

THE JACKAL AND MISS STANHOPE

by Shana Galen

CHAPTER ONE

Fleeting glimpses of his black velvet cape, brief meetings in dark alleys, whispered words on a breezy terrace—that was all anyone knew of The Jackal. And yet not a man could describe him as anything less than charming, not a woman as less than dangerously handsome.

From *The Jackal and the Rose*

London 1811

She reached one gloved hand under the desk, her practiced fingers finding the secret latch easily. With the flick of her wrist and an almost inaudible snick, the desk was hers. Pausing to take a measured breath, she coaxed the center drawer open.

Beyond the door of the library, somewhere in the midst of the ball, she heard the tinkling of a woman's laugh and the low rumble of a man's baritone, and still she moved slowly. Almost painfully so. In the lambent candlelight, she had time to study the ancient desk's gleaming mahogany surface. But even here, Time, the great equalizer, had taken the toll it was due. Small dents and chips marred the otherwise flawless wood.

The drawer was heavy, but it had not stuck. Yet. She was careful not to allow it to squeak as it yawned wider.

Almost there...

Well aware that at any moment the desk's owner, Comte Traducer, could enter and interrupt her work, she didn't allow her hands to tremble or her heart to race. Under her dark cloak, her skin was cool. Not even a trickle of perspiration curled down her back to betray her. She was a professional. Steady as the tightrope walkers she'd once seen at a country fair.

The mouth of the drawer gaped at her, and she balanced the ledge on her knee. The papers inside did not appear to be placed in any sort of order, but she studied their arrangement anyway.

With the drawer still balanced on one knee, she used two fingers to lift the documents, flipping them open. A bill from the tailor, a letter from the solicitor, an article from last month's *Times*, a list of ships, a bill from the confectioner...wait.

A list of ships.

She pulled the paper and perused it quickly. It was written in French, but as her French was flawless, she hastily translated it: names of British warships along with their arms and complements of marines. Just the sort of information the enemy would pay for.

Leaving the rest of the papers undisturbed, she lifted the document out of the drawer and secured it in the hidden pocket in her cloak. Feeling hurried now, she slid the drawer closed, then jumped as she heard a squeak.

Her eyes flew from the silent drawer to the doorway, and she saw an unmistakable shadow darken the crack beneath. The latch lifted.

With barely a second thought, she doused the candle and ducked under the desk, sliding as deep into the recesses as possible.

Botheration! She was effectively trapped.

She heard the door open and the click of boots on the hardwood floor. A moment later, the clicks turned to ominous thuds as the man stepped onto the plush Aubusson rug.

The same rug under her own feet.

Moving slowly but deliberately, she withdrew a small pistol from the holster in her boot. She preferred not to use it, but she knew Comte Traducer. If he discovered her, a pistol might be her only escape.

"Nothing appears disturbed." A voice with a thick French accent broke the silence. "Perhaps you were mistaken."

"Unlikely. She's here."

Under the desk, she winced. She knew that voice with its lilting Italian inflections. It was her archenemy, The Italian. And he'd found her.

There was no point in hiding now, and with swift sure movements, she sprung from her hiding place. The Comte was closer than she'd thought, and just near enough that she could aim a punishing kick at his midsection. He

bent double, and a second kick to his jaw brought him to his knees. No fighter, he went down with a muffled oomph.

In the doorway, his face shadowed by the light behind him, The Italian seemed to smile.

“Finally, we meet.” His tone mocked her, but she didn’t let him unnerve her. She hefted her pistol so the metal gleamed in the faint light.

“Not this time,” he said, and too late, she saw his pistol. The shot rang out like the crack of lightning.

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“What is wrong with you, Alexandra?” Georgina said, putting her hand on Alexandra’s arm. Pulled violently out of her elaborate daydream, Alexandra blinked in confusion. Bright lights, loud music, laughing voices, too much cologne.

“Are you unwell?” Georgina asked, her plump face tight with concern. “The crash was only the servant dropping a tray of champagne glasses.”

“I’m sorry?” Alexandra struggled to get her bearings. There was no secret latch under a desk, no list of British military ships, no Comte Traducer, and she, most certainly, was no spy. Looking around, she recalled all too clearly her true identity—Alexandra Stanhope: wallflower.

“Oh, dear. You are not well at all. Shall I find your grandfather?”

“No.” Alexandra put a steadying hand on her friend’s arm before she could dart into the crowd, leaving Alexandra a lone wallflower. “I am fine. I was—lost in thought.”

