, he is no different from you or me.” That wasn’t quite true, but the agent certainly wasn’t a pawn of Satan, if that’s what the mother had told this child. It annoyed Margaret how people judged anyone different to be abnormal. She’d been bullied as a child because of her height and her spectacles and her love of books. Her mother had chided her to dance like the other girls or join their embroidery circles. But Margaret hadn’t been welcomed among the petite girls who had perfect vision and clear skin. She’d found solace in her books and the fictional characters who became her friends.

But she couldn’t blame this child for what the adults in her life had taught her. “Can you tell me where he is?” Margaret asked.

Vicky looked up. Margaret followed her gaze to a water stain on the plaster. “Does he live on the first floor?”

Vicky nodded. “ ‘E did. I ‘aven’t seen ‘im for a few days.”

“Which room—”

“Vicky!” came the sound of a woman’s voice from inside the flat behind her. The little girl jumped and scooped up the cat.

“I ‘ave to go.”

“Thank you for the help.”

The child took her cat and scooted inside the flat’s door then closed it.

Margaret glanced at the dark stairwell. So far everything she’d been told was accurate. The agent was here, and he was on the first floor. She had no idea which flat, but what kind of agent would she be if she couldn’t determine a detail like that?

Margaret lifted her skirts and started up the steps. She moved carefully as the shadows made it hard to see, and she did not want to step on any of the scurrying shapes on the steps. They might be shadows, and they might be rats. At the landing, she moved to the left where the stairs continued

upward and a corridor extended the other way. She could make out three doors along the corridor. All three were closed and their chambers presumably occupied.

She could start knocking or pick one randomly, but her gaze kept returning to the first door. The little girl had looked up. She might have just been looking at the floor above, or she might have been looking at the chamber above her own. That chamber was behind this first door.

Margaret went to the door and tapped lightly.

No sound came from within.

“Holyoake?” she said, using the agent’s surname. “Are you in there?”

No sound.

Margaret knocked this time and said, “Holyoake, open the door.”

Not even a hint of movement. Margaret began to worry that he wasn’t here after all. She closed her eyes, leaned her head on the door and breathed. Ridiculous but for some reason she thought if he was behind that door, she would sense him. After a moment, she drew back. He was in there.

She knocked louder this time. “Holyoake!”

“Oy!” came a voice from behind another door. “Shut yer potato ‘ole or I’ll shut it for ye.”

Well, that sounded unpleasant. She could either come back later or find another way inside the flat. She peered at the door, using the little light that came through a small window at the end of the corridor. The door was thin and had probably been locked with a deadbolt that slid across once the inhabitant was inside. That was a flimsy sort of security and fortunately, she’d worn her walking boots today. Margaret took a step back, lifted her skirts, and with a twist sideways, kicked the door. It banged open with a metallic *ping* that she assumed was the bolt giving way.

“Oy!” the unhappy neighbor called again. Margaret ignored him, dropped her skirts, and slid into the open door.

She moved cautiously. No light came from within. The hearth was dark, and the drapes pulled tight. She pressed her back against the wall and felt in her pocket for her dagger. It was small but extremely sharp and deadly if one knew how to use it.

Margaret knew how to use it.

She reached over with her elbow and closed the door, which had swung back toward her. It wouldn't close completely now, but she didn't want anyone going in or out without her knowing. The flat was small, and it didn't take her long to identify the objects within. To the right of the door, a rudimentary kitchen with a dark hearth, a cupboard, and a small table.

A lone chair sat near the hearth, but it was unoccupied.

Her gaze slid to the left. The sound of a pistol cocking came from the small bed pushed against the wall. Margaret drew in a breath.

“Take one more step,” said the deep male voice, “and I’ll put a hole in your head.”

“And here I thought you’d be happy to see me.”

The figure across the room didn't lower the pistol. Margaret didn't move. “Holyoake?” she asked after a long silence.

“What the devil are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” she said. “Could you lower the pistol, please?”

He lowered it, and she took a tentative step forward.

“When you disappeared from Liverpool, Baron sent me to find you.”

“Baron?”

“Yes, I was at the Farm.”

“He has women training as Saboteurs now?”

Margaret ignored the comment as she came closer to the bed. She pocketed her knife again and felt for a tinderbox on the bedside table. Locating the box, she lit a match and then applied it to the wick of an oil lamp. Finally, she turned her gaze on Holyoake. “Not only training but taking missions.” She blew out a slow breath. “Good thing he sent me after you.”

It had been years since she’d seen Viscount Holyoake, but it only took an instant to see he was unwell. His face was mottled with bruises, his beautiful amber-gold eyes dull, his chestnut hair too long and pressed to his head with sweat, and his usually tawny skin pale. He was trying to hide it, but he was in pain. Her gaze went to his hand, pressed against his side. He wore a shirt and breeches, so she couldn’t see the injury. Broken ribs? Something worse?

“How bad is it?” she asked.

“Nothing a few days of rest won’t cure.” He set his pistol on the bed beside him.

“Oh, and how long have you been here?”

He didn’t answer.

“What happened to your side?”

Immediately, he dropped his hand. “Nothing. You want a report for Baron? There’s ink and parchment on the table. I’ll dictate it, and you can take it back to him tonight.”

“Broken ribs?” she asked. “Or something more serious?”

“I told you, it’s nothing.”

“And I know you well enough to know when you are lying. Off with your shirt then. Let me see.”

“Just get the bloody parchment and let me dictate a report.”

Margaret crossed her arms over her chest. “Off.”

He sighed. “You’ll have to help me.”

A slice of panic cut through her. Admitting he needed help was serious indeed.

“I had a surgeon bandage it and then made my way here. Hurt too bloody much to lift my arm to get the shirt off.”

Margaret leaned forward and undid his cuffs and the buttons at his throat. Then she tugged the shirt out of his trousers and, with a little maneuvering, over his head. There was indeed a bandage on his right side and linen wrapped about his body to keep it in place. Blood had seeped through the bandage but not enough to stain the shirt. Still, she could see the bandage needed changing. And Holyoake was far too thin. He needed food. Probably medicine as well. His ribs and abdomen were covered with bruises. She touched a particularly vicious bruise, and he inhaled sharply.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Don’t apologize. It’s just been a long time since you touched me. Maggie.”

Her gaze shot to his. He knew she hated that name “Don’t call me that.”

He leaned back on the pillow. “What should I call you then?” He took her hand and kissed her knuckles. “I know. I’ll call you wife.”



Chapter Two



Ambrose Cornelius Holyoake, the second Viscount Holyoake, watched as his wife's cheeks turned a dark shade of red. It was no small feat to make her blush, though she was a ginger and should blush easily. But then she wasn't really blushing, was she? Her cheeks were tinged pink with fury. She removed her hand from his bruise, and he was able to breathe again. He hadn't been ready for her to touch him so intimately, and he'd known the best way to cover the sudden rush of heat he felt was to distract her.

"Don't like to be reminded that you are married?" he asked.

"I don't mind being married," she said. "I just don't want to be wed to you."

"Well, nothing you can do about that."

Behind her spectacles, her light eyes flashed, indicating she had some rather disreputable ideas as to what she might do. He didn't have to guess to know at the top of her list was letting him die. Perhaps helping him along on the road to an afterlife.

"Baron sent you to find me?" Ambrose could still feel the heat of her touch on his skin. He'd felt nothing but pain the last few days, and he wasn't sure that he didn't prefer the pain to the formal way she'd touched him. She'd looked as though she were touching some sort of specimen in a laboratory rather than a flesh-and-blood man.

"I know my mission."

Still, he thought it best to remind her before the murderous ideas in her mind took hold. "You've found me."

"Yes, and seeing you now, it's fortunate I did. I don't suppose you have anything in this flat to eat?"

“Not anymore.”

“And what about medicine?”

“The surgeon gave me laudanum, but I threw it out. Awful stuff.”

She nodded in agreement. “I’ll be back then.”

He grabbed her wrist before she could scurry away. “This is Seven Dials. It’s not safe for you.”

She gave him a withering look. “So says the man with bruises over half his body and a—what is it—a knife wound in one side? I’ll be fine. As always.”

“Maggie—”

“It’s Margaret. And I don’t want to have this argument with you. Again. I’ll be back shortly, Holyoake.”

And with that, she detached herself from him and went out the door to the flat as abruptly as she’d come in.

Ambrose laid his head back on the pillow and wondered if she had been a hallucination. Perhaps his fevered mind had imagined her. He’d been lying on this thin mattress for two days—maybe longer—waiting to die. Mayhap he was close and that was why his mind had conjured Margaret Vaughn Holyoake, his long-estranged wife.

Ambrose pinched himself and decided he was truly awake and alive, not dreaming. With a push from his reserves of strength, he managed to prop himself into a sitting position. He’d been in and out of consciousness since he’d been wounded, and the only way to judge the passage of time was to assess how hungry and thirsty he felt.

The answer was very.

Why couldn’t his mind conjure a kind Maggie who would have given him a sip of water? Even better, if he was imagining his wife, why didn’t she give him a brandy?

That would ease the pain.

The physical pain, at least.

He closed his eyes, and then Maggie was there again, dribbling water into his dry mouth and prodding him so that he hurt and wanted to push her away and let himself fall back into sleep. But he was not so far gone that he didn't comprehend the danger. If he didn't wake up now, he might not ever wake up. So, painful as it might be, he swam up through the murky layers of aching discomfort and crushing fatigue and opened his eyes.

"There you are," she said. "Open your mouth and take this."

Like a baby bird, he obeyed. She gave him a spoonful of something that tasted awful but which he'd had before. He knew it would ease his fever and the throbbing in his side.

"Now have a bite of this."

He bit down on the soft, juicy orange. The tart flavor was a surprise, and after a few slices, he was able to keep his eyes open.

"Thought you'd like that," she said.

"Had I known you could play the role of nursemaid so well, I might have suggested we play patient and naughty nursemaid back when I had you in my bed."

Her face clouded over. Clearly, she didn't like thinking back to those early days of their marriage. "I don't have to help you, you know. I could just leave you to wither away."

"You won't do that until you get the information Baron wants." Maggie was a Royal Saboteur. Ambrose still couldn't believe it.

"We have agents in the field relying on your information. I need to send him a missive. Do you have the strength to give me a report?"

He hated how cold and formal she was behaving. He wanted to topple the wall between them and see the heat and fire in her eyes once again. But he'd helped her build that wall, and he doubted he'd be able to tear it down on his own.

“I have the strength,” he said. He resented the implication that he was some sort of weakling, even if it might be factually accurate at present.

“One moment,” she said. Ambrose watched as she moved across the room and opened her large reticule. No doubt whatsoever she had a book inside. She was never without a book. She withdrew a small notebook and then a stub of a pencil, drew a chair alongside the bed, and sat. For a tall woman, she moved very gracefully. She pushed her spectacles higher on her nose and opened the notebook. “Go on then.”

Ambrose sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. The pain from the knife wound—she’d been accurate there—was fading a bit and he could form coherent thoughts once again. “I was at the old pile. As you know, it’s in Warrington.”

“Not far from Liverpool, yes.” She scribbled something on the notepad. “I suppose that’s why Baron sent you. You were close to Liverpool, but didn’t that also mean you might be recognized?”

Ambrose ran a hand over his beard, which had filled in rather nicely over the past couple of months. “I know how to wear a disguise. Besides, the men I mingled with don’t have any contact with the *ton*. They probably don’t know what a viscount is, much less care. My disguise was more for the factory owners, but I needn’t have bothered. They don’t even give their workers a second glance. If they come to the factory at all.”

“You were sent to infiltrate the union.”

He gave a bitter laugh. “It’s not a union. I told Baron this already. The workers aren’t that organized. When I arrived and signed on for a job at the factory—”

Maggie dropped the pencil. “Sorry.”

Ambrose waited until she bent and retrieved it.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You *worked* at a factory?”

He lifted a hand and modeled his calluses then turned his arm and showed her the rather bad burn on the underside. “I’m lucky I didn’t lose it. I worked in an iron factory owned by one

Horace Vanderville. Horrible conditions. Dark and hot. Twelve-hour days. Some days no break to eat. I was there a month and saw at least three men maimed. Two of them died.” He paused. “I say men, but one was a child, really. Couldn’t have been more than twelve. The others weren’t yet twenty. I didn’t make enough to feed myself, much less anyone else.”

Her gaze dropped to his chest, which he knew looked thin. He was not averse to hard work. He’d done his share at Holyoake Hall, but working at the Vanderville Iron Factory had all but killed him. He might have afforded more food and better lodgings, but he had to fully embed with the men in order to become one of them.

“I find it very difficult to picture you working in a factory.”

“And I find it difficult to picture you as a Royal Saboteur, but I suppose we’ve both been busy these past few years.”

“Touché.” She tapped her pencil on the notebook. “Go on. You signed on and took a job at the factory. But you said there was no union. I was told the union wanted better working conditions and were threatening a strike.”

“They did strike after the child of one of the workers was killed in an accident. He had hot water poured over his body and basically boiled alive. I wasn’t there for that. By the time Baron sent me, the men had gone back to work. It was that or starve.”

“But you heard dark rumblings of revenge?”

“Yes. When I first arrived, there was talk of revenge. When Vanderville was in Liverpool, he traveled with an armed escort.” Ambrose blew out a breath. “Protection against his own workers. A few of the men had some education. They proposed going to Parliament or the prime minister to ask for better working conditions as going to Vanderville had gotten them nowhere.”

“What about the strike? That had no effect?”

“It had an enormous effect. I’m sure Vanderville lost money hand over fist, but the men couldn’t afford to stay strong. They had to go back to work before they saw the true

impact of their collective actions. Honestly, it was difficult to play the role of observer. I found myself siding with the men, wanting them to succeed in their cause.”

“And you call yourself a nobleman.”

He gave her a sardonic smile. “Yes, well, I’m sure I would have come to my senses. In any case, I began to hear about a plot to murder the child of the prime minister. I didn’t know where it originated, though I have my suspicions, but it was all anyone spoke of between shifts.”

“And this plot was to avenge the death of the child killed in the factory.”

“That was how it seemed. I even wrote to Baron and told him the rumblings I’d heard. And then a week ago, everything changed.”

“How so?”

Ambrose met Maggie’s gaze and held it. He watched her swallow and look away. Perhaps she wasn’t as unaffected by him as she pretended. “I finally traced the rumor to its source.”

“And?” She glanced back at him, her gaze dropping to his chest, and then away again. Maggie, Maggie, Maggie. Was it possible she still felt something for him? Even if it was only desire, he could work with that.

“The source was Vanderville.”



MARGARET STRAIGHTENED. “What do you mean, Vanderville? The owner?”

Holyoake nodded, his beautiful gaze still fastened on her. The way he looked at her made her feel too warm. She had the urge to extinguish the fire she’d built in the hearth. It was summer and the weather was warm—warm for England, at any rate—outside. Perhaps they hadn’t needed the fire. “You mean, he had spies in the factory and had discovered the plan?” She lifted her pencil to jot this down.

“No. I mean, he invented the rumor himself.” He went on to explain the complicated fashion in which he’d traced the rumor back to Vanderville. Her head was spinning as he took her along the twisting tunnels and winding warrens of his exhaustive investigation. But she knew he was an expert agent. She didn’t doubt his methods.

After all, he’d taught her everything she knew.

Well, most of it, anyway.

“Did you report any of this to Baron?” she asked.

“No time,” he said. “I was following Vanderville by then and didn’t have a moment to send a report, especially after Vanderville realized he was being tracked and sent his assassin after me.”

“Did he find you?”

Holyoake gestured to his wound. “As you see.”

She did see. Holyoake had been badly injured. She had more questions now than before. Was the assassin still at large? Where was Vanderville? What should she tell Baron? Did Holyoake still love her? Had he ever loved her?

No, those last questions were irrelevant.

“What motive could Vanderville have for starting such a rumor? Why would he want the prime minister to think Vanderville’s factory workers intended to murder the minister’s son?”

“To encourage the prime minister to retaliate, I suppose. Vanderville lost thousands in the strike. He didn’t want to risk another.”

Margaret scribbled furiously on the pad. “I should code this and send it immediately. Baron needs to know. There are agents in the field.”

“Go ahead.” Holyoake closed his eyes. “I’ll just close my eyes for a moment.”

She watched his jaw go slack and sighed. He might have died if she hadn’t found him when she had. He was putting on

a brave face, but the fact that he hadn't written to Baron of his discovery told her his injury was serious. He would never have neglected his duty otherwise.

"You might as well have a lie down," she said, trying to make it sound casual. He was still a man and would not want his pride injured by feeling as though he needed to be taken care of or managed. "It will take me some time to code the letter and then I'll have to find one of our couriers and send it."

The Royal Saboteurs had trusted couriers to deliver missives to and from the various agents back to Baron at the Farm. They were stationed all around London and Britain. Margaret would have to check her mental list of courier stations, but she didn't have to think hard to know none were in Seven Dials.

Margaret removed one of Holyoake's pillows and helped him lie back. His eyes were closed, but he smiled at her attention and then his jaw went slack. She'd never seen him with more than two days' growth of beard. This beard had been grown for several weeks, if not more. She supposed it made for a good disguise among the other factory workers. She touched the beard, which was the same chestnut color as the hair on his head. The bristles were soft and rather luxurious. But then Holyoake had always had lovely hair, not like the red corkscrew confection on her own head.

She smoothed the hair back from his forehead then went to the washbasin, dipped a cloth in the cool water, and pressed it over his brow. She wasn't usually so maternal, but she was unreasonably glad to find him alive. There had been moments these past few days when she doubted.

When he didn't stir after a few moments, she lifted his hands from the sheets at his waist, intent on tucking them at his side. But she paused, taking one hand into her own and turning it over. He'd shown her the burn on his forearm and the calluses on his hands, but now she felt them. She'd always remembered his hands as being soft and well-manicured. He did work in the fields at Holyoake Hall, but he wore gloves

and had his ever-fussy valet rub lotions and creams on his hands to keep them soft and gentlemanly.

But there was no valet in sight now, and Holyoake's hands were red and rough, cracked in places from hard labor. She ran a finger over one of the coarse calluses and found that her heart sped up. What would it feel like to have these hands on her body? Holyoake's touch had always been soft and respectful, but these hands would scrape her skin and leave it burning.

Margaret closed her eyes and willed the sudden jolt of arousal to pass. What was wrong with her? She was here on a mission, and the agent she'd found was injured and weak. Her response should not be to lust after his rough hands. Not even if he were her husband.

She opened her eyes and tugged the sheet up, pausing to make sure the bandages she'd changed earlier were still intact. When she'd returned with the medicine and food, she'd had a quick look at his wound. The surgeon had sewn it neatly. It was not a large wound, less than an inch, but she thought it might be rather deep. It showed no sign of infection and Holyoake's low fever seemed to have dissipated now with the ingestion of the medicine she had given him.

She pulled the sheets higher and sighed over his thin chest. He'd never been a heavy man, but he was always hale and hearty. Now it seemed he was all muscle and bone, his skin stretched tight over his ribs. She'd buy more food and make him eat. He'd be healthy again before she returned to the Farm.

Would it be another three years before she saw him again?

Margaret rose and walked to the scarred table, taking the lamp with her. She hadn't ever expected to see him again when she'd left three years ago. She hadn't ever wanted to see him again. But her anger had faded. Apparently, her desire for him had not. But she could manage her emotions and her desires. She'd done so for the past three years, and she was even more in control of herself now. She wouldn't let her errant husband stir up old feelings.

She wrote a missive to Baron. She'd wanted to write something short, but she had to add some details to paint the whole picture. Then she painstakingly coded the entire message and wrote it again. By the time she finished, her back and her hand were aching. She prepared more medicine for Holyoake and was able to get him to take some without waking him. He swallowed the vile stuff, made a face, and went back to sleep.

Margaret found her cloak and went out to find a courier.

By the time she returned, it was just past dawn, and the streets were empty. Holyoake had mentioned an assassin. She would have been careful moving about Seven Dials regardless, but now she kept a watch out for potential assassins as well. If the hired man knew he hadn't succeeded in killing Holyoake, he might want to finish the job. She certainly did not want to lead the hired man to Holyoake.

She took a circuitous route back to Holyoake's flat and then slipped inside the door to the building. It smelled as bad as it had before, but she found she was becoming used to it. Surely, that could not be a good thing.

In the light of the open door, she caught the figure of the little girl. What was her name again? Vicky. She was sitting on the floor, pulling a piece of twine for her cat, who swatted at it half-heartedly.

"Good morning, Vicky," Margaret said. "You're up early."

"Tabby wanted to play, and me ma don't like when 'e wakes 'er."

"That's nice of you to bring him out here to play. Are you hungry?"

Even in the gloom, Vicky's eyes lit. "I could eat."

Margaret withdrew a warm meat pie wrapped in paper from her pocket. "Here you are. Share some with Tabby."

The cat was already in Vicky's lap, sniffing at the scents of bread and meat.

“Thank you,” Vicky called as Margaret started up the stairs.

“You’re welcome.”

Margaret told herself she was not going soft. She’d bought three pies, but that was because she’d intended to give Holyoake two. Yes, she knew he probably wouldn’t be up to eating even one. Still, one never knew. She hadn’t bought the extra pie for the child. But since she did have an extra pie, why not share?

She slipped in through the door and set her remaining pies on the table.

Then she froze. Something wasn’t right.

She spun to look at the bed and gasped when she noticed it was empty. How had she not seen that before?

“I’m here,” came a low male voice. Her gaze darted to a corner by the window. The flimsy drapes were pulled closed, but she could make out his form.

“What are you doing out of bed?” she asked, crossing the room to him.

“Doing what is necessary after you feed a man broth and medicine half the night. I paused to look out and saw you coming back.”

Margaret parted the drapes and looked down at the street below. Of course, he’d taken a room that had a view to the building’s entrance. “How long have you been standing there?” she asked.

“Not long.”

“You’d better get back to bed. You’ll catch your death.” She gave him a quick once-over, noting he wasn’t wearing stockings or his shirt. The fire in the hearth had burned down, and the room was chilly.

“Maggie, I didn’t know you cared.”

“I don’t. But Baron will want you alive.”

“Give me a hand, will you?”

The next thing she knew, he'd slung an arm over her shoulders and was leaning against her—all six-foot-one inches of warm male pressed to her side. Margaret was a tall woman at five-feet-nine inches, but she always felt short next to Holyoake. She tried to think where to place her arm and realized she had no choice but to wrap it about his waist. She could feel the warmth of his bare back as she led him to the bed.

“It smells like you brought breakfast.”

“I didn't know if you'd be up to solid food.”

“I haven't cast up my accounts yet. Let me try a few bites, and we'll see how I feel.”

How could he converse so easily when they were pressed together like this? She could barely think, and he was chatting away as though she helped his half-naked body back to bed every day.

At the bed, he removed his arm from her shoulders and sat. In the maneuvering, he accidentally dislodged her spectacles. They fell into his lap. She reached for them then paused, realizing she probably shouldn't be grabbing at things so close to his genitals.

Holyoake caught them, and she withdrew her hand. She thought he would hold them out for her to take, but instead, he inspected them, then moved to place them back on her face himself.

“I can do it,” she said, reaching for the spectacles.

“Allow me.” He moved them out of her reach. She might have grasped at them anyway, but she didn't want a scramble for her spectacles. So she stilled as he slid the spectacles' temples on top of her ears and placed the bridge on her nose. Slowly, he pushed the spectacles into place. “Now, you look like yourself.”

“Who do I look like without them?”

He considered. “Still Maggie, but naked and vulnerable.”

She swallowed. Because she didn't know what else to say, she murmured, "Don't call me that."

"No, I forgot, Maggie is the name I call you in the dark, when we're lying in bed together and I reach over and pull you ___"

"Holyoake."

He raised his brows.

"Don't."

"Why not? You are my wife, at least you were until you ran off."

"I ran off? You were not even home. You were never home. It's hard to run away from someone who is not there."

"Maggie—"

She gave him a look.

"Margaret, I tried to take you with me, when I could."

"As though I were some child to be shown the amusements of the world but never allowed to live in it fully."

"Well, I hope you are living as fully as you like now. For three years, I haven't known if you were alive or dead."

"You are a superior agent. You could have found me if you tried."

"I didn't think you wanted to be found."

"I didn't think I did either." She realized what she said a moment too late. But in that moment, she gave Holyoake a small opening. He was never one to waver, and he jumped through. He took her hand in his and pulled her body between his legs. She could feel the newly formed calluses on that hand, rubbing against her palm in the most delicious manner. He lifted his other hand and slid it along her cheek. She closed her eyes at the contrast between the softness of his touch and the roughness of his palm. His fingers curled around the back of her neck and pulled her face to his.

Neither of them moved for a long, long moment. Their eyes had locked, and their breaths rose and fell in unison. Both anticipated the kiss, but neither acted to close the whisper of a gap between their mouths.

Margaret wanted to be the one to resist, the one to pull away. She'd show him she no longer wanted him. She'd show him their marriage was over.

From somewhere in the back of her throat, a small, needy sound emerged. It sounded suspiciously like a moan. She tried to stifle it, but it seemed that moan had unleashed all of the pent-up need of the past three years. Her arms locked around Holyoake's shoulders, one of her hands finding his thick hair. She tangled her fingers in it and forced his head up a notch. Then she pressed her lips to his.

Kissing him with the beard was novel. She'd thought it would scratch, but it was soft. Margaret allowed her hand to drift from his hair to his jaw so that she might touch that new growth. But other than the beard, kissing him was like coming home again. How she had missed his soft lips and his warm mouth. How she had longed for the skilled way he used his tongue to stoke her desire.

She hadn't kissed a man in three years. She'd pushed all carnal feelings aside, ignored them and her body's needs as she worked in the field and then trained at the Farm. Her desires now rose up like a flame, feeding on the tinder that was Holyoake's touch, his scent, his lips. She was burning, and she didn't want to extinguish the fire.



Chapter Three



Ambrose had not forgotten what it was like to kiss Maggie. How it consumed him. How it utterly destroyed him. He'd been so angry when she'd left—well, when he'd come home and discovered she'd left. He'd wanted to punish her. Now he could think of nothing more than giving her pleasure. He wanted to hear more of her moans. He wanted her clutching at his shoulders and calling his name.

His Christian name—Ambrose.

Ambrose moved to pull her into his lap and hissed in a gasp of pain. He'd forgotten about his damn wound.

Maggie drew back. "You're hurt. I should have been more careful."

"It's my own fault. I moved too quickly. I'll just have to move slower. You like things slow." He tried to kiss her again, but she moved back.

"You're injured. You should be lying down and resting. In fact, it's probably time for more medicine."

"Damn the medicine, Maggie. I want you."

She stepped back. "Well, you can't have me. I shouldn't have allowed you to kiss me. I forgot myself for a moment."

"*Allowed* me to—you kissed me!"

"It doesn't matter who began it." She moved to the table and retrieved the medicine bottle. "I'm ending it. In fact, as soon as you are well enough, I'll go back to the Farm. My mission was to find you and report what you knew to Baron. I've done that." She held out a spoon. "Open up."

Ambrose did so, swallowing the vile-tasting medicine. Whatever the stuff was, it worked. His knife wound had gone from a searing pain to a dull throb. He'd been lying in bed for at least a day before she had shown up, but he was still tired.

He didn't argue when she helped him lie back and tugged the sheet up around him.

She'd leave tomorrow or first thing in the morning the day after. He didn't want her to go. "Your mission isn't over," he said before he could think better of it.

Her gaze lifted.

"The assassin who came after me may be hired to murder the prime minister's son. We must find him and stop him before it's too late."

Maggie's eyes narrowed. "Baron has two agents stationed at the prime minister's country house. They won't allow an assassin to hurt the child."

"I'm sure they won't, but I didn't exactly allow the man to stab me, and I'll wager I have more experience than the men Baron assigned." He shrugged. "I could be wrong."

Maggie looked down, giving nothing away and everything. "We'll talk about it in the morning."

"It is morning."

"When it's light. Sleep now."

"What about you?" he asked. "Surely you need sleep as well. I could shove over—"

"I'm fine," she said tersely. "We'll talk more when you've had some rest."

Ambrose humored her by closing his eyes. When he opened them again, the sunlight streamed through the open drapes of the window. He'd never closed the drapes the night before. His gaze roved the room until it landed on Maggie, head on her arms at the table. She'd removed her spectacles and placed them neatly beside the book at her elbow. He could imagine her thinking she'd just put her head down for a moment.

Ambrose sat slowly, testing his wound. It still hurt, but the hurt was one of healing—skin being knotted back together. Not the pain of infection. He couldn't assess his own skin for

fever, but he didn't feel as though he had a fever. He felt... hungry.

His gaze drifted to Maggie again. What the devil had he been thinking asking her to work with him to catch Vanderville's hired assassin? He was her husband. His role was to protect her.

And for all the fervor with which he'd played that role, he'd only succeeded in pushing her away. Maggie didn't want to be protected. Her outward bookish appearance hid the passionate woman within. She had as much of a taste for adventure and danger as he did.

At first, he'd enjoyed that side of her. She was inventive and energetic in bed. She was curious about his work for the Foreign Office. When they first married, he'd become a foreign diplomat—a position that allowed him to collect intelligence on the governments of foreign powers. He knew who their leaders met with and who was turned away, who formed alliances and who broke them. He sent all of the intelligence back to the Foreign Secretary.

He'd explained to Maggie that her role, as the wife of a diplomat, was to play hostess to the diplomats of other countries and visitors from their own. To his surprise, Maggie rebelled. He hadn't required this of her when they'd been in England. His mother was the dowager viscountess then and happily took on the role of society matron. Ambrose hadn't ever considered that Maggie wouldn't want that role as well.

He hadn't realized that even when she attempted it, she failed miserably.

Ambrose didn't understand. She'd been raised the daughter of a gentleman. Her family's property bordered his own country estate. They'd known each other for years before they wed. She was perfectly capable of hosting a dinner party. Her mother had hosted dozens over the years, many of which he'd attended. But a couple years into their marriage, Ambrose realized he didn't really know Maggie at all.

Yes, he knew what her favorite foods were and her favorite positions in bed, but he didn't know her hopes and dreams.

She told him one night, after they'd fought because he'd insisted she host several members of his staff for a small gathering. She'd barely spoken a word during the entire evening, and at one point, she'd disappeared. He'd had a strong suspicion she'd gone to her chamber to read.

He'd drank too much, and he hadn't been careful with his words. "What is wrong with you?" he'd snapped. "Why can't you behave as a woman ought?"

She'd recoiled visibly. "And how is a woman to behave?"

"Smile, laugh, look pretty. Play the hostess and do me credit."

Her shoulders had straightened, which he knew was a bad sign. But he was too drunk to shut his mouth before he put his foot in.

"And that's my role in life? To make you look good?"

"That's not what I mean."

"You said I need to behave in a way that does you credit. I suppose the fact that we don't have children hurts your credit as a man as well."

"Maggie, you know I've never cared that we don't have children, but I do care about my career."

"And what about my desires?" she asked. "What about what I want?"

"I care about your desires," he shot back. "I never leave you unsatisfied."

She stared at him, and he realized he'd misunderstood. She hadn't been talking about the bedchamber. She'd been talking about her dreams and aspirations for her life. But weren't her dreams his dreams? Didn't she want him to advance in his career? What more did a woman want than to help her husband succeed? Ambrose was not a complete idiot—not most of the time—and he loved Maggie, so he did what seemed reasonable. "What is it you want?" he asked.

Looking at her now, corkscrew curls spilling over her arms and making a splash on the worn table, he could almost hear

her say the words she'd said four years ago.

"I want to be your partner."

He'd taken her hands. "You are my partner. You're my wife."

"No. Your *partner*. Your equal. I want to learn to do what you do. To cipher, to gather intelligence, to be a spy."

Ambrose had almost said, *Women aren't spies*, but he'd held his tongue. Firstly, that wasn't true. He'd known of a handful of female agents over the years. One was the wife of Baron, the leader of the Royal Saboteurs, an elite group Ambrose hoped to join when he returned from the Continent. Secondly, he had the sudden thought that Maggie would make a very good spy. No one would suspect her.

She could eavesdrop without being noticed. She was very good at disappearing when she didn't want to be seen. If he taught her some rudimentary codes, she could send missives for him, easing his own workload.

"Fine. I'll teach you," he'd said.

Her eyes had lit up with a brightness he had only seen in them a few times before. She'd kissed him so passionately that they hadn't even made it to their bed before taking each other. He still blushed to think what the servants must have said of them.

Ambrose had reasoned if it made Maggie this happy for him to teach her a bit about being an agent for the Crown, what harm could there be?

How wrong he had been.

She made a sound now, and he watched as she lifted her head from her arms and blinked up at him. Her spectacles corrected her vision so she might see distances. He was standing close enough that she could see him clearly. "What are you doing up?" she asked.

"Contemplating my mistakes."

"That could take all day." She twisted and blinked at the sunlight. "It's later than I wanted. You need more medicine."

“Fine.” He moved toward the table to lift the spoon and vial. He could take it himself. He didn’t need to be fed. “Is there any food left?” he asked after he’d downed the medicine.

She shook her head and lifted her spectacles, polishing the glass on a corner of her skirt. “I need more coin. I only brought a few shillings with me. I can get more—”

“I have blunt. I’ll wash and change, and we’ll go together to break our fast. If you’re to assist me with the capture of the assassin, you’ll want to know where the attack occurred and the places he frequents.”