Georgina’s face drooped in disapproval. “You were daydreaming again, weren’t you?” She shook her head and closed her eyes, looking rather like her mother, Viscountess Downing. She lowered her voice. “It’s bad enough that you spend hours and hours each day writing those horrid novels. Now, when we have finally gotten you out and about, do you smile and flirt and flutter your fan?”

Alexandra glanced down at her wilted fan, lying dormant in her lap.

“No!” Georgina answered her own question. “You daydream about spies too! Spies, spies, spies! Why, if I were forced to take up the writing profession, I

would certainly try to forget about it as often as possible. Besides, how will you ever find a husband if you do not try?”

It was a good question, and one Alexandra had ceased to worry about two years ago. She had larger concerns. “Georgina, we are five and twenty now. Do you not think it might be time we stopped looking for husbands?”

Her friend stared at her as though she had snakes for hair. “Stop—but then we’d become spinsters!”

Alexandra pursed her lips and considered how to explain the obvious. “Georgina, we *are* spinsters.”

Georgina’s hands flew to her round, red cheeks. “No. We. Are. Not! Do not ever say so, Alexandra! There are husbands plenty yet to be had, if you would only stop thinking of spies all the time and look for a suitable man.”

Alexandra frowned and surveyed the couples executing the forms of the dance a few feet away. Most of the men were suitable enough. They dressed in the latest fashion, hair impeccably styled, conversation polite. She would have considered just about any of them. The problem was, of course, that none of them would consider her.

And why should they? She’d never been a beauty. She was not ill-favored by any stretch, but she had nothing to recommend her. Alexandra considered herself average in looks. Her height and weight were average—not too short or tall, not too thin or plump. Her hair and eyes were average shades of brown, her hair not dark enough to be glossy chestnut and not light enough to fall into the blond category. In actuality, she thought her eyes rather pretty, but that was before she began to wear spectacles. Now her eyes were all but lost behind the lenses.

It was true that on occasion other ladies—Georgina and her mother—had commented that Alexandra’s clothes were less than attractive, but Alexandra could never abide gowns with all those flounces and bows. She preferred her dresses plain and modest.

But when Alexandra ran her eyes over the dancers at Lord Dunderlee’s ball, she knew that her looks alone did not deem her a spinster. Many of the partnered ladies were no more attractive than she. But they had assets more

valuable: money and connections.

Alexandra had nothing but her imagination, and while it kept a roof over her head and food on her grandfather's table, it did not beckon men hither.

"What about him?" Georgina was saying, gesturing unobtrusively toward a man escorting a blond beauty onto the dance floor for the next set. "He is attractive."

"I suppose." Alexandra's eyes glossed over the man without much interest. Something else had caught her eye, and now she scanned the far side of the ballroom to find it again. Hoping to see better, she stood and craned her neck slightly. Georgina was beside her in an instant. "You needn't be so obvious."

Alexandra ignored her. Pushing her spectacles onto her nose, she squinted.

Yes, there! There was the swirl of a black cape again, and this time she also caught the flash of a golden lion's mane. She watched as the man took the proffered hand of a young lady. Then her eyes widened as she clearly saw the lady slip a piece of paper into the man's sleeve.

Interesting.

Alexandra had to know what was on that paper. "Who is that?" she breathed, interrupting whatever Georgina had been babbling about.

"Who?" Georgina craned her neck as well.

"The golden-haired man in the black cape." Code names? Dates? Lists of shipments? The man looked quite suspicious.

"I didn't see any—wait a moment! Is this another of those times when you think you see a spy and go chasing after him, hoping to uncover some tidbit for your latest novel?"

"No," Alexandra answered, but she was already moving away. The man in the black cape stood near the door to the ballroom, and Alexandra did not want him to get away. Her very livelihood depended on her success.

"Oh, yes it is," Georgina whined. She stomped her foot. "And this time I am not going to follow you."

"Good," Alexandra called over her shoulder. She would never accomplish

anything if Georgina tagged along. "I shall return in a moment."

She slid past the throngs of people, wending her way to the far side of the ballroom. Several times she lost sight of the man in the black cape, and when she reached the door, he was nowhere in sight.

Botheration!

She thought about going back to Georgina. She could see her friend, looking forlorn on the other side of the room, but something urged Alexandra to keep searching. Perhaps this time she had found a true spy! How could she give up the opportunity to see him in action? Her editor said she needed to enliven her books. What better inspiration than observing a real spy on a mission?