“You were serious, then? You will really allow me to help with this?”

“I said I would.”

“Yes, but then I figured you would change your mind because you would remember I am a woman and too delicate.”

“That was never my objection to you becoming an agent,” he said, going to the washbasin and pouring water from the ewer into it. At some point, Maggie had filled the ewer with fresh cold water. “I only wanted to protect you.”

“There’s such a thing as protection, but when that crosses over into imprisonment, it becomes more about your wants and less about my safety.”

Ambrose wanted to take issue with her use of the word *imprisonment*, but they’d had this argument before. He didn’t want to start it again. What he did want was to win Maggie back. And it seemed the best way to go about that was to stop telling her he had changed and instead show her.

The problem was, Ambrose wasn’t quite sure he *had* changed.



MARGARET DID NOT BELIEVE for a moment that Holyoake had changed. Yes, he *said* he wanted her help capturing the assassin, but he had given her opportunities to help before. And then as soon as they were in the thick of it,

he'd panicked about her becoming injured or killed or traumatized and pushed her aside or left her behind.

At first, Margaret was understanding. Her husband loved her. He wanted to keep her safe. He was afraid something would happen to her. She'd discussed this with him. She'd tried to explain that she wanted to do something more than host garden parties and sip tea with Society matrons. She was no good at social affairs. She might be a viscountess in title, but in the eyes of polite society, she was a nothing.

Margaret had never cared about being a nothing before. She lived a thousand lives through her books. But once she and Holyoake left for the Continent and she had a taste of his work, she couldn't stop herself from wanting more. She wanted purpose. She wanted adventure. She wanted to do something meaningful.

Oh, very well. Truth be told, she wanted excitement.

She could understand why Holyoake was initially amused and then concerned. She hadn't seemed the sort of woman who would want excitement. She'd always lived a quiet life. But perhaps that was because the only excitement ever available to her before was dancing at a ball or shopping in Bond Street. Those were tedious chores compared to the thrill of tracking another agent or intercepting a coded missive.

"Well, we'll throw caution to the wind today," Holyoake said now in response to her accusation about him imprisoning her. She raised her brows. She thought that comment would stir his anger, but he was hiding his emotions well. Or perhaps his feelings toward her had changed. Perhaps she had been away so long that he didn't love her anymore and didn't care if she was hurt or killed in the line of duty.

Perhaps he had taken a lover.

Margaret watched as he crossed the room and opened a trunk near the bed. He tossed several garments on the floor then chose a pair of trousers and a shirt. The discarded garments were tossed back in the trunk in a heap. It appeared some things hadn't changed. She pushed aside the urge to

open the trunk and fold the garments neatly. Instead, she watched as her husband gingerly removed his shirt.

She couldn't blame him if he had taken a lover. After all, she'd abandoned him. She didn't believe what he'd said yesterday—that he hadn't known whether she was alive or dead. He was a talented agent. He'd known where she was and probably what she was doing. He hadn't seemed to know she was a Royal Saboteur, but then the identity of those agents was highly guarded.

Holyoake finally managed to remove his shirt, and Margaret's mouth went dry. His back was to her, and she had always had a weakness for his back. He had broad shoulders and sculpted muscles that tapered into a slim waist. He was thinner now than he had been, the muscles stretched tightly, but he was still an impressive male specimen. He lifted a cloth, dipped it in the water, and applied soap. With a practiced efficiency, he scrubbed his chest, arms, and the part of his back he could reach.

Margaret wanted to offer to help with the parts he couldn't reach, but she knew where that would lead. He still wanted her. He'd told her that last night. She still wanted him too.

She wanted her freedom more, she reminded herself as he dropped a clean shirt over his upper body and bent to remove his trousers. The shirt was long enough that she probably wouldn't see his backside, but she turned to give him privacy all the same.

Or perhaps she wanted to avoid temptation.

She went to the table and lifted her reticule, removing the knife inside and sliding it into the sheath inside her boot. Holyoake had placed his pistol on the table as well. She lifted it, testing the weight. Far too heavy for her to use it with any accuracy. In training, she'd done well with lighter firearms.

“Ready?” Holyoake asked.

“Yes.” Margaret turned to him, and he eyed the pistol in her hands warily.

“I'll take that.”

She handed it over, surreptitiously looking him up and down. He cleaned up well and looked almost presentable even with a rumpled neckcloth and dusty coat. He would have looked like a gentleman heading home after a drunken night out if not for the bruises all over his face. Those gave him a rather dangerous look.

“Are you certain you’re well enough to go out?”

He’d been attempting to move about the flat as though nothing troubled him, but she was his wife. She could see that he favored his injured side.

“I’m fine. Don’t think I’ll allow you to have all the fun without me.”

“Lead on,” she said and followed him out the door.

Vicky and Tabby weren’t outside the door to the flat on the ground floor. It was late morning now, so perhaps they were off doing whatever they did during the day. The street outside the building was still empty. Holyoake had chosen his quarters well.

“Where do you want to begin?” she asked.

He glanced at her over his shoulder, his face somewhat shadowed by the tricorn he’d set on his head just before they stepped outside. *Clever*, she thought. It would hide some of the bruising.

“Where do you think we should begin?”

“I’m not your student any longer,” she said. “But any student would answer the same—the last place you encountered the assassin.”

“That was at a tavern in Marylebone.”

Margaret looked at the sky. It was clear, the sun peeking through the quickly moving clouds. The weather was mild but a bit windy. She didn’t think they’d be caught in a rain shower, but Marylebone was a good long walk from Seven Dials.

“Should we hail a hackney?”

“Where would we find a hackney in Seven Dials? We’ll walk.”

“Are you certain you’re up to that?”

“Are you certain you are?”

Margaret tilted her own hat to shield her fair skin from the sun and started toward Marylebone. Holyoake was at her side immediately. “I’m still hungry, but we can eat at the tavern. I trust the food there more than the fare we might buy here.”

“Agreed,” she said. “Can you describe the assassin, so I know who to be looking for?”

“A man with dark hair, about five and a half feet tall, and quick. Thin and wiry, not some big brute. The sort of man who can slide in and out of shadows.”

“That describes half of the criminal element in London. What about his face?”

“I didn’t get much of a look at it. No scars, nothing to make him stand out.”

As they made their way through Seven Dials and toward the sundial pillar that marked the entrance and exit, the number of people they encountered increased. Children, in particular, seemed to be everywhere. Margaret held on to her reticule, fingers closed around the drawstring. She didn’t have anything in her pockets, and more than once she felt little fingers inside those pockets, searching. The children gave Holyoake a wider berth, and at one point, he growled at them, scattering them and giving her room to walk more quickly. “I hope you have enough coin left by the time we reach this tavern. What is the name of it?”

“The Queen’s Arms. He must have tracked me there. I had an appointment to meet with one of Vanderville’s former servants. The man never showed, and after waiting two hours, I left. He caught me just outside. A few well-placed blows and a quick jab, and then he was gone.”

Margaret glanced at him. “He didn’t stay to make sure you were mortally wounded?”

“I made enough noise to attract attention. If I hadn’t, he might have finished the job. This is just a scratch.”

Yes, that was why he looked pale and had a sheen of perspiration on his brow. Even the hat couldn't hide the toll even a twenty-minute walk was taking on him. Margaret forced herself to cease asking questions so Holyoake might save his strength. Once outside of Seven Dials, she complained that her feet hurt and made him hail a hackney. Inside, he gave her a long look from the other side of the conveyance.

"I could have made it."

"Yes, but I'd rather you not collapse. You're too heavy for me to carry back to that awful building and up a flight of stairs."

He let out a sigh and closed his eyes. "I'll be fine once I have something to eat."

She made a neutral sound and, since he had his eyes closed, took the opportunity to study him. She liked him with the beard. He was what, about eight and twenty now, and the beard made him look older, more mature. She could barely see any trace of the boy she had known when they'd been children or even when they'd first married. She wondered if, when he looked at her, he saw any traces of the girl she'd been.

In the three years she'd been gone, she felt as though she had lived a lifetime.

"You didn't come after me," she said, only realizing she'd spoken aloud when he opened his eyes. His eyes were so lovely, unusual but dark enough that she could lose herself in their amber-gold depths.

"No, I didn't," he said.

Margaret thought that would be the end of it, and thank God. Why had she even mentioned it? She looked out the window of the coach, watching the throngs of people moving along the side of the street and across it.

"I wanted to," he said.

She closed her eyes, surprised at the sting of pain inflicted by his words.

“I had to all but tie myself down not to go after you. But every time I gathered my coat and my hat, I thought about what would happen when I found you. What would happen if I dragged you back. You’d come, and you’d stay for a little while. We’d argue; we’d make love. And then you’d leave again.”

She opened her eyes and caught her breath at the intense way he was looking at her.

“In those days of fighting myself, I finally realized something,” he said.

“What was that?” she whispered.

“You needed something more than me. I would never be enough for you, and as many times as I dragged you back, you would leave again. You were all I ever wanted, but I had to accept the same wasn’t true for you.”

Margaret lowered her lashes, reached across the coach, and put her hand on his knee. Then she moved her hand slightly and pinched the tender skin of his inner thigh viciously, causing him to jump.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“That was for that pile of excrement you just spouted. *You were all I ever wanted.* What a load of horse manure.”



Chapter Four



Ambrose scowled at his wife and rubbed his still smarting leg. “It’s not horse manure.”

“Oh, really? If I was all you ever wanted, then explain to me why we had to remove to the Continent for your career as a diplomat? Why you continuously hounded me to host this ambassador or that ambassador? Why you forced me to go shopping week after week for new gown after new gown—”

“How dare I torture you,” he drawled.

“It *was* torture. I hate dressmakers. All they do is criticize. I’m too tall. I’m too thin. My complexion is too spotty. Must I wear my spectacles?”

Ambrose sat forward. She had never said any of this to him before. He thought women loved shopping for new gowns. His mother and sister always spent weeks planning their shopping trips to Town. Why hadn’t he ever considered that Maggie didn’t enjoy shopping any more than she enjoyed attending social events? She preferred to stay home and read. He enjoyed a quiet night at home as well, but quiet nights at home didn’t further his career.

“Maggie—”

She held up a hand. “But do you know what was even worse than all the parties and the shopping and the pretending to smile when all I really wanted was to close my eyes and sleep for a week? It was when you were away. Then I *could* close my eyes and sleep for a week, but I also desperately wanted to because I missed you so terribly. You would go for weeks at a time, and I’d hear nothing from you.”

“I couldn’t write on assignment. I explained that.”

“It didn’t make me feel any less lonely. Stuck in a foreign country with no friends or family. I was so alone. After I read so much my head hurt, I used to practice lockpicking or

ciphering to while away the hours. Perhaps if we'd been in England, among friends and the familiar, I would have managed it better."

He'd known she was lonely. He hated to think of her like that, and yet when he'd been called away on a mission, he seemed to forget how much time passed. He'd come home and couldn't understand why she wasn't happy to see him. Why she was sullen and resentful.

"I tried taking you with me when I could. That was my first mistake."

"That was one of the only things you did right. When I was with you on a mission, I had purpose and meaning. It was thrilling."

It had been thrilling, but not for the reasons she said. He'd liked having her with him, but even more he'd liked the way she came alive when she was working with him. She'd seemed to glow from within and, at times, he would have difficulty looking away from her as she was so lovely. So alive.

"It was dangerous," he added.

"I liked the danger."

"That's what worried me. You seemed intent on getting yourself killed."

"And yet, three years as an agent, and I am still very much alive. I told you then that I could take care of myself. But you wouldn't listen. You insisted on locking me up—"

"Maggie—"

"*Margaret.*"

"*Wife.* I didn't *lock* you up."

"Not with chains or bolts, but you went away without me. You left me alone for weeks and weeks. Was that because I was all you ever wanted? Ha. What you really wanted was to become a Royal Saboteur."

"It seems that was what you wanted too. Because one day I came home, and you were gone." The old anger burned in him

again. He hadn't felt it so strongly in years, but now it boiled up in him as hot and potent as it had been the day he returned home and found her bags packed and their bed empty. The pain that had speared him then lanced through him again, as sharp as the assassin's knife had felt when it plunged into his flesh. Except Maggie had stabbed him through the heart.

"I was tired of trying to explain! You wouldn't listen to me, so I acted."

"You left me."

"Not before *you* left *me*."

"Oi! Ye want me to sit 'ere all the day?" the jarvey called.

Ambrose glanced out the window and realized they had reached the Queen's Arms. They'd been sitting outside the tavern for several minutes. He pushed the door to the hackney open and stepped out. His wound ached, but he ignored it and turned to offer his hand to Maggie. She pushed it away and stepped down from the coach on her own. Ambrose flipped the jarvey a coin and followed her toward the Queen's Arms.

She paused on the street outside it, looking at the shops on the right and the left and then turning and examining the shops across the street. Everything looked very much as it should in Marylebone, but Ambrose waited patiently, even if his side throbbed and he wanted nothing more than to sit down and eat.

"Show me where you were waiting for Vanderville's staff member," she said, gesturing to the tavern.

A quick glance through the establishment's windows showed him the table he'd occupied that night was empty. They entered, and he led her to it. He would have pulled out a chair for her, but she walked ahead of him and seated herself. Ambrose sat across from her and signaled a server. He ordered tea and half the menu. Maggie waited until he was finished then told the server to disregard all of that except the tea and to bring them both plain toast. Ambrose began to object, but Maggie tossed him a look of warning and he closed his mouth. The server seemed to know who was in charge and scurried away.

“You’ve been ill,” she said. “The last thing you need is sausage and blood pudding. You’ll be sick. Stick to toast. Perhaps porridge.”

“Now you’re punishing me.”

She smiled, obviously remembering that he detested porridge. “You deserve it.” Then her expression went serious, and she pointed out the window beside their table. “I can see why you chose this table. You can observe everyone who walks by. No doubt you wanted to know when your informant arrived.”

“Or didn’t arrive, as the case may be.”

“Correct. But this table affords anyone looking for you a perfect opportunity to observe as well.” She pointed at the building across the busy street. Several men stood outside smoking and chatting.

“It’s a coffee house,” he said. “Members’ only.” Did she think he hadn’t surveilled the area before deciding to meet here?

“And it’s a perfect place for the assailant to wait and watch for you.”

“Assuming he was a member.”

She gestured to the men standing outside. “Are all of them members?”

“I don’t know.”

The server returned with weak tea and dry toast. Ambrose ate two pieces posthaste then sat back, the pounding in his head lessening. “How would he know I would be here?”

“Because he extracted that information from the servant you were supposed to meet before killing him.”



HOLYOAKE DROPPED HIS third piece of toast and stared at her. Had he really not considered the reason that Vanderville’s former servant hadn’t met him was because the man was dead?

“You can’t know that for certain.”

“It’s easy enough to determine. The Metropolitan Police will have a record of murders. We ask about any bodies found the night you were attacked.”

Holyoake lowered his head. “I should have done that already.”

Margaret felt a sudden sense of sympathy for him. She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. “You were intent on staying alive. I’m amazed you were able to think straight enough to make it to a surgeon. You must have lost a great deal of blood. Speaking of which, show me where you were attacked.”

He gave her a look she knew well. That look that said don’t-rush-me. He lifted his toast again and ate it, drank more tea, and then attacked another piece of toast. She nibbled her own, knowing she had to eat or else she would be hungry and tired later. She was eager to be on their way now, to track the assassin and perhaps even capture him and find out what he knew. If Vanderville intended to send him to kill the prime minister’s son, then she could stop him before he ever left. The agents there would be safe, as would the boy.

Baron would see he had made the right decision in giving her this assignment. She’d waited eighteen months for her first mission, only to realize the reason she’d finally been given one was because her target was her estranged husband. She wanted a mission she earned on her own, not by virtue of her marriage.

But then she glanced at Holyoake and wondered how she would ever leave him again. Leaving him once had been hard enough. How could she walk away again? It was so much easier to pretend she didn’t still love him when they were apart. Now that they were together, all her feelings had bubbled to the surface. She still loved him, perhaps more now than she ever had because she realized how close she had come to losing him.

“I’m still hungry, but we’re out of tea and toast,” he said, rising. “Come and I’ll show you the scene of the attack.”

She smiled at how dramatic he sounded. Hopefully, his mood would improve now that he'd eaten. She knew she had angered him in the hackney. Part of that had been necessary as he seemed to have a faulty memory when it came to the realities of their marriage.

You were all I ever wanted.

She wanted to smack him for spouting such drivel. Even if it had been true, she wouldn't have liked it. Everyone needed interests and pursuits outside marriage. His just took him away for months at a time, and she was not content with whiling away her life with dressmakers and tea parties.

Now they were working together. *Truly* working as partners, and she was thrilled. But she also feared it was only a matter of time before his anger and pride resurfaced and he insisted on taking the lead to protect her, either because he really feared for her life or because he didn't think her capable.

She thought, more often than not, it had been the latter reason that spurred him to leave her behind.

Now she rose and followed him through the tavern and out a back door. They emerged into a small yard where damp tablecloths flapped in the breeze from a saggy clothesline. "Why did you come out this way?" she asked.

"I knew he hadn't come in the front. I wanted to make sure he wasn't waiting for me in the back. My plan was to then go back around the front and make one last search for him."

"But the assassin was waiting for you. Here?" She pointed to an area where stones had been laid in a rough pattern.

He nodded. As he moved closer, he spotted the pale splotches of blood that even the recent rains hadn't managed to completely wash away. "Perhaps I need a pair of spectacles. You found that rather quickly," he said.

"I just looked for the most likely place someone would lie in wait."

"If he was waiting across the street, he would have seen me rise from my table. When I didn't emerge through the front door after a moment, he would have assumed I'd go out the

back. In the time it would have taken me to make my way through the crowded tavern and examine all of the patrons, he could run across the street and step into the shadows there. It's only a few steps from the gate."

No doubt Holyoake was an excellent agent. That was exactly what she'd surmised. He removed his hat and used it to fan himself. She couldn't help but notice how handsome he looked. She would *not* think about those calluses on his fingers. Margaret cleared her throat. "Er—I suppose we should track the assassin down. That won't be easy since you didn't get a good look at him."

"I imagine if he's still in Town, he'll find me."

"To finish the job," she said. "I won't let that happen."

The look on Holyoake's face was almost comical. His jaw dropped, and he stared at her as though she'd just claimed to be Queen Victoria. Margaret drew herself up. "That's right, Holyoake. This time *I'll* protect *you*."

"Is it wrong that you saying that makes me want you even more?" His eyes darkened with a look she knew well. Heat flooded her face and spiraled down to her belly. She took a shaky breath and tried to think of a witty rejoinder. He stepped forward and she licked her lips as he pushed her up against the wall of the tavern. She gasped in pleasure as his mouth came down hot on hers.

They were out in the open, and someone could come upon them at any moment. Not to mention, they were on assignment.

Margaret didn't care a whit. Her hands came up and she curled her fingers in Holyoake's hair, keeping him in place. His hot mouth teased and tantalized until she opened her lips and allowed him inside. His tongue lashed at hers, took without asking, and stole her breath away. When he pulled her body tight against his, and she felt the hardness of his erection, she moaned in response. She needed him, needed this so badly. It had been so long.

His hands on her waist slid upward until his palms glided over her aching breasts.

“Yes,” she breathed, panting with need.

His mouth trailed across her jaw and then down the column of her neck, while his hands skated down her body and began to ruche up her skirts.

“Ambrose,” she moaned.

He looked up at her. “What’s this? No Holyoake?”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

He did. His mouth claiming hers again, the scrape of his beard unfamiliar and enticing. And then his hands found her drawers and his fingers slipped inside the slit, finding her skin. He inhaled sharply and pulled away. “You’re ready.”

“It’s been a long time,” she said.

“How long?” he asked as his roughened fingers stroked her gently, causing her to squirm in anticipation.

“Three years,” she breathed. One of his fingers entered her, and then another.

“No one has touched you here in three years?” He kissed her again, stroking her in a way that made her head spin. “A passionate woman like you. How did you survive it?”

“I have no idea,” she said, allowing her head to fall back as he found that spot that gave her the most pleasure and applied a delicious pressure. She caught her lip between her teeth to keep from crying out, and then she did so anyway as he brought her to a quick, hard climax. She thought she might slump to the ground, but he caught her and buried his face in her neck.

“God, but I love the sounds you make when you come.” His tongue flicked out to taste her neck, making her squirm with renewed pleasure. “I want to taste you.”

“Not here,” she said, already appalled at what they had just done. “We shouldn’t even have done...what we just did.”

“Then let’s go back to the flat. I want to strip you naked and lick every single inch of you.”

Margaret shivered in anticipation. Then she shook her head. “Baron,” she said.

Holyoake blew out a breath. “I don’t want to think about the mission right now.”

“There are agents in the field counting on us. Friends of mine.”

He sighed. “I know. I know. You’re right.” He set her on her feet and stepped away, raking a hand through his hair, then wincing at the pain the movement must have caused to his injury.

“Holyoake, you should go back and lie down. I can go to Vanderville’s and break in. I’ll see what I can find out and report back to you.”

“No, even if that were possible, I wouldn’t allow you to go on your own. Especially because you won’t ever get inside. I’ve tried. He has more security than Buckingham Palace.”

“I want to see it anyway.”

“Of course, you do. And once you do, we can make a plan to get inside. I don’t think either of us could do it alone, but together...” He trailed off and looked contemplative. “It might just be possible.”

Margaret swallowed and straightened her skirts, the last vestiges of pleasure still thrumming through her blood. His words touched her as much as his hands had earlier. She didn’t dare believe he might mean it, but just the chance made her want to push Holyoake against the wall and ravage him as he had just done to her. But she herself had pointed out that they had more important obligations. And thank God she had a reason to stop herself.

The question was how she would resist later?



AMBROSE WATCHED AS Maggie tried to compose herself. He was secretly glad she seemed to be struggling. Her struggle showed him she wanted him as much as he wanted her. But she was right that they had to put that aside. For now.

Finding and neutralizing the assassin should be their top priority.

Of course, now that he wasn't thinking about how good it would feel to plunge his cock inside her, his wound had begun to ache again. Maggie opened her reticule but instead of withdrawing her ever-present book, she pulled out the vial of medicine. "You look like you need more of this."

"I'll take that," he said, downing it, "and some sausages. I'm still hungry."

"We'll buy something from a street vendor after we go to Vanderville's," she promised. He'd hold her to that. She never seemed hungry and often forgot to eat, but his empty belly reminded him when it needed filling.

They made their way around to the front of the tavern, and he hailed yet another hackney. This time they managed to make the trip without starting an argument. The coach slowed to a stop on the outskirts of Mayfair. For someone who wasn't born into wealth, finding a town house in Mayfair itself was almost impossible, but a businessman with new money like Vanderville could afford a gaudy house close to Mayfair, and that's just what he had purchased.

Ambrose climbed out of the coach and paid the jarvey then joined Maggie on the walk across the street from Vanderville's residence.

"That is truly hideous," she said, gesturing at the enormous, overly ornate home taking up half the block. "I have never seen so much scrollwork."

"I care less about the outward appearance as I do about the impossibility of getting inside. It's a veritable fortress. He has a man on every door and dogs patrolling the grounds."

"We need to go inside. We should go through Vanderville's personal papers and ferret out the name and residence of the

assassin.”

“Before I was attacked, I was planning to break in. I’d tried multiple times to gain an audience with Vanderville. I used my calling card”—Maggie glanced at him, knowing he hated to use his title for anything—“and even pretended to be an investor. He was never at home. When I tried to break in, my attempts were discovered within moments.”

“It’s my turn then,” she said. “You stay here as you’re sure to be recognized by the staff.” She started across the street, strides long and gait determined. Ambrose’s research told him Vanderville was not wed, but if he had an interest in women, he didn’t flaunt it. Even so, Maggie wasn’t the sort of woman men who dealt with the demimonde preferred. She wasn’t coy or charming or classically beautiful. She wasn’t amply endowed. If the butler had orders to admit delectable women, the door would close in Maggie’s face.

Which just showed what fools most men were. He’d loved Maggie since they were children. She’d been tall and gangly even then, but she was clever and creative, and he would choose her to play with over any of his brothers or sisters. She didn’t have siblings and preferred to spend her free time reading. She loved to discuss books with him and argue over who was a better hero—Odysseus or Hector.

When he was home from school, he’d try to impress her with his mastery of Latin or Greek, but she’d always kept up with him on her own. And then one year he came home from school and forgot about trying to prove he was better at geometry. He realized she had grown up while he’d been away. Her unruly hair looked lush and lovely. Her too big mouth looked perfect for kissing. And her intelligent eyes were expressive and beautiful. He wanted to kiss her more than beat her at chess.

When he’d confessed as much, she’d laughed and told him it was about time. She’d loved him as more than a friend for years. They hadn’t rushed to marry. He had his education to finish, and her mother sent her to school and went through a bevy of governesses who tried valiantly to turn Maggie into the sort of woman who would make a perfect viscountess. She

had a failed Season in London and came home saying the whole thing had been a waste of time and silk. Ambrose had been relieved she hadn't found some other man to fall in love with and proposed on the spot.

From then on, he was hers and she was his, officially. She'd always been his, unofficially.

Until she wasn't.

He'd found a railing to lean on while she argued with the butler at the Vanderville residence. His stomach rumbled and his wound throbbed, and he wanted to close his eyes and block it all out for a time. He forced himself to keep watch, though, in case the assassin made an appearance.

A few minutes later, Maggie stomped back across the street. "That man is an idiot," she said.

He nodded. "Wouldn't let you in."

"Wouldn't even tell me if Vanderville was at home. I think that he is, and I think we will need to break in late at night and take a look at those papers. Not only will we be able to find out the identity of your assassin, we can search for anything that might tie Vanderville to the plot to murder the prime minister's son." She glanced at Ambrose. "And you look as though you are about to topple over. Let's take you back to the flat."

"Sausages," he reminded her. "You promised me food."

"What you need is a nap, but I'll fetch you food. And then if you don't rest, I'll hit you over the head and knock you out."

"Darling," he said. "I love it when you whisper sweet nothings."



Chapter Five

Margaret returned to the flat in the late afternoon. Vicky and Tabby were still missing. She thought about knocking on the door and offering whoever answered a share of the meat and veg pies she had bought, but she decided to look for Vicky later. She made her way up the stairs, not as bothered by the dark as she had been at first, and tapped out a quick code on Holyoake's door before entering. He'd been asleep when she'd left, but if he was awake now, she didn't want to enter and face the mouth of his pistol.

She entered the flat and found it still dark, the fire in the hearth burning low, which was perfect for this time of year. She closed the door quietly behind her. She'd broken the ineffective lock when she'd kicked it in, but now she dragged a chair in front of it. At least they would have a warning if anyone tried to enter.

The lump in the bed hadn't moved, and she placed the pies near the hearth to keep them warm. Then she removed her outerwear, washed her hands, and went to check on Holyoake. He was sleeping peacefully. She touched his forehead and found it cool. She couldn't check his wound without waking him, and she thought he needed his sleep.

She needed sleep as well. They could both sleep for a few hours until night fell, and they could go back to Vanderville's home. Margaret glanced at the table, where she'd rested her head and tried to sleep the night before. Then she looked at the bed. It was large enough for two, and though Holyoake lay on his back, he wasn't sprawled over the mattress. She could climb in and lie on her side. That possibility seemed infinitely preferable to the hard wooden table. She'd sleep an hour or two then slip back out and Holyoake would never be the wiser.

Margaret went back to the washstand and removed her dress and other garments, so she wore only her shift. She unbound her hair and quickly washed. Then she padded to the

bed, pulled back the threadbare blanket, and climbed in beside Holyoake. She kept to the very edge of the bed and tried to keep from touching him. Strange to be sleeping with a man again. Strange to be sleeping with her husband. Being beside him felt both new and familiar. She listened to his deep, regular breathing. The sound was comforting to her, and she closed her eyes, blocking out the sounds of London and the other residents of the building, and focusing on Holyoake's quiet breaths going in and coming out.

Her own eyes fluttered closed, and she slept lightly, fighting the part of her brain that wanted to sink into deep, dreamless sleep. At one point, she rolled over, the thin mattress making her hip ache, so she was forced to readjust. She wasn't certain if it was then or at some other point, when she'd drifted deeper into sleep, that Holyoake put his arm about her. She only knew that she was sleeping curled against his chest, and even though she thought she should move, she didn't want to.

He smelled of unfamiliar soap and his own very familiar scent of man. His chest was bare, and she thought if she were more awake, she might examine his wound. Instead, she savored the warmth of his naked chest and tried not to think too hard about what he might—or might not—be wearing below the waist.

She knew when he came awake to find her in his arms. His body went rigid and then relaxed slowly as he must have realized who she was. Margaret wanted to wake, tried valiantly to pull herself up from the depths, but her limbs felt so incredibly heavy. She didn't know if Holyoake went back to sleep, she only knew that when she finally did wake, at the stroke of a distant church bell, Holyoake was still holding her. "It's quarter to twelve," he murmured into her hair. "I planned to wake you at midnight."

"Thank you," she said, "but I told myself to wake before midnight so I could wake you. How do you feel?"

He stretched, shifting away from her. Her shift had risen enough that she could feel his bare legs. "Better," he said. "My

wound still hurts like hell, but it's a lesser layer of hell. My head stopped aching. I could eat something."

She laughed. "I bought pies while I was out."

"Good girl." He patted her bottom, and it seemed such a natural thing to do, she didn't jump away. But then it seemed neither of them wanted to move, wanted to disturb the peace between them. She thought he would ask her about what she had found out at the police headquarters, but he didn't speak.

And he didn't go for the pies.

Margaret lifted her head from his shoulder and looked up at him. "Do you want to get up?" she asked.

"No. Do you?"

She laughed. "No. But it's almost midnight, and we have to go all the way across Town and break into Vanderville's home."

He looked down at her. "It can wait a little longer."

"How much longer?"

"Long enough for me to kiss you?"

She heard the question and appreciated that he asked it. He must have known what she wanted, but she liked that he didn't assume. She slid one hand into his hair and drew his mouth down to hers. "Long enough for a kiss, yes," she said, brushing her lips against his. "Perhaps more."

"More? What do you have in mind?"

She nudged closer to him and his growing erection. Apparently, he wasn't wearing anything below the waist. "The same thing you have in mind."

"Thank God," he said, rolling over her and looking down at her. "I thought maybe you just climbed into my bed to keep warm." He kissed her long and deep.

"Not at all," she said between attempts to catch her breath. "The bed looked more comfortable than the table."

“Much more comfortable,” he said, bending his head to run his mouth along her jaw and then down to her neck. Margaret squirmed with impatience as he took his time nibbling his way to her ear lobe. Once he kissed the spot behind it, she felt a flood of heat between her legs and nudged her hips up to press her sex against his erection.

“You still like that,” he whispered, his breath making her even more impatient for his touch. “What about this?” He slid down and toyed with the drawstrings of her shift. Margaret wished she’d discarded the thing before she’d climbed into bed so there would be fewer layers between them. But he eventually managed to push it down, revealing her aching breasts to him. He kissed one and then the other, his lips reverent.

She didn’t want reverent. She wanted his hands all over her and his body straining against hers.

But he was injured. Of course, why hadn’t she thought of that before? “You’re hurt,” she said. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“This is an excellent idea,” he said, his beard tickling her breast. “I feel better than I have in days.” He slid down further, taking her shift with him and kissing her belly. Margaret knew she should tell him to stop. There was the mission. There was his injury. There was the fact that they’d been estranged for three years.

And there was his mouth.

He’d kissed a path down her belly to the juncture of her thighs, and now he was on his knees, pressing her legs further open. “Still want me to stop?” he asked.

“I never said I wanted you to stop. I said—”

His mouth was on her inner thigh, his beard teasing the tender flesh there. That sensation was new and not unwelcome. He drew closer to her center, and she dug her fingernails into the mattress, willing herself to be patient and to lie still. She didn’t want to clamp her legs on him and hurt his injury.

A moment later, all thoughts of his injury fled, and she couldn't think of anything but his lips and his tongue and the way he made her feel when he did this to her. She could hear herself panting and crying out, but it seemed someone else made those sounds as the whole of her attention was on Ambrose and the way he loved her.

She was practically weeping by the time he brought her to a shuddering climax. He would have plunged into her then. She wanted him to, but she summoned the last of her strength and pushed him on his back, tossing her shift aside and following him over to straddle him.

He looked up at her, his lovely amber-gold eyes appreciative and full of arousal. She glanced at his wound just in case, but his hands came to rest on her hips. "I'm fine," he said. "Better than fine, in fact." His gaze raked over her, making her nipples go hard. She rose up and took him inside her, her body seeming to pulse with the pleasure of it. She was still throbbing from the orgasm, and the feel of him inside her heightened that pleasure.

"Maggie," he moaned as she began to move. His hands clutched at her hips, not to control, but to hold on as she went faster, then slower, then agonizingly slow as another orgasm built.

"Faster," he urged her.

"Give me a moment," she said.

He opened his eyes. "Really? Again?" He smiled lazily and let his hands wander up her body until they cupped her breasts. She moved even slower, pushing him deeper, until her body began to contract again.