The refreshment room adjoined the ballroom, but it was not as crowded, and Alexandra quickly ascertained that the black-caped man was not here. Looking about, she saw only two other possible options: the exit or the music room.

She arrowed for the music room. If the spy had exited, she was out of luck, so this was her only chance. There might be fewer people in the refreshment room, but she knew more of them, and she had to pause several times to smile and greet those acquaintances.

When she finally reached the music room, she saw that the door was slightly ajar. Not wishing to be seen by either those within or those nearby, she stood with her back to the room and pretended to nibble on the sandwich she'd nipped from the refreshment table. She imagined the Jackal, that perfect spy of her scribblings, would be proud of her.

As inconspicuously as possible, Alexandra inched closer to the open door. Within, she heard two men talking, their voices far too low for her to decipher any words. Taking a chance, she peeked through the open slit just in time to scoot out of the way as one of the men—not the spy in the black cape—pulled it open. With a frown in her direction, he exited, closing the door behind him.

Now what was she to do?

Georgina would tell her to go back to her seat by the wall. Her

grandfather would probably pat her head and tell her to have a biscuit. What would The Jackal tell her?

Ah, yes.

Taking a deep breath, she flung open the door and stumbled inside.

The man in the black cape hunkered before the fireplace, but he jumped up sharply at her unexpected entrance. “Who the devil are you?” In his hand he held a smoldering slip of parchment. Alexandra ignored his question and focused on the parchment and playing her part.

“Oh, dear!” She put a hand to her forehead. “I fear I shall faint.”

The black-caped man just stared at her, so she staggered a bit for his benefit.

“Bloody hell!”

That did the trick. In three steps he crossed the room and grasped her arm with his free hand. “Sit down.” He led her to the settee near the pianoforte, and she allowed it, studying him from underneath her lashes.

He was older than she’d thought—at least fifty. Streaks of gray striped his golden locks and lines etched his face. It was an attractive face, to be sure. Strong jaw, blue eyes, aquiline nose. He wasn’t as attractive as The Jackal, but then of course The Jackal was younger.

And imaginary.

The parchment in his hand was still smoldering, and when he placed her on the settee, she took the opportunity to snatch it.

“What—”

“Oh, my! How clever you are!” She waved the smoking parchment under her nose and inhaled deeply. “This smoke will certainly revive me.”

“I-yes.” His blue eyes were fixed on the parchment, and she could tell that he desperately wanted it back. That was one part of the plan she hadn’t quite worked out. Somehow she had to distract the black-caped man long enough to read his missive.

The Jackal would know what to do, and she, being the Jackal, should know what to do as well. But when she wrote about The Jackal’s exploits, she had days and sometimes weeks to consider his schemes. At present, she had

only a few seconds.

Not only was the black-caped man holding out his hand, expecting her to relinquish the parchment, the missive was slowly burning down to ash.

“I—” She had no idea what she was about to say.

Behind her, the door opened, and she practically collapsed in relief.

“Sorry,” a deep voice drawled. “I must have the wrong room. Am I interrupting?”

“Not at all, Roman.” The black-caped man moved away from her. “This lady was feeling ill.”

Without turning, she gave a little wave and inhaled deeply. Her lungs, unaccustomed to so much smoke, protested, and she bent double with hacking.

Behind her, she could hear him speaking to the man called Roman. Their words were muted as she was still coughing furiously, but all that mattered was he wasn't watching the parchment.

Still in her bent position, she hurriedly unfolded the charred paper.

I love you to the depths of m

Alexandra squinted, but the rest dissolved into burnt blackness.

Frowning, she read it again. And again.

But this wasn't a spy missive at all! It was a love note!

Alexandra closed her eyes and recalled the black-caped man's actions at the ballroom's entrance. It was entirely likely that the lady who had slipped him this note was not an operative but a love interest.

Botheration! This man was no spy!

“Do you mind?”

With a gasp, she straightened. The black-caped man stood before her, hand held open. Without protest, she dropped the note into his palm. “I'm terribly sorry,” she said weakly. “I shouldn't have peeked.”

“No, you shouldn't.” Crumpling the note, he threw it into the fire and watched it snap and hiss. Then he turned back to her. “What are you really doing here, Miss—”

Alexandra felt her cheeks flush, and a small bead of sweat trickled down

her back. “Stanhope. Nothing, sir. I felt faint.”

“Who sent you?”

Her heart stumbled in her chest. “No one, I—” To her utter horror, her lip began to tremble. It was most unfortunate that whenever Alexandra was nervous or agitated, she began to laugh. Uncontrollably. Reflex, she supposed, and a most inconvenient one at that. You will not laugh! she told her traitorous body.