Ambrose drew in a breath and closed his eyes again as her inner muscles squeezed him. And then the pleasure rushed in, and she was chasing it, moving quicker, taking him with her. She heard his quick cry of pleasure as he came. She felt the way he swelled and the heat of him as he spilled his seed inside her.

She wanted to collapse on top of him, but she was thinking about his wound, and she rolled to the side and lay beside him, one hand thrown over his chest.

“That was...”

She looked at him, eyes still closed, chest heaving. “Yes, it was,” she answered. “There’s one advantage to abstinence,” she said. It was what she’d always said when they’d come back together after a long absence. But now she realized she didn’t know if he’d been abstinent during their separation. She hadn’t asked that of him. She hadn’t even known if she’d ever see him again. Suddenly, self-conscious, she cleared her throat. “That is to say—I shouldn’t have assumed—”

Ambrose pulled her closer and squeezed her gently. “You were right to assume.”

Margaret couldn’t say why, but her heart contracted painfully at his words. He’d been loyal to her, kept his marriage vows, even though she’d left him. Even though there’d been no promise to ever see each other again.

“You know there’s never been anyone for me but you, Maggie.”

Margaret levered onto her elbow. “There’s never been anyone else I wanted either. God, Ambrose, I’m sorry I left without a word. I shouldn’t have done it that way.”

“I didn’t give you much choice,” he said. “You tried to tell me you were unhappy. I didn’t want to listen. I couldn’t understand why you didn’t want to play the role of the diplomat’s wife. It wasn’t until after you left that I tried to put myself in your place. I would have hated being my wife too.”

“I didn’t—I *don’t* hate being your wife. I just don’t want to be *only* your wife. I want more.”

“You found it. You’re a Royal Saboteur. That’s the best of the best. All this time, I was holding you back. You left me, and in three years accomplished what took me almost five.”

“I had a good teacher.”

“I patronized you.”

“No—”

He gave her a look.

“Well, yes, you did. At first.”

“I didn’t expect you to be so damn good at everything. I can admit, my pride got in the way.”

Margaret swallowed, uncertain what to say. Ambrose had always been a good man, but he could also be stubborn and stuck in convention. The way he spoke now gave her some hope that he had changed. “I never stopped loving you,” she said quietly.

He took her face in his hands and kissed her gently. “I never stopped loving you. The problem is, I don’t know if love is enough anymore.”



AMBROSE KNEW WHAT SHE was thinking. She could hide her thoughts, allow an impenetrable mask to descend and keep everyone out. But she’d never shown him the mask. She’d never tried to keep him out. She didn’t do so now, and her expression was a mixture of disappointment and resignation.

When she’d said she loved him, that she’d never stopped loving him, his chest had tightened so he could barely breathe. He’d needed, so badly, to hear those words. Then he’d looked at her face and saw the hope. It was the same hope he’d been toying with since she’d reappeared in his life. Could they try again? Could their marriage work now?

But he hadn’t been able to convince himself, and he couldn’t lie to her.

Maggie pulled back, taking the blanket with her. A moment later she was back in her shift and pushing her wild red hair out of her face. “You’re still angry that I left.”

“I was angry,” he admitted. “I was furious with you for years, maybe until you kicked your way into this room and back into my life. But what I’m saying now is not out of anger.”

“And you think saying *love isn't enough anymore* won't hurt me?”

“I don't want to hurt you, and I'm not angry at you. I understand why you left, even if I don't like it. But now you're looking at me like you want to try again, like you think our marriage is worth saving.”

“You don't think our marriage is worth saving?”

Ambrose had to step carefully now. She was angry, the kind of anger that often led to heavy objects being thrown in his general direction. She'd never hit him with anything, but that wasn't because she didn't have good aim.

“It's not a question of worth. There's nothing and no one I love more than you, Maggie. I expect you would say the same about me.”

“Not at the moment.”

He smiled. “Ten minutes ago, there was nothing and no one you loved more than me.”

“Fair enough.”

“But we both admit we've always felt that way, and it wasn't enough to keep us together. I was always chasing my career, going after this mission or that. You wanted more out of life than waiting for me to come home, and I know it seemed the perfect solution for you to join me, but it was never that easy for me. It's still not.”

“Because you still can't see me as your equal.”

“Because I can't stop loving you. I've worked with other agents, and I don't want to see them hurt or killed, but they're not my wife. They're not a piece of my heart. I don't know if I could go on if something happened to you, especially if it was my fault.”

“You seem to have gone on pretty well for three years, and I assure you there were times I was in danger.”

Ambrose wanted to cover his ears. “That was why I didn't come after you. I had to let you go. The only way I could

allow you to put yourself in such danger was by keeping you as far away from me as possible.”

“The only way you could *allow* me to put myself in danger?”

Ambrose sighed. “You see? I haven’t really changed, Maggie. And neither have you. In fact, you’ve become more of who you always were, and we’re further apart than we ever have been. I want you back, yes, but how long before I leave you behind for my own mission? How long before I try to keep you safe, and you see it as a prison sentence?”

She nodded, the pink fading from her cheeks. She looked tired and miserable, and Ambrose wanted to take her in his arms and make her smile again, make her happy. But that happiness would be fleeting, and in the end, they’d both be more miserable than before.

She lifted her spectacles and carefully placed them on her nose. “Do you want a divorce?”

Ambrose sat so quickly, the wound in his side screamed in pain. “No!”

She eyed him levelly. How could she look so calm when she was proposing divorce? “I know it’s difficult to obtain, but we both have connections. You could divorce me on grounds of abandonment. Or perhaps we could acquire an annulment.”

“No.”

“You’re a viscount, Holyoake. You need a wife and an heir. It’s been clear for some time that I can’t give you an heir. Now it seems I can’t even be a wife.”

They were back to Holyoake, and he supposed he deserved that, considering he’d told her their marriage would never work. “I don’t care about an heir. I have brothers and cousins and nephews enough to carry on the line. It’s not as though we are an old lineage.” In fact, Ambrose was only the second Viscount Holyoake. He had been about two when his father had been made a viscount as a reward for his service to the Crown.

“You never will be with that attitude.”

“It’s better if I don’t have children,” he said. “I don’t want to be the sort of father mine was.”

Her expression softened, but she didn’t argue the point. Ambrose had followed in his father’s footsteps, becoming an agent for the Crown and being away from home for weeks at a time. Ambrose had hardly known his father. He’d admired him and the accolades he received, but the man himself was a stranger. When he’d been killed in the line of duty when Ambrose was sixteen, Ambrose had wanted to grieve. But it was difficult to grieve the loss of a man he’d never really known. Still, he’d felt the great weight of his new title on his shoulders. He was young to shoulder responsibility for his mother and siblings, not to mention the estate that had been given to the family when his father had been given his title. There were tenants to look after, lands to manage.

Maggie had been there to comfort Ambrose, of course, and she seemed to understand that his anxiety came from his new responsibilities more than the loss of his father. She’d been younger than he but mature enough to help him arrange everything so that he might return to finish his schooling. Even then, she’d put her own desires aside to help him, writing to him when she observed a problem at the estate or when strife erupted in his family.

And now she wanted a divorce. It was as though she was asking him to cut off one of his limbs. He couldn’t imagine not having her in his life.

“Your father was a great man,” she said.

“But he wasn’t a great husband or a great father. I’ve already failed as a husband. God knows, I don’t need to fail as a father.”

“I doubt I would be a very good mother, and that has nothing to do with my own mother. She was wonderful. You are not destined to become like your father. Instead, I think we’ve both chosen lives of service.”

“That’s what we call it anyway. We both know it’s the thrill of the hunt, the lure of danger that we’ve really chosen.”

“Speaking of which, I believe we have a house to break into and documents to pilfer.”

“I don’t suppose I could convince you to stay here where it’s safe and”—he looked about the shabby room—“minimally comfortable.”

“Not a chance. If this is the end, then I think we conclude things with one last mission together.”

“I’ll try not to protect you from danger.”

“And I’ll try not to strangle you.”

“It seems we both have our work cut out for us.”



Chapter Six



Margaret slid the window open and gave a silent shout of joy. They'd chosen a window on the side of the house as it was mostly hidden from the street. The rear of Vanderville's house would have been preferable, but the kitchen and servants' area was located there, and one never knew if a scullery maid or boot boy slept downstairs instead of tucked up in the attics with the rest of the staff.

The window had been a bit too high for either of them to see inside, so Ambrose had lifted her by the waist so she could peer in. "Clear," she said.

"Good work," he whispered in her ear as she slid down his body. She tried not to shiver, tried to focus on the mission. But she liked having him here with her, liked being close to him. Too bad he was such an idiot and couldn't see that she could take care of herself. All she'd ever wanted was to be seen as his equal. Tonight, he'd as much as told her, he'd never see her that way. She'd always be his wife, not his partner.

They both took a moment to look about. They'd watched the house from across the street for a half hour before attempting to break in. In that time, they hadn't observed any men patrolling the perimeter. Margaret was certain there would be men stationed at the doors, though. It was after three in the morning, so one would hope the guards had fallen asleep.

"Still clear," Ambrose said. "Come here, and I'll give you a boost up."

Margaret wore a belt and had tucked her skirts into it to give her legs more freedom. Now she stepped onto Ambrose's hands and used the momentum he gave her to grasp onto Vanderville's windowsill and pull herself through. She toppled unceremoniously to the floor then popped back up and peered about the chamber. The furnishings looked like dark lumps,

but from the arrangement, she thought this might be a small parlor. She moved carefully between the shapes until she reached the door. Closed.

Margaret let out a breath and returned to the window. “All clear.” She held a hand down to Ambrose, but he waved it away and climbed up. She heard him hiss out a breath in pain. Such movements couldn’t be good for his wound, but then he was inside and panting beside her.

“Just like old times,” she whispered, thinking of when they’d been children and climbed trees or over fences on his estate. He’d always made his hands into a stirrup and boosted her up. Just as he’d done tonight.

“This was a lot easier when I was younger.”

She smiled. “Come on, old man. Try to keep up.” She led him across the room to the door she’d found earlier. Silently, she lifted the latch and eased it open. A sconce burned in the foyer, the light dancing across the marble floor. A boy sat in a chair near the door, his head resting against the wall.

She made a motion, indicating the servant. Ambrose nodded and gestured for her to close the door. He leaned close so she caught a hint of his scent. Margaret forced herself not to inhale.

“I’ll see if there’s another door. It might join this room to a library.”

Margaret nodded and eased the parlor door closed again. Her eyes had adjusted to the dim light in the chamber, so when Ambrose gestured for her to join him, she did so quickly. He pointed to the door he’d found and mimed *locked*.

She had picked her fair share of locks, mostly in training. She wasn’t without skill, but she knew Ambrose was better. Now he withdrew a length of cloth, laid it on the floor near the door and unrolled it. She couldn’t see what it contained but could picture the assortment of odd metal tools. Some were long and thin, some short and blunt. He clearly knew them by feel, selected one in the dark, and went to work, his ear

pressed to the door to listen for the faint clicks of the locking mechanism.

Margaret waited quietly, listening for any sound from the foyer or the other side of the door. They hadn't seen any lights on this floor, so she assumed Vanderville had gone to bed. That didn't mean everyone had gone to bed. There might be others guarding the house who hadn't fallen asleep like the boy at the door.

Ambrose swore, and Margaret watched as he changed one tool for another, all by touch. She couldn't help but worry at the passing time. How long had they been inside the house? Ten minutes? A quarter hour?

Finally, she heard a quiet *snick* and the door to the adjoining room swung open. Ambrose rolled up his tools, stood, and slid through the door. She waited a moment then followed, closing the door behind her.

"This is it," he whispered, when she turned back. "This is Vanderville's study. We'll need light if we're to go through his papers."

She moved to the windows and drew the drapes closed, then went to the door leading to the foyer and tried it. "It's already locked and requires a key," she said.

"Good. That means we shouldn't be disturbed." He was at the desk, and a moment later, light flickered in the lamp on one end. Margaret looked about the room, taking in the high ceilings with their bookshelves reaching almost to the top. A thick rug had cushioned their feet and muffled the sounds of their movement. She'd felt the heavy damask draperies when she'd closed them. They were behind an equally heavy oak desk.

Ambrose took a seat behind it. "I'll search the drawers, and you take the shelves, yes?"

"Fine." She went to the shelves and studied the spines of the books until she found a set of ledgers. She took several from the shelf and moved to the desk where she could use the light to study their contents. Ambrose was back to picking

locks as the drawers to the desk were all closed and latched. Once again, she felt the pressure of time ticking away, but she forced herself to study the ledgers and concentrate. This sort of work was tedious and time-consuming, but she knew what information she sought—irregular payments to one or more men for nondescript services.

Ambrose managed to open one drawer and rifled through it. He took out a box and picked the lock on it, whistling softly when he opened it. Margaret glanced over and raised her brows. “That’s a hell of a lot of blunt,” she said.

“Yes, it is.” He closed the box again and started on another drawer.

They worked quietly for a time. Margaret finished the ledgers she’d carried to the desk, returned them, and brought another stack. “Anything?” she asked, watching Ambrose flip through papers.

“Not yet. You?”

“I started with the earlier ledgers. Nothing there. These are the most current, I think.” She glanced at a tall case clock against one wall. “It’s just past four. We have at most one more hour before the first members of the staff wake and begin work.”

“Then let’s find what we need and go.”

Another ten minutes passed before Margaret turned a ledger toward him. “This is it,” she said.

“Is that the household ledger or one for his business?”

“I looked at the household ledgers. Nothing. This lists payments and income from one of the Liverpool factories.” She turned back several pages. “You see the regular transactions in and out. A few irregularities, probably bribes to city officials. And then last year, several payments listed as *security*. He already has regular payments for security. These are in addition, and the amount paid steadily increases. And take a look at this.” She pointed to the last payment.

Ambrose leaned over the book, checked the date. “That’s the day before I was attacked.”

“This payment is for security to M. Golden. If that’s his real name, that’s your assassin.”

“Fifty pounds?” Ambrose pointed to the notation. “Is that all I’m worth?”

“I would have done it for forty. Do you think Golden is his real—”

They both stiffened at what sounded like a cry from the foyer. Their eyes met, and Margaret could read the question in her husband’s. Silence followed for several minutes, and Margaret leaned close to him. “A bird?”

“Still too dark for birds. One of the servants having a nightmare?”

“Possibly. I planned to copy several pages with names we might investigate.”

“I think you’d better just take the ledgers. I feel...”

He trailed off, but she knew what he felt because she felt it too. A prickly sensation crawled up the back of her neck, making the hairs there stand on end. Something wasn’t right. She might have tried to convince herself she was scared and imagining things, but she’d been taught to trust her instincts. “Let’s go,” she said, gathering the ledgers she wanted. But just as Ambrose stood, they heard a key turning in the lock to the outer door.



MAGGIE MOVED QUICKLY. She shuttered the lamp and pushed Ambrose back down then joined him under the desk. It was a spacious desk, but they were not short people and both of their heads bumped against the underside. Still, he didn’t move, and Maggie was so still he couldn’t even hear her breathe. She held the ledgers against her chest, one of the edges poking his arm.

The door to the study opened. The hinges were well-oiled, and there was no sound, just a change in the feel of the atmosphere in the room. Presumably, someone stepped inside, and Ambrose heard the door close again. It made a quiet thud

as though it had been pushed closed as an afterthought. Beside Ambrose, Maggie stiffened. He had probably done the same. Whoever had just entered wasn't worried about being heard. Was that because it was Vanderville himself who'd entered or someone else?

Ambrose thought about the cry, the boy at the door. And then a sliver of light crept across the floor. Whoever had entered had brought a lamp or a candle.

"I know you're here," a low male voice said. "I can see the smoke in the air from the lamp."

Maggie grasped Ambrose's wrist tightly. She was urging him to stay still. If her training had been anything like his, she'd practiced striking as one rather than separately. Two against one was hardly fair, but agents didn't fight like gentlemen.

And yet, Ambrose couldn't quite put that part of him aside. Maggie wasn't just an agent; she was his wife. He had to keep her safe.

"Come out now, and perhaps I won't kill you." The voice was moving and presumably so was the man. He was edging toward Ambrose's side of the desk. Ambrose pushed Maggie back and sprung out, striking at the voice but missing when the man jerked out of reach. The man twisted back to face him, no weapon in hand but on the balls of his feet, ready to fight. He was a short man and slim. His face was all angles with a dark mustache making a slash across his lip. His face registered recognition at the same time Ambrose's did.

"You," Ambrose said.

"Well, if it isn't Viscount Holyoake," the assassin answered. "Back from the dead."

"If you thought the scratch you gave me was enough to kill me, you have a lot to learn."

"Someone else will have to teach me because I intend to finish the job now." He made a motion with one hand and a long dagger slid into his gloved fist. Ambrose had his own dagger in his boot, but he didn't think he'd win against this

man if it came to a knife fight. He needed something bigger. The hearth was to his right and beside it the broom, bellows, and poker. He could do some damage with the poker.

The assassin moved toward him, and Ambrose pretended to back away, moving closer to the dark hearth. “How did you track me here?” Ambrose asked, hoping to keep the man distracted by talking.

“Oh, I didn’t. Meeting you here is just luck.”

“You came here to kill your employer? What’s become of the criminal underclass? No sense of loyalty in assassins anymore.” Ambrose shook his head.

The assassin gave him a wry smile. “I came to take the blunt I’m owed. You cost me twenty pounds.”

The poker was just a couple more feet away. “Not true. I saw in the ledger you were paid fifty.”

The assassin flipped the knife in his hand with a terrifying dexterity. “It was fifty up front and twenty when I finished the job.”

“Oh, thank God. I knew I was worth more.” Suddenly, Ambrose whirled, grabbed the poker and feinted to the right, just out of reach of the assassin’s blade. Ambrose had the bookshelf behind him now, which meant he was on defense. He’d take care of that soon enough and swung the poker, forcing the assassin to take a step back.

“What do you think Vanderville will say when he finds us here?” Ambrose asked. “Think he’ll realize you intended to rob him?”

“He won’t find us here tonight, *Viscount*. He’s gone to Richmond to take care of that little brat himself. So if you were thinking of protecting the prime minister’s son, you’re too late.”

Ambrose jerked back at the words. *Too late*. He’d suspected Vanderville was behind the threats on the life of the prime minister’s son, but this seemed to be the proof—proof that was coming too late.

The assassin lunged, and Ambrose hastily thrust the poker out to deflect. He realized—again too late—that the assassin’s distraction had worked. He’d been stunned by the man’s revelation that Vanderville had gone after the child himself and now Ambrose would pay for his lack of focus. The assassin ducked, twisted, and grasped the poker, flinging it out of Ambrose’s hand. It went flying across the room, landing with a soft thump on the carpet. It was out of reach.

The assassin advanced, pushing Ambrose back against the bookshelves. “But you cost me more than twenty pounds, Viscount. *I* was supposed to go tonight to take care of the brat. Vanderville’s man there has failed repeatedly. I would have made a tidy sum—if not for you.”

“Perhaps you can find another innocent boy to murder.” Ambrose’s shoulder hit the bookshelf.

The assassin smiled. Ambrose locked eyes with the assassin and then slid his gaze to the dagger. He’d have to avoid a strike and disarm the man. He kicked, and the assassin easily avoided the blow and then crouched, dagger extended. “It’s not even about the blunt anymore,” the assassin said smoothly. “I’ll enjoy gutting you, Viscount. I want to hear you scream.”

Ambrose’s heart stopped, clenching painfully in his chest. He could feel the blood drain from his face and hoped to God the assassin thought the reaction was one of fear caused by his words. The fear was real enough. But it wasn’t the assassin’s threats causing it.

Maggie stepped smoothly behind the assassin, and Ambrose knew when the point of her knife pressed into his back, because he stiffened and his eyes widened.

“You were saying?” Ambrose quipped. Despite the levity he tried to feign, his voice sounded tight and strained. He was equal parts thankful for her help and angry she hadn’t taken the opportunity to run to safety. This was why he hadn’t wanted her to come. If she were hurt or killed, Ambrose would have no one but himself to blame. He’d allowed himself to be momentarily distracted, and now Maggie was trying to save

him. “First rule of assassin school,” Ambrose said. “Always check for confederates. Drop your dagger.”

The assassin lifted it but hesitated.

“Drop it,” Maggie said, and Ambrose imagined she dug in with her knife point when she spoke. Still, he hadn’t wanted her to speak. He knew what would happen as soon as the assassin heard her voice. The man’s eyes widened, and he looked behind him.

“A woman?” he said, sounding incredulous.

“Drop the knife,” she said.

“Yes, madam.” He held his arm out, but instead of dropping his weapon, slammed his elbow back, ramming it into Maggie’s middle. She stumbled back and went down. The assassin lunged for her before Ambrose could yell, “No!”

But then Maggie was back on her feet, crouched in fighting position, her own long, sharp blade in her hand.

“It’s been too long since I killed a woman,” the assassin said. “I can’t wait to slit your throat.”

“I can’t wait to see you try.”

The assassin lunged, and Maggie whirled out of the way, coming up beside him and kicking out. The assassin huffed out a breath and lunged again. Maggie ducked and rolled, this time using her foot to sweep his ankle, causing him to stumble. She was up again and back in fighting position. Ambrose could only gape in shock. Where the devil had she learned how to fight like that? She wasn’t merely defending herself; she was gaining the upper hand. She was amazing. She was—hell, she was better than he.

“Holyoake,” she said, her gaze on the assassin. “A little help?”

He blinked and closed his mouth. “Yes, darling. Sorry for the delay.”

“Apology accepted.”

The assassin lunged at her again, and this time Ambrose heard the clink of blades as they made contact. Maggie hissed, and Ambrose saw a flash of red before she pivoted away.

“Maggie!”

“Just a scratch,” she said, returning to fighting stance. The assassin had his back to the bookshelf now, his only option with two opponents. Maggie was on his right and Ambrose on his left. As much as Ambrose wanted to examine her, to see where she’d been injured, he kept his gaze on the assassin while reaching into his boot and withdrawing the knife. He should have brought his pistol. This would have been over much more quickly.

“Two against one,” Maggie said. “Drop your knife and live.”

“Maggie?” the assassin sneered. “Is that your name? Well, Maggie, I’d rather die than surrender to a woman.”

“My name is Margaret, actually, and—” She didn’t finish, just lunged and struck with the knife. The assassin raised an arm to block her then grabbed at her with his other arm. He caught her wrist, twisted, and her knife fell. Then as Ambrose watched in horror, he yanked Maggie to him, wrapped his arm about her throat and smiled. “Hello, Margaret.”



MARGARET WAS ANGRY. She’d made an error in striking out on her own. She and Ambrose should have attacked in tandem. That’s what she’d been taught at the Farm. But she wasn’t used to fighting with her husband, and he wasn’t giving her any of the signals other agents she’d trained with gave. She suspected he was terrified she’d be injured and not thinking clearly. He never would understand that she was as capable as he.

The assassin smelled of sweat and fried onions. His arm tightened about her throat, but he’d have to shift positions to actually strangle her. It was the knife in his other hand that worried her. He could gut her with it.

“Drop your knife,” he told Ambrose.

“No!” she cried out, but Ambrose didn’t hesitate. He dropped his weapon.

“Sit in that chair,” the assassin ordered. Ambrose again obeyed, taking the chair behind the desk as the assassin had ordered. Margaret wanted to hit him. If she were any other agent, he would have attacked. Now they were both in positions of weakness.

“I see you have unlocked the desk drawers already,” the assassin said, motioning with his knife toward the desk.

That’s right, Margaret thought. Keep your knife pointed away.

“Fetch any blunt inside and set it on the corner of the desk.”

Ambrose’s gaze met hers, and Margaret nodded imperceptibly. She could see his jaw working. He wasn’t just scared; he was furious. Good. They could use that. She bit her lip as she felt the knife press against her side.

Slowly, Ambrose pulled open a drawer fully, reached inside and withdrew the box containing money they had found earlier. He held the box up and made a production of placing it on the far edge of the desk. “Now let her go,” he said.

“Sit back down,” the assassin said. The pressure of the knife eased, and she lowered her gaze. Once again, the assassin used the knife to gesture to the desk chair. She didn’t wait this time. She reached for the extended arm, locked it in place, leaned forward and slammed her head back into the assassin’s nose. She hadn’t always liked being tall as a child, but she appreciated it now as she would much rather plow the back of her head into his nose than his hard chin. The assassin made a sound, and he bent his arm to bring the knife toward her. She couldn’t match his strength, but his hold on her had loosened and she lowered her head to slip out.

“Maggie, down!” Ambrose yelled.

She didn’t hesitate but released the assassin’s arm and let her body weight carry her to the floor. She landed heavily and

heard the sound of a projectile winging through the air. The assassin cried out and stumbled back. Margaret swiveled and used an arm to jab at his feet, causing him to stumble. He fell, and she jumped up and put two feet on the arm where he held the knife.

Ambrose was right behind her, bending to take the knife, then kicking another out of reach of the assassin. He wasn't dead, Margaret saw, but he was wounded. Another knife protruded from one shoulder.

"That's not a knife," she said, looking closer.

"Letter opener." Ambrose said. "In the drawer with the money."

The assassin moaned.

"Good throw," she said.

He looked at her. "We need to talk."

She opened her mouth to reply, but just then the door to the library burst open, two men in rumpled clothing coming through.

"Who the devil are you?" the older man demanded. Margaret recognized him as the butler. "What's happened here?"

Ambrose didn't miss a step. "We caught this man breaking into your house. We're with the Home Office, working for the Crown."

This was not untrue. The Royal Saboteurs were housed under the auspices of the Foreign Office.

"I'm calling for a magistrate!" the butler announced.

"Please do," Ambrose said. "And a doctor as well. My wife is injured." He looked down at the assassin. "This man too."

Margaret had all but forgotten she'd been injured. Suddenly, her hand throbbed, and she looked down to see blood dripping on the carpet. She lifted her hand and studied

the cut. *Rather deep*, she thought before the room began spinning.



Chapter Seven



Ambrose hadn't wanted to bring her back to the flat in Seven Dials. She argued that someone called Tabby would be hungry, but he told her Tabby would have to wait and had her taken to a town house kept for use by the agents of the Royal Saboteurs. It was unoccupied, except for the staff, who greeted them as though they were expected and tucked Maggie into bed.

Ambrose dealt with the Metropolitan Police and the magistrate until well after noon and by the time he had appeased all of them, a letter had come from Baron telling him to stay put. The situation in Richmond Park had been dealt with. The letter had come via another agent, this one named Duncan Slorach. Slorach looked as though he'd been in a war, but he refused to rest or eat and insisted on going directly to Vanderville's home to look through documents.

"The ledgers are what you want," came a voice from the doorway.

Ambrose, who had been trying to persuade the newly arrived agent to rest for a bit, turned to see his wife standing just inside the drawing room.

"Maggie, you shouldn't be up."

She waved a hand. "Good to see you, Mr. Slorach."

"And you, Miss Vaughn."

"How is Lucy?" she asked.

"What the devil is happening here?" Ambrose demanded. "Maggie, go lie back down."

She gave him a look of annoyance. "Ambrose, I cut my hand. There's nothing wrong with my legs."

"You fainted."

“I didn’t faint. I felt lightheaded. I should have eaten before we left for Vanderville’s. Mr. Slorach, you’ve met my husband, Viscount Holyoake?”

Slorach stared at her as though she’d sprouted a flower from her ear. “Your, er, husband?” His gaze shifted to Ambrose. Ambrose scowled. Apparently, Maggie hadn’t told her fellow agents she was married.

“Yes. The viscount is also an agent for the Royal Saboteurs. He’s the reason I wanted to join the group, in fact.”

Slorach nodded at Ambrose. “We just met. I’m sorry I didn’t realize who you were at first, my lord. Miss Vaughn—er, Lady Holyoake?—has spoken of you so often.”

Ambrose let out a laugh. “No, she hasn’t.” He looked at Maggie. “Mr. Slorach says Vanderville is dead. He and another agent killed Vanderville last night when he attacked them and tried to kill Lord John’s son at Pembroke Lodge.” Pembroke Lodge was the prime minister’s residence in Richmond Park, just outside of London.

“I hope Lucy doesn’t look as bad as you,” Maggie said, coming inside the drawing room and taking a seat.

“I’m fine.” Slorach shrugged and couldn’t quite hide a wince. “Baron has ordered me to assist you and to collect as much evidence against Vanderville as possible. I’d like to go to his residence and take a look before anything has a chance to disappear.”

“As I said,” Maggie continued, “you’ll want to study the ledgers. Holyoake and I hadn’t time enough to study the transactions thoroughly, but we saw evidence of Vanderville’s payments to the assassin and suspicious payments for security to his men in Liverpool.”

“I’ll need to study those and track down the recipients. Vanderville acted alone last night, but if there are others working with them, we need to know who they are and bring them in for questioning.”

“I’ll go with you,” Ambrose said. “I think it’s best if we search Vanderville’s files and bring everything we need back

here. Less interference from local officials that way.”

“Baron would like to keep this quiet, so if we can avoid having to explain ourselves to every magistrate and constable, that would be best.”

“Send a note when you are on the way, and I’ll make sure tea and sandwiches are waiting. I’ll have the staff ready the dining room. We can spread out there.”

Again, Ambrose wanted to order Maggie back to bed, but she had as much right to close the investigation as he did. She had proved herself. She’d saved him as much as he’d saved her. She could fight and defend herself as well if not better than most other agents he’d worked with.

If only Ambrose could rid his mind of the image of her with the assassin’s knife at her throat. Every time he thought of it, and that was once every minute or so, he felt physically ill. He could have lost her. He could have watched the blade slice across her lovely neck and been powerless to stop it. His mind conjured the image of red spilling from her throat, and he standing there watching, inept and being incapable of saving her.

“Ambrose?”

He blinked and focused on Maggie. She was frowning at him.

“I asked if you wanted to walk or if I should call for the coach.”

“The coach,” he said, thinking of the bruises he had seen just above the line of Slorach’s cravat. The man had been in an even more perilous battle than they the night before. No need to make him walk to Vanderville’s when they had a long day ahead of them and all of them were sleep deprived.

When the coach was ready, Maggie walked with them to the conveyance. Ambrose leaned close to her, pretending to kiss her cheek, and instead whispering, “Please go lie down.”

She smiled. “Please? How can I say no when you ask so sweetly?”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way.”

“Go and search, and I’ll be here when you return.”

She waved as the coach pulled away, and Ambrose turned away from the window and sighed.

“You’re a lucky man, my lord,” Slorach said. “There’s not an agent at the Farm who doesn’t think Miss Vaughn—er, Holyoake—is one of the best we have.”

“I saw that for myself last night.” Ambrose stared out the window, trying to ignore the vision of the assassin with the knife at Maggie’s throat. “Are you married, Mr. Slorach?”

“No, my lord.”

“Call me Holyoake. I always think of lords as men parading about at court and in the ballrooms of Mayfair. I haven’t been in a ballroom in years.”

“Neither have I.”

“Do you miss them?”

Slorach smiled. “Not a whit. You?”

“Sometimes.”

Slorach cleared his throat, pressing a hand to it gingerly. “If you don’t mind me asking, how long have you been married?”

“Seven years—no, almost eight now.”

Slorach’s eyes widened, and he gave a low whistle. “Any advice for a reformed rake?”

“Do you want to marry?” Ambrose asked.

“If I can find the right woman.”

Ambrose nodded and thought for a long moment. “If you do find her, put your pride aside and never let her go.”

Slorach’s expression turned pained. “Good advice,” he said.

Ambrose agreed. If only he could follow his own counsel.



MARGARET WAS EXHAUSTED by the time they finished dinner. She had worked with Ambrose and Mr. Slorach examining the ledgers all day. They'd found what they needed to support their theory that Vanderville had paid men to not only discourage the formation of a union among his workers at the Liverpool factory, but also to target union leaders for attacks of their homes and families. They'd have to travel to Liverpool to interview Vanderville's associates and corroborate their theories. Mr. Slorach was leaving for Liverpool in the morning, and Margaret and Ambrose would go over everything again, then meet with magistrates and judges to conclude their business here in London before following.

The assassin was in custody, and Margaret wanted to question him about any other jobs Vanderville had hired him to complete. She already suspected he'd killed one of Vanderville's former servants, the man Ambrose had hoped to meet the night he'd been stabbed. Who else had paid him to ply his trade in death?

She had a thousand questions about the mission, and she focused on those rather than the question she really wanted answered—was this the end of her marriage?

Ambrose had barely glanced at her all day, and when he had, she noted the presence of that furrow he always got between his brows when he was worried. He must have asked her if she wanted to lie down a dozen times. Now that she was ready to lie down, she supposed she should be thankful he had asked and not ordered.

Not that she would have listened.

She smiled at herself in the mirror at the dressing table where she sat. Ambrose had given her the larger of the two main bedchambers, and she'd bathed, changed into clean clothing, and was finishing plaiting her damp hair so she would not wake with it in an impossible tangle in the morning. Ambrose's bed chamber was across from hers, and she jumped at every sound on the other side of her door. Considering how

insistent he'd been that she rest, she doubted he would come to her. Part of her was disappointed. And part of her wondered if it wasn't for the best. If this truly was the end, perhaps a clean break was better.

They had the night they'd shared in Seven Dials. No need to dredge up more emotions by spending what they'd both know was one last night together. She'd rather their last night be one filled with passion and not bittersweet attempts to say good-bye.