Chomping her lip between her teeth brought tears of pain to her eyes but stopped the laughter bubbling within her.

“Oh, leave her alone, Vauxly,” Roman’s voice washed over her. “Can’t you see you’re scaring the chit?”

Alexandra whipped around, prepared to deny she was in any way, shape, or form scared, that she was only crying because it was better than laughing. But what she saw silenced her.

He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen—more physically attractive than she’d even imagined her hero, The Jackal. He stood, holding a champagne glass and watching her with a look of curiosity on a face the very angels must have molded. She had a quick impression of green eyes, black hair, and a perfectly sculpted nose before the breath whooshed out of her. It came out sounding suspiciously like a sniffle.

“Handkerchief?” the Adonis asked.

She shook her head, unable to make her paralyzed mouth function. The black-caped man stepped closer. “Hadn’t you better be going?”

She swallowed—finally closing her mouth, thank heaven—and when he raised one menacing eyebrow, she jumped to her feet. And, to her utter humiliation, she scurried out of the room like a rat.

The door slammed behind her, and she leaned against it, now attempting in truth to catch her breath.

She had seen a god.

And he had spoken to her.

His name was Roman. Was that his first or last name? How was he affiliated with the man in the black cape?

Several people stared at her, so she moved away from the door and back toward the ballroom. She had no intention of resuming her seat near the wall. She would find her grandfather and go home. She had too much to think about to waste time at a ball.

When she arrived home, she would make a list of all her questions, and her one answer.

For she finally had the answer she'd sought. After the way he behaved, the suspicious questions he asked, and his threatening nature, there could be no doubt.

The golden-maned man in the black cape was indeed a spy.

CHAPTER TWO

In a time when nobility was in short supply, The Jackal understood its true meaning. He fought for his country, not for glory or honor. He fought to protect the women and children. He fought to protect liberty. Like his namesake, he was content to let the lions of the world take the credit for his hard-won victories. The Jackal shunned applause.

From The Jackal

“Who was that?” Harry Roman watched the door slam shut on the girl in the ugliest gown he had ever seen. He didn’t pay much attention to ladies’ gowns, but even he knew the shade of a gown should not make one’s eyes water.

“No one. Some chit who stumbled in here claiming to feel faint.”

“Claiming?” Roman took a seat on the settee the girl had just vacated, leaned back, and propped one foot on the table. He swirled the bubbling contents of the glass he held. “She looked ready to faint when she ran out of here just now.”

“Good.” Vauxly nodded with approval. “Serves her right for snooping around. There’s been an epidemic of it.”

Roman was careful to keep his face unchanged. “Really?” He brought the champagne to his lips and took a small sip.

“All that stuff and bother to do with The Jackal.”

Roman jerked and his champagne went down wrong. He stifled a cough with an exaggerated yawn, but his throat was burning and his eyes watered. How the hell did Vauxly know about the Jackal?

Vauxly took a cheroot from the depths of his cape and, using one of the lamps in the room, lit it. “You’ve been abroad for some time, Roman, so you probably haven’t heard of The Jackal.”

Roman shook his head and clipped the urge to cough by clearing his throat.

“Horrid books, if you ask me, but this A. Stanley Hope has all the ladies atwitter.” He puffed on his cheroot. “All of a sudden needlework isn’t good enough for them. They want adventure and romance like *The Jackal* and his ladies.”

Roman set his champagne on the table. “So these are adventure stories?”

“Spy stories. *The Jackal* is a spy—tall, dark, and handsome. A lot of rubbish. If one of them ladies was to get a taste of a real adventure—”

The hair on the back of Roman’s neck prickled. Vauxly was the consummate gentleman—perfect speech and manners—until he became excited. Then his cultured speech was the first to go.

Now Roman frowned at the look in Vauxly’s eyes. He was not a poetic man, but *gleam* seemed a perfect description.

Vauxly flicked the cheroot, heedless of where ash might fall. “Yes...why not give the chit some adventure? I could use a girl like that.”

Roman feigned a laugh. “Use her for what? She’s not much to look at. Just now, you scared her half to death.”

Vauxly shrugged. “She could be useful. You’re a businessman, Roman. You know that any successful man of business is always looking for ways to improve.”

Roman inclined his head and allowed the conversation to turn to profit and loss and the risks of owning a shipping business during wartime. It was exactly the kind of discussion he’d been hoping to have with Vauxly for weeks, but instead of absorbing every word, he was worrying about the damn girl.

What did Vauxly have planned for her?

More importantly, why did he care?

An hour or so later, one in which he did not again spot the girl in the bright orange dress, Roman left the ball, opting to walk back to the Pulteney rather than take a hack. It was early November, and the weather was cold, but in his hat and greatcoat, Roman barely felt the chill.

Thus far his trip to London had been relatively uneventful. One might

even call it dull. He would have enjoyed the respite from his usual circumstances—a good sight colder, hungrier, and wearier than he was at the moment—if he felt the work he was doing here was in any way meaningful. But the time he'd spent with Vauxly seemed wasted. If the man was a spy for the French, he was not on active duty. Roman could not find any evidence of Vauxly's covert operations whatsoever.

But he could not exactly put that in his report—he was paid to uncover covert operations—and so Roman would be forced to while away his time at balls and musicals, the theater and Vauxly's clubs, until the man did something to give himself away. The more Roman considered his present assignment, the more appealing cold and hunger became.

Perhaps he could—

A shadow moved in one of the many alleys that lined North Audley Street. Roman tensed and narrowed his eyes on the indistinct black shapes nearby. A group of thieves? Street urchins? A prostitute?

No, he didn't think so. Roman wrapped his fingers more tightly about the knob of his walking stick. He could use a good fight. "Show yourself," he said. When there was no answer, he pressed a small button at the tip of his walking stick. The outer casing folded away, revealing a sharp sword that gleamed wickedly in the weak moonlight.

The sound of hollow clapping echoed in the empty streets, and out of the darkness emerged a pair of shiny black boots. The light was poor, but whatever there was of it reflected off that polished leather. Next came a pair of thick legs, a black greatcoat swirling about them. The man's body was obscured by the thick greatcoat, its collar reaching all the way to his chin and grazing his ears. A tall beaver hat completed the picture.

"Well done, Jackal," a voice drawled from the darkness. "Playing constable now? How the mighty have fallen."

Roman closed his eyes and swore.

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"Are you comfortable, Grandfather?" Alexandra asked as they settled into their seats at the theater. "You're not cold, are you?" Alexandra looked about

for their footman who might bring a blanket, but her grandfather waved an impatient hand.

“Capital. Everything is capital. Sit down, my dear. If I continue to crane my neck looking up at you, you’ll give me a crick.”

“My apologies.” Alexandra took the seat beside him, settling into the plush cushion.

Her grandfather had held a subscription at Covent Garden for over sixty-five years. He’d been heart-broken after the great fire of 1808 had destroyed the theater, and there had been no question that they would purchase a subscription when the theater reopened the following year. Even though times were lean, Alexandra found money to pay for the theater. Her grandfather could do without bread, but he lived on theater.

Unfortunately, Alexandra could not do without bread...or a roof over her head or coal for the fire or it seemed a great many things.

“What are we seeing tonight?” her grandfather asked, raising his opera glasses to peer at the crowds filling Covent Garden.

“*Julius Caesar*,” Alexandra reported. “John Kemble is playing Brutus.”

“Et tu, Brute?” Capital. Just capital.” Folding his hands over his belly, he sat back and closed his eyes.

He wasn’t asleep, Alexandra knew. Sir Harold frequently took catnaps. At eighty-seven years of age, she couldn’t blame him.

She perused her program, then seeing the opera glasses dangling from her grandfather’s seat, drew them away and put them to use.

For the past few days, she’d done little but think of her spy and how she could catch him doing something that would fit perfectly into her next book. Inevitably, as soon as she thought of the spy, she also thought of his friend, Roman. Encountering him had unnerved her, without question.

She was so shaken that every time she sat down to write her novel in progress—*Night of the Jackal*—she became distracted and sat for hours staring at the wallpaper in the parlor. The Jackal had always been the hero of her dreams, but now she found another man’s face and eyes invading her fantasies. Suddenly, The Jackal seemed bland and flat.

She had to stop thinking about that man. Roman.

But even now as she scanned the crowds at Covent Garden, she was secretly hoping he'd be here—secretly hoping she'd catch a glimpse of him.

Certainly, the rest of London was in attendance. She saw dukes and duchesses, earls and countesses too numerous to count. Scanning the less expensive seats, she found Georgina and her mother, both with their own opera glasses. Georgina's seemed trained on her, so Alexandra waved. Georgina waved back.