Of course, they didn't have to say good-bye. She could go to him now, pound on his door, and tell him she never wanted to be apart from him again. She could promise to be the wife he always wanted—the kind who organized dinner parties and tried to court the *ton's* favor. She might never have children, but she could shepherd his nieces and nephews through all the rituals of Polite Society. She could make a life, an ordinary life, and when he retired, they could grow old together, strolling the fields where they'd played as children.

All she had to do was go and knock on his door right now to make all of it come true.

Margaret turned and stared at her bedchamber door. She tried to rise, tried to force herself to take the first step. Her uninjured hand clutched the dressing table, her fingers digging into the soft rosewood so hard she feared she'd have splinters under her nails. She loved Ambrose. She loved him so much that it was as though a part of her was missing when they were apart. Walking through the world without him felt as though she'd constantly forgotten something vital and necessary. She might check her reticule for her book and her coin purse, feel for her hat, check for her cloak, but even though she had remembered everything, something was still missing.

She'd felt the lack for years, and it wasn't until she'd walked into the flat in Seven Dials and he'd pointed his pistol at her that she'd felt that missing part of herself click back into place.

Now he would be gone again, and the sense of emptiness would return.

As much as she hated the hole his absence created, she couldn't ignore the magnetic pull of her life as a Royal Saboteur. She'd always felt the pull of something...something *more*. Even when she and Ambrose had first married, and she'd felt so happy and complete, there had been the feeling of something pulling her, not necessarily away from Ambrose, but toward it.

It had been easy to resist the tugging when she didn't know what it was, what was pulling her. But the first time Ambrose had described one of his missions to her, shown her how to decipher a code, given her a message to deliver to a confederate, Margaret had felt the undefinable tug sharpen and clarify. She'd known she was meant to be an agent. She'd known it like she knew her own name or what she looked like in a mirror. She'd tried for months and months to help Ambrose know it.

But he had wanted a wife at his side, not another agent. Even as he praised her abilities, he held her back. She believed him when he said he wanted to protect her and keep her safe. But he was also a man of his time, and though a few other women had made a name for themselves as agents for the Crown—Baron's own wife, to name one—Ambrose didn't want that for his wife.

Yes, she had finally left him and succumbed to the attraction of a career as an agent, but he was the one who obliged her to make a choice. Even now, it was she, not he, who had to choose.

Margaret forced her hands on the dressing table to relax and release. No decisions had to be made tonight. She was tired and overwrought and overemotional. She picked up her book and padded to bed. She'd read for a few minutes and then sleep. She could forget about her problems for a little while. They'd still be there in the morning.



RAIN Poured FROM THE heavens the next day, and Margaret and Ambrose waited as long as they could for the skies to clear before they were forced to venture out. They

spent most of the day with the local authorities, answering questions and then making their own inquiries.

By dusk, the deluge had slackened into a steady drizzle. Ambrose stood with Margaret outside the jail where the assassin was held. “If you go back to the safe house and start on the report, I’ll finish up here.”

She nodded. “Fine, but I need to go to Seven Dials and collect my things. I can fetch yours as well.”

“No,” he said quickly. “You’re not to go to Seven Dials alone. I’ll go. You return to the safe house and start on the report.”

Margaret gave him a look then slowly adjusted her spectacles. Ambrose closed his eyes and seemed to be searching for patience. “I’m sorry. I would prefer if you didn’t go to Seven Dials alone. If you must go, we’ll go together.”

Margaret sighed. She took both of Ambrose’s hands in hers and leaned forward, kissing one cheek then the other. He’d shaved his beard at the safe house, exposing his chiseled cheekbones and unyielding jawline. On a whim, she kissed that stubborn jaw. She loved him, even the parts she didn’t like. She had really hoped one of them might change.

But she hadn’t changed and, it appeared, neither had he.

“I’ll see you soon,” she said, pulling back. He held her hands a little too long, staring into her eyes. She let him see the emotion there—the love, the regret, the determination. Then she pulled her hands free, turned, and walked away.



AMBROSE HADN’T FOUND Maggie at the safe house. He hadn’t expected to. He slumped against the door of the dining room and closed his eyes, listening to the silence of the house around him. Ambrose knew if he went to the chamber where Maggie had slept last night, he’d find it clean and orderly with no trace of her remaining. He’d been through her leaving him before.

He shouldn't have told her not to go to Seven Dials alone. Ridiculous to give her such an order when he knew she wouldn't follow it and when she'd been navigating Seven Dials and all its accompanying dangers for days. She had been the one taking care of him, not the other way round.

But old habits died hard. He still wanted to protect her, even when it was clear she didn't need his protection. Hell, at Vanderville's town house, she had been the one to save him.

And then they'd saved each other.

She'd been trained well, and she deserved to be a member of the Royal Saboteurs. Why couldn't he see her as more than his wife? Why had he tried to force her into the role of hostess and Society matron when it had been clear since the first day they ever met that wasn't what she wanted or where her true strengths lay?

She wasn't the wife he'd thought he needed, and he wanted to appreciate the woman she'd become. He wanted to treat her as an equal—a partner, a fellow agent. That's all she'd asked for.

But old habits died hard.

Ambrose fisted his hands and opened his eyes.

The hell they did. He wasn't some stone relic who couldn't be changed. Maggie had changed. She'd become one hell of an agent. Why couldn't he change too? He could change. He *had* changed. He would lose her again if he didn't. She wouldn't give him a third chance. It was now or never.

He turned on his heel and grabbed his coat from the rack. A servant immediately appeared. "My lord, may I be of assistance?"

"Not unless you can grovel for me."

"My lord?"

"I have to go to Seven Dials."

"Shall I call for the coach?"

“No time.” Ambrose pulled the door open and ran down the steps and into the steady rain. He’d forgotten his hat, but he didn’t have time to go back. He might already be too late. Panic at the thought of losing her welled up in his chest, making his lungs constrict and his throat close.

He couldn’t lose her again. The first time she’d left, he’d been angry. She’d hurt his heart and also his pride. He’d wanted to sulk and throw vases and curse her name.

Now it was his own name he cursed. Those years without her had dragged on, empty and meaningless. He hadn’t even realized how empty or meaningless until she’d walked into his flat in Seven Dials. The dingy room had filled with life and color, and every moment with her felt too short. Every step he took now, trying to reach her, felt like an eternity.

Ambrose ran faster, brushing past men and women, and calling apologies for jostling them over his shoulder. Elbowing the wrong man in Seven Dials could cost him, but he didn’t slow until he reached the building where his flat was housed. He slammed open the door and stared at a little girl sitting beside a door. Her cat blinked at him, back arched and fur on end.

“Sorry,” he said.

She took a bite of bread. “Ye looking for the lady?”

“Is she here?”

“Wot’s it to ye?”

Ambrose blew out a breath. He could run up the stairs himself and see—once he caught his breath again. But this must be the child Maggie had come to care for. So he tossed her a half crown. “For your trouble,” he said.

The girl caught the coin with a neat flourish then opened her fist and stared at it. Her eyes went wide then, quick as you like, the coin disappeared. “She went upstairs. She ‘asn’t come back down yet.”

“Thank you.”

Though his legs burned, and his knife wound felt as though it were burning into his ribs and the tender organs beneath, he climbed the steps and crashed through the door. He saw Maggie immediately. She'd been at the window. She whirled around and pointed a pistol at him.

His pistol.

"And here I thought you'd be happy to see me," he panted, echoing her words from a few days ago.

"Ambrose!" She lowered the pistol and crossed the room in two strides. "You're soaking wet and breathing like you're Pheidippides just come from Marathon."

He nodded, bending over to catch his breath.

"Ambrose, you should lie down. You're still injured."

He shook his head. "Just give me a moment."

"Is something wrong?"

"No." Then he looked up at her. "Yes." He grabbed her hand and sank to his knees.

Her eyes widened. "I'll have Vicky call for a doctor."

"No. I'm fine. I'm better than fine. I was afraid you'd be gone."

She opened her mouth then closed it again.

"I know you were leaving. I can hardly blame you. All this time has passed, and I haven't changed a whit."

"I would never ask you to change."

"No, you wouldn't. That seems to be something I do—something I *did* for years during our marriage. I tried to make you into someone you weren't, and I regret that. Maggie, I'm so sorry that I didn't appreciate you as you are. That was wrong. *I was wrong.* You must forgive me." He had to break off and take a breath, but he squeezed her hand.

She squeezed it back. "I forgive you. Now stand up—"

He shook his head. "I'm not done. I should have told you every day—nay, every hour, how amazing you are. How much

I love you. How much you mean to me. I should have said it every minute, every second.”

She raised a brow. “That seems a bit excessive.” Her voice was steady, but he saw the way her eyes welled.

“Never. I was a fool. I was—I *am*—an idiot. I know you want to go, and I won’t stop you. But I didn’t want you to leave without me telling you I love you. I love you, Maggie.”

She removed her spectacles and wiped at the tears streaming down her cheeks now. “I love you too. I don’t want to leave, Ambrose, but I don’t want to end up hating you. I can’t be the person you want—”

“You’re wrong. You are exactly the person, the wife, the agent, I want. It just took me all these years and almost losing you twice to realize it. I know it seems like I haven’t changed, but I offer you this”—he indicated his position on his knees—“as proof that I have. That I am changing. That I will keep changing.”

She pressed her lips together, and he could see the conflict within her.

“It won’t be easy. You might have to knock me over the head a few times. You might have to set me straight, but I’m on my knees, I’m begging you. Please give me another chance. Give *us* another chance.”

She wiped her eyes again, set her spectacles aside, and sank down before him. “I hate seeing you kneeling before me. That’s not what I want—for you to grovel.”

“No groveling then.”

She smiled. “Maybe a little groveling is warranted—from time to time.”

“I’ll do whatever you want if you’ll just be my wife. My partner.”

She drew in a breath. “You don’t know how long I’ve waited for you to say that.”

“Be my partner, Maggie.”

“Yes,” she said, taking his face in her hands. “Yes.” She kissed him. Ambrose wrapped his arms about her and pulled her close, hard against him. He kissed her back, showing her the emotions he couldn’t seem to express with words.

She pulled back. “You’re wet and shivering.”

He hadn’t even noticed until she said it. “I don’t care.”

“You’ll catch your death. I’d rather not mourn you when I just found you again.” She started to strip off his coat. “Out of these wet clothes. I’d start a fire, but we’re out of coal.”

“We should go back to the safe house.”

“And back out into the rain? I’ll find a way to keep you warm until it stops raining.”

“I like the sound of that.”

She loosened his neckcloth and then unfastened the buttons of his shirt, pulling it over his head. She stepped away and returned a moment later, dropping the thin blanket from the bed over his shoulders. She took his hands and pulled him to his feet, tugging him toward the bed. He paused to remove a boot while she unfastened her bodice. He removed the other boot while she untied her skirts. He stripped off one stocking then the other while she kicked off her boots and dropped her petticoat. He reached for his breeches while she started on the laces to her corset.

“Let me do that,” he said as his breeches dropped to the floor. She had the corset loosened, but she moved her hands so he might finish the task and toss the garment aside. She stood in only her chemise, her red hair a sharp contrast to the pale linen. Ambrose pressed his forehead against hers. “I’m not shivering anymore,” he whispered.

“I can change that.”

“No doubt.” He reached for the tie at her neck. “May I?”

“Please.” He pulled it loose and pushed the chemise down off her shoulders. His hands traced the smooth skin of her upper arm and down to her wrists. The garment fell to the ground, and he slid his hands back up her thighs to rest on her

waist. She lifted her chin, and their mouths met for a long, tantalizing kiss. They'd always been partners in bed, Ambrose realized. They both gave as much as they took. Now they'd be partners in everything else.

She took a step back and then another until she lay back on the bed. He took a moment to admire her there then followed her down. Her legs tangled with his and their hands explored, followed by their mouths. When she was gasping and he so hard it was uncomfortable, he looked up at her, meeting her gaze.

Her legs tightened around him, and he entered her slowly. She moaned and arched to meet him. He wanted to take her leisurely, to make this last. But, as usual, her cries and the thrust of her hips, the way she bit his shoulder, spurred him toward climax. When she went over the edge, he couldn't help but follow her.

They lay breathing together, their bodies tangled, their limbs heavy.

"Can I ask you for something?" she murmured.

"Anything," he said. This was where she told him she wanted to infiltrate London's criminal underworld or trek across the Continent in search of a notorious assassin. He'd promised to be her partner, so he'd follow her anywhere.

He pushed back on his elbows and looked down at her flushed face and her bright eyes.

"Grow your beard back."

He stared at her. "My—you liked it?"

She bit her lip. "I did."

"I'll throw my razor away. Is that all you want?"

"No," she said. "But we'll take the rest as it comes."



Chapter Eight



*S*ix months later

London was freezing. It had rained the night before, and sheets of ice made every step outside treacherous. Still, the agents of the Royal Saboteurs had braved the brisk winds and the sleet to arrive at Buckingham Palace for this secret ceremony.

Winn, better known as Agent Baron, tucked his wife's hand into the crook of his arm and led her into the large ornately furnished reception room. The queen's throne sat atop a dais at the far end of the rectangular space. Behind it, on the crimson-draped walls, hung portraits of her illustrious ancestors. Baron recognized George IV, Henry VIII, and Charles I. He squinted at the image of a king he didn't recognize. "Who's that one?" he asked Elinor.

"Just smile and lead me to our seats," she said. "Everyone is watching us."

Baron looked about the room, where groups of agents stood chatting quietly. He smiled and nodded at them as he walked past. "Mr. Kelly," he said, acknowledging the ne'er-do-well Irishman who had only come to the Farm to earn a few quid and escape his problems in London. Instead, Baron had sent him to Ireland to infiltrate a violent Irish separatists' stronghold.

Beside Callahan Kelly was his wife, Bridget Kelly. She came forward, and Baron paused to smile at her. Her husband might be aloof, but she was not. When she'd been Bridget Murray, she'd been his secretary before he'd given her the mission with Kelly. Baron still wasn't certain if he'd made the right decision there. He hadn't found another secretary as capable as Bridget Murray.

"My lord. My lady." She curtsied to both of them.

Elinor held out a hand. “It’s so good to see you again, Mrs. Kelly. Please accept my best wishes on your marriage.”

“Thank you.”

Winn still wasn’t used to seeing his secretary—former secretary—smile.

“Is Kelly behaving himself?” Winn asked.

“He’s completely reformed,” Bridget said.

Elinor glanced at the brooding Irishman. “Somehow I doubt that.”

Bridget looked over her shoulder at her husband. “Oh, he doesn’t want to be here. Says no self-respecting Irishman would accept a farthing, much less a commission, from the English queen.”

“He’s probably right,” Winn said. “Thank you for coming all the same.”

Bridget drew out her pocket watch. Winn smiled seeing it. She was never without her pocket watch. “Will we be starting soon, my lord?” she asked.

“One cannot rush royalty,” Winn said. “But I believe the queen is on the way from her chamber.”

“I won’t keep you.” Bridget moved back to her husband’s side, directing him to a set of chairs facing the throne. Winn continued on, pausing before the largest grouping here—a collection of six.

“Uncle Winn!” Lucy said, separating from the group to embrace first him and then Elinor. “Aunt Elinor! I’m so glad you came.”

“It seems I can’t escape London,” Elinor said. “First one wedding”—she gestured to Lucy’s brother, Will—“and then another.” She gestured to Lucy herself. “Who would have thought my husband was such a skilled matchmaker?”

Winn stiffened. “I assure you, I’m no matchmaker.”

“The evidence contradicts you.” Adrian Galloway, Viscount Smythe, stepped forward. As always, seeing Adrian

and Sophia, standing beside her new daughter-in-law, Lady Emily, brought back Winn's memories of his time in the now disbanded Barbican group. Baron shook Adrian's hand and bowed to Sophia.

"I have no idea what you mean," Winn said.

"First my son Willoughby married Lady Emily on a mission, then Lucy and Mr. Slorach worked together—your idea, I take it—and married."

Sophia came forward and embraced Elinor. "Be careful or the Society Mamas will be knocking on your door, Winn."

"Don't threaten me, Saint," he said with a smile. But he couldn't help be somewhat pleased by the outcome—however unintended—of his agents' assignments. Willoughby Galloway had been assigned to protect the queen from assassination attempts. Lady Emily, her lady-in-waiting, had been a prime suspect. The two had fallen in love and rooted out the assassin. Though Lady Emily was no agent, Will had proved an invaluable asset to the group since his marriage—even if he did take a month or two off here and there to spend with his wife.

Lucy Galloway and Duncan Slorach had married not even six months before. He'd sent them to protect the son of the prime minister. He'd known there was some tension between them—Elinor had seen them one day and said they just needed to kiss and get it over with—but he hadn't expected them to return from their mission with Lucy proposing to Duncan. That scene had played out in his study at the Farm. Was there no decorum any longer?

"Does the queen need any assistance?" Lady Emily asked.

"I believe she is on her way now," Elinor said.

"We should take our seats then," Duncan Slorach suggested.

"This is so exciting!" Lucy said. "We're right in the front."

"I'm so proud of you both," Sophia said, reaching for her son and daughter's hands. "We never had an installation ceremony."

“We were just sent out and told not to die,” Adrian said.

“You have your share of medals and ribbons.” Will elbowed his father. “I’ve seen them.”

Adrian looked embarrassed then cleared his throat. “You are coming to our town house after the ceremony?” He glanced at Elinor. “Sophia has ordered enough food for an army.”

“Of course. We’re looking forward to it. We’ll see you soon.”

Winn led her away. He’d wanted to speak to each of his agents before the installation ceremony. He moved closer to the front where Hew Arundel stood beside his wife, Belle. She was seated in the second row, but she rose as Winn and Elinor approached. “Mrs. Arundel, how good to see you again,” Winn said.

Elinor didn’t say anything. She simply embraced first Belle, then Hew. “My two favorite agents!”

“Elinor,” Baron chided.

“Sorry. I don’t have favorites,” she said. “But if I did...” She winked. “How are you? How is your tea shop?”

Baron recalled that Hew Arundel had been taken to his now-wife’s tea shop after being stabbed in an assassination attempt by a landowner trying to swindle the railroads. Belle had nursed Hew back to health, but not without cost. The assassins had targeted her shop, and Belle and Hew had to escape and take refuge with Elinor.

“Business is very good,” Belle said. “I could hardly get away.”

“I had to drag her away. One doesn’t keep the queen waiting,” Hew said.

“Of course, I didn’t want to miss this,” she said, putting her hand on his arm. “Oh, I almost forgot!” She opened her reticule and drew out a small box. “For you.” She held it out to Elinor.

“Don’t tell me,” Elinor said, her voice rising with excitement. “Is this?”

“Shh!” Belle said. “If you say anything, everyone will want some, and I have a very limited quantity.”

“Not a word,” Elinor said, dropping the box into her reticule. Winn could only assume Mrs. Arundel had presented his wife with a gift of some exotic tea. She’d given him cups of this or that, but Winn still preferred his Earl Grey.

The door to the chamber opened, and a footman in royal livery stepped inside. “Take your seats, gentleman, lords, and ladies. The queen approaches.”

Belle’s eyes widened, and Elinor patted her hand. “I’ll see you at Lord and Lady Smythe’s, yes?”

“If the shop can spare me,” she said.

“It can,” Hew said.

Winn steered his wife to the last couple, who were taking their seats in front of where Winn and Elinor would sit. “If it isn’t Lord and Lady Holyoake,” Winn said, giving them a bow.

“Lord and Lady Keating,” Viscount Holyoake said. “Might I sit with you?”

“Of course,” Winn said. “You’ve been through this before.”

“My installation was in a small parlor.” Ambrose Holyoake looked about the reception room. “Nothing as grand as this.”

“It’s Willoughby Galloway’s fault,” Margaret Holyoake said. Winn remembered she liked to use her maiden name, Vaughn, when she’d been estranged from her husband. He supposed this was another one of those instances where Elinor would say he played matchmaker. He hadn’t. He’d sent Margaret to find her husband when he went missing on an assignment because she was good at tracking people, not because he wanted them to reconcile. Though it was a happy outcome.

“He saved the queen’s life, and now she is grateful.” Margaret sounded almost annoyed.

“Maggie’s anxious to leave for her next mission,” Holyoake said.

“Tomorrow is soon enough.” Winn smiled. “What will you do while she’s away?” he asked Holyoake.

“Oh, I have enough business at my estate to keep me busy. I’ll need to stay busy if I don’t want to drive myself mad with worry for her.”

Margaret squeezed his arm.

“I understand perfectly,” Elinor said. “I always worried about Winn when he was on assignment without me.”

“And I worried about you!”

Elinor blew out a breath. “You only worried because if I perished, you’d have to take the girls dress shopping.”

“One of many things I would miss about you,” he said. “Enjoy your day, Lady Holyoake,” he said to Margaret.

The agents had just arranged themselves in two rows and taken their seats when the door opened and a footman announced, “Her Majesty, Queen Victoria!”

They all rose as the petite queen entered the reception room. She didn’t smile, but her eyes scanned the room and she nodded at Willoughby and Lady Emily. She was followed by various secretaries and the prime minister, who had his eldest son with him.

“Miss Lucy!” the boy cried.

Lucy smiled and waved at him, while his father hushed him and promised they could see her after the ceremony.

The queen bid them be seated and accepted a sheaf of papers from an attendant. Winn sighed. Apparently, she had prepared a speech. He took his seat with Elinor on one side and Holyoake on the other. As the queen spoke, Winn surveyed his agents—his Royal Saboteurs. Almost two years ago, this group had arrived at the Farm looking eager and

naïve. They still looked eager but considerably less naïve. They'd all completed their training, and he'd sent them out into the world. He couldn't protect them there. He had to trust their training would do that. Elinor was encouraging him to give up his role as the Saboteurs leader. She said it was time he retired and enjoyed his grandchildren. But who would take his place?

He glanced at Adrian, who seemed to feel Winn's gaze on him. He looked over, narrowed his eyes, then understanding, shook his head. Winn glanced at Sophia. Adrian's gaze hardened, but Winn knew Sophia would make up her own mind. She looked over and smiled.

"Pay attention," Elinor whispered. "She's praising you."

Winn looked back at the queen and forced himself not to squirm at the praise. It was his agents, not he, who deserved the praise. The queen was saying something about a royal order and a garter, and Winn realized, too late, his agents weren't the only ones being recognized today. He shot an accusatory look at Elinor. She'd known. She had to have known.

She smiled serenely and motioned for him to rise. Winn walked to the front of the room, up the dais, and knelt at the queen's feet. Behind him, his agents clapped, the sound ringing through the high ceilings of Buckingham Palace and beyond.

About Shana Galen

Shana Galen is three-time Rita award nominee and the bestselling author of passionate Regency romps. Kirkus said of her books: “The road to happily-ever-after is intense, conflicted, suspenseful and fun.” *RT Bookreviews* described her writing as “lighthearted yet poignant, humorous yet touching.” She taught English at the middle and high school level for eleven years. Most of those years were spent working in Houston’s inner city. Now she writes full time, surrounded by three cats and one spoiled dog. She’s married and has a daughter who is most definitely a romance heroine in the making.

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Bridget Murray consulted the small gold watch she held in her gloved hand and frowned. Nearby, the last train of the night blew out a burst of steam, sounding very much like an enormous, and rather impatient, horse. She looked about the deserted train station, her eyes roving over the same figures she'd observed the past forty-seven minutes. One lone porter sat on a bench, his eyelids half closed as he snoozed. Through the window of the small lounge, she noted the ticket seller beginning to gather his coat and hat. Bridget, in her dark traveling dress and old but still serviceable winter coat, stood between two columns, watch in hand and umbrella hooked on one arm.

Another minute ticked by. *Where was he?* The train would depart in twelve minutes. The rest of her charges were aboard, and she felt a twinge of unease at not being safely aboard, though she'd reminded herself several times that she still had plenty of time.

Baron wanted Kelly on that train, and Baron had asked her, specifically, to wait for the man. But she couldn't *make* this Kelly come to the train station. He knew the train schedule, didn't he? Surely, he did. Baron informed her Kelly had been given his ticket days ago. Whereas, she had held the tickets for her other passengers.

She looked at her watch again just as a gust of steam from the train ruffled her black skirts and momentarily deafened her. When she looked up again a man sprinted toward her.

He dashed down the platform, his greatcoat flying behind him, revealing dark, fitted evening clothes beneath. He'd lost his hat at some point and his chin-length hair flew back from his clean-shaven face. She might have retreated if not for the grin he wore. He looked like a man having the best night of his life.

She'd been struck momentarily immobile by his sheer masculine beauty. The way he moved, the way his eyes glittered, the way the wind whipped his hair back...

He was coming straight for her.

Bridget glanced at the train then the lounge, trying to decide which was closer should she need to flee. But even as she turned toward the lounge, the man, who was now only a few yards away, called out to her. "Are you Miss Bridget Murray?" His voice had a lilt she couldn't place at the moment, but she understood him well enough.

"I am." She shoved her watch into the reticule hanging from her wrist.

"Sure and I'm Callahan Kelly." He skidded to a stop before her and reached up to doff his hat. Finding it missing, he shrugged and gave her a sweeping bow. Oh, yes, he was handsome. That was undeniable.

Even more undeniable was the fact that he was trouble. One look into his gray-blue eyes told her that.

A commotion at the other end of the platform caused him to straighten and cast a look over his shoulder. Just then four other men tumbled down the far stairwell. A remarkably tall man led three burly men. They paused and looked about as though searching for someone. She sighed. "They're after you, of course."

Kelly hissed in a breath and stepped behind the nearest column, pulling her with him. "How long until the train leaves?"

"Eleven minutes." She peered around the column. The men had slowed, seeming to search, and moving in the direction of the lounge behind her.

"Too long." Kelly took her wrist and yanked her out from the columns and into the shadows at the back of the platform.

"Let go!" she objected as he pulled her into an archway built into the stone.

But instead of releasing her, he shoved her against the white tiled wall and pressed himself beside her. “Be quiet.”

Bridget brought her foot down hard on his shoe, and he jumped back, a look of incredulity in his eyes. She straightened. “I don’t know who you think you are, but I have not given you leave to touch me.”

“Bridget—”

“*Miss Murray*, if you please.”

“You’ll be *Miss Murdered* if you don’t shut up and step back.”

She might be angry, but she wasn’t an idiot. She could see the men who’d come for him were not the sort to listen to reason or, more importantly, to respect train schedules. She stepped back, pressing herself uncomfortably close to Mr. Kelly and dug out her watch. “Nine minutes until the train departs.”

“We’ll catch the next one.”

She turned to face him. “You think trains to the Farm leave every day? I have strict instructions to be on that train no m—”

He cupped a hand at the back of her neck pulled her face hard against his chest. Two seemingly contradictory thoughts entered her head at that moment.

One, she wanted to hit him.

Two, he smelled remarkably good. She had the ridiculous urge to bury her nose in his coat and press her cheek against his warm torso. Instead, she shoved back. His grip on her neck held, and they stared at each other, nose to nose.

“Unhand me!” she hissed.

“My friends are just there.” His gray-blue eyes darted to the side. “Once they pass us, we make a run for it.”

She wanted to argue. She wanted to stomp on his foot again. She wanted a closer look at those eyes. Instead, she

pressed her lips together and allowed herself to be gathered against his chest again.

Even she would be pressed to admit her current situation was a hardship. Besides the fact that his touch was doing strange things to her belly and making her chest feel tight, his plan was reasonable. Provided the men passed them in the next seven minutes, they'd have enough time to board the train and be away.

But seven minutes with her body flush against his, her breath quickening as her breasts were flattened against his chest, the hair at the nape of her neck rustling with each of his warm breaths. She clenched her fists, determined to bear the friction as he slid against her in an effort to peer around the wall shielding them.

“Miss Murray,” he whispered in her ear, making her shiver. “We have a problem.”

Truer words were never spoken. “What problem?” she whispered back.

“One of the men is standing guard just outside the station lounge.”

Clearly, Kelly's plan must be discarded. The thug was unlikely to move in the next six minutes and she must be on that train. She could go without Mr. Kelly, but that would mean ignoring Baron's order to wait for the man. Baron wanted Kelly at the Farm.

She looked up, avoiding Kelly's unusual eyes. Her gaze rested on his lips, but those also proved too dangerous, and she settled on one of his dark eyebrows. “Do these men need to take you alive?”

“Sure and I don't know what you're hinting at, Miss Murray.”

Irish. That was his accent. “Will they kill you now or do they need to bring you to their leader alive?”

“Alive, I expect, though they wouldn't mind damaging me, if you understand my meaning.”

“Now who would want to hurt you, Mr. Kelly?”

He lifted a brow, which made her chest tighten a fraction more.

“I might owe their employer a pound or two.”

They’d want him alive then. Dead men couldn’t pay debts. In any case, there was no more time to waste. She held up her watch and palmed it so only a glint of metal showed. “Turn around and let me put my arm about your neck.”

“Are you daft?”

“Don’t try me, Mr. Kelly. Turn around.”

He gave her a look of incredulity then turned and hunched down, so she could hook her arm about his neck. She pressed the watch to his temple as though it were a pistol.

“You can’t think this will work,” he muttered.

“Hello there!” she called, pushing Kelly out of the alcove.

The wide, muscular man standing by the column spun around, his small eyes widening. “Oy!” he called to his comrades.

“Is this the person you are searching for?” Bridget pushed Kelly forward. If she could move near enough to the train, they could make a run for it.

“Hand ‘im over, missus.”

“No, don’t come any nearer. I have a pistol to his head, and if you come any closer, I will shoot.”

“Oy!” The thug called again.

“They’re coming back, lass,” Kelly said under his breath.

“You won’t shoot ‘im, missus” The burly man moved forward. He had a vicious scar across one cheek, and his nose looked to be little more than a flat blob in the center of his face.

“I will. I’ve shot men before. Now, I want to board this train, and I am taking him with me.”

The tall man approached, slowing to a walk as he assessed the situation. “You can’t do that, madam.” He was obviously the leader. His speech was slightly more refined. “We work for a very important man, and he needs to speak with Mr. Kelly. Immediately.”

The train hissed out another blast of steam. Now she had two men between the train and herself. She couldn’t look at her watch, but she knew she was almost out of time. “That’s most interesting because I also work for an important man, and he would like to speak with Mr. Kelly as well. Perhaps my employer could speak to Mr. Kelly and then you could have him back. Now, if you would move aside and allow us to pass.” She started confidently forward, pushing Kelly in front of her.

“I can’t do that, madam.” The tall man glanced to the side as the third large man joined them. “Hand him over, and I give you my word, you will not be touched.”

“Get out of my way, or I give you my word that I will shoot him right now.”

The tall man’s eyes narrowed. “I think you’re bluffing.”

She kept her gaze locked on his. Bridget was a very good card player.

The train whistle shattered the tension, and Bridget jumped at the unexpected screech. Her hand opened, and she fumbled to catch the watch before it fell to the ground.

“Get him!” the tall man yelled.

Everything happened very quickly. Kelly pushed her out of the way as the three men rushed him. She stumbled over her skirts and went to her knees. She pushed up again just as someone called, “All aboard!”

“No!” She started for the train, but she couldn’t leave Kelly behind. He had his hands full with the three men circling him. As she watched, he threw a punch at the flat-nosed thug, but it glanced off the man’s cheek, doing little harm. The tall man grasped his arms from behind, but Kelly slammed his elbow back, and the tall thug bent double.

Bridget was used to seeing men who could fight, and she knew skill when she saw it. The enormous wheels of the train began to move, and she started for it. She could still jump aboard, but how to free Kelly to join her?

And if that wasn't problem enough, the fourth thug was racing toward them. He had his full attention on Kelly, and Bridget unhooked her umbrella from her arm and stuck it into his path at just the right moment. He went down hard and she closed in, bashing him in the back of the head with the umbrella's solid wood handle.

One down.

The train was moving in earnest now. She had less than a minute to jump aboard. "Mr. Kelly, we must go!" she called.

"I'm coming—" He threw a punch and missed. "—as fast —" The tall man hit him in the shoulder, and Kelly reeled back. "—as I can, lass."

"Must I do everything?" she muttered to herself. She dug in her reticule and pulled out all the coins she possessed. In one motion, she flung them onto the platform. As she'd expected, the men glanced at the dropping coins, and realizing what they were, dove for them.

Well, two of the thugs dove for them. The tall man turned back to Kelly, ducking his right hook.

The train was moving quickly now. She could see the last cars approaching. She began to jog to keep up. "Mr. Kelly, now would be an excellent time to board."

He feinted left then punched the tall man in the throat. Bridget turned away and, running now, grasped the stair railing, pulling herself onto the steps of the car just as the rearmost car passed the struggling men.

"Mr. Kelly! Now or never!" she yelled as the train whistle sounded for the last time.

Kelly grabbed the tall man by the coat, pulled his head down, and slammed his forehead against the tall man's. Bridget winced, but the desperate maneuver worked. The tall man stumbled away, and Kelly began to run toward the train.

He shook his head as though dizzy, and Bridget realized he wasn't running fast enough. He'd never catch the last car.

“Hurry!” she called.

Kelly looked up at her and increased his speed then stumbled at the last moment. “No!” Bridget called as Kelly went down and the train sped away.

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