Allowing her gaze to wander again, Alexandra turned her attention to the seats directly across from her. Nothing new there unless one counted Lady Forney's latest husband—her fourth. This one appeared heartier than the last, so perhaps he would live a bit longer.

Suddenly Lady Forney's new husband's face was obscured as a familiar blond mane entered Alexandra's line of vision.

Alexandra almost dropped her opera glasses.

It was him! The spy!

And he was speaking to Lady Forney's husband.

Quickly, Alexandra surveyed the remainder of Lady Forney's box, hoping to catch sight of Roman. She attempted to steady her glasses so she could get a better view of the spy. She needed to find a way to move close to him and observe him at work.

She dropped the opera glasses from her eyes and turned swiftly to Sir Harold. "Grandfather, I should visit the retiring room before the production begins. Will you excuse me?"

Sir Harold looked surprised. Alexandra rarely left his side and only after much urging. She smiled and rose quickly, gathering her shawl. "I shall be quick."

"Good. You don't want to miss The Soothsayer's warning about the Ides of March."

"No indeed."

As she hurried out of the box, Alexandra couldn't help but think that perhaps she should heed a few other warnings as well.

CHAPTER THREE

“Step away from the girl,” The Jackal demanded, leveling his pistol at Comte Traducer, his indefatigable archenemy.

“You want the girl?” Traducer sneered. “Here!”

The lady let out a cry of relief as Traducer threw her into The Jackal’s strong arms. He caught her easily, but when he looked back, Traducer was gone.

From The Jackal’s Last Stand

“Damn it,” Roman hissed from behind his opera glasses. “She’s left her box.”

“Who?”

The voice came from behind Roman, but he ignored it. Maximilian Lennox was an annoyance he didn’t need right now. His former partner and his current director had found him walking back to the Pulteney last night, and he wasn’t letting Roman out of his sight.

Roman was standing, partially hidden behind a swath of velvet blue drapery in a box across from the one Alexandra Stanhope—he had done his research and learned her name—and her grandfather, Sir Harold Stanhope, occupied. Roman was ensconced in Vauxly’s box, but Vauxly was out making the social rounds. Roman would have tailed him if he hadn’t seen Alexandra and her grandfather come in.

Now that Lennox had slipped into the box, Roman wished he’d stuck with Vauxly. Vauxly was Roman’s target. Lennox might oversee the work Roman was doing, but he would never interfere.

Roman watched the Stanhope box a few moments more, then tossed his opera glasses onto a chair. “I’m going to have to look for her.”

“Who?” Lennox asked again.

“No one,” Roman hissed, wishing he hadn’t spoken aloud.

“Then perhaps you should have stayed with your target.”

Roman rounded on his former partner—the man Roman had practically trained. “Don’t tell me how to complete my missions.”

“I wouldn’t have to if you’d actually complete them.”

“I don’t have time for this.” Roman pushed past him and stalked down the corridor. He melted into the thick crowds and jogged down the steps toward a wide, curved staircase on the other side of the theater. He knew he hadn’t lost Lennox, but at least he had a momentary reprieve.

What the hell did Lennox know? He might have been a legend at one time, but now he was little more than an officious administrator. An officious administrator who had confined Roman to London—he detested London—following Vauxly to every ball, theater, and pleasure garden in Town. Frederick Vauxly who, in the grand scheme of things, was a no one—despite what the officious administrators of the world said.

Roman knew a demotion when he got one, even if it was couched in the likes of Frederick Vauxly.

Roman ascended the steps, taking them two at a time, and started down the corridor. He moved slowly now, more carefully, because he didn’t want Miss Stanhope to see him.

Not right away.

He caught a glimpse of orange silk a few boxes away and ducked behind a pillar, pretending to check his pocket watch. A quick check around the pillar, and he knew it was her. Her spectacles were skewed and her brown hair was in disarray, and he recognized that pert mouth and sharp chin immediately.

As she came closer, he shook his head. The gown she’d worn at the ball hadn’t been an accident. The woman had horrible taste in clothing. Her gown tonight was striped orange and lavender and about two sizes too big.

She looked like she was deep in thought, intent on her mission, and completely oblivious to everyone around her. A quick peek into the box behind him told him it was unoccupied.

Perfect.

As she walked, Alexandra mentally reviewed what she'd read about spies. Her instincts told her that the blond man was a spy, but she needed proof not intuition.

She ticked off the evidence she had thus far.

He wore a black cape.

He had a dangerous look about him.

He was engaged in clandestine activities. Or so it appeared.

By her calculations, the blond man should be coming her way. She spotted the curtains of a box and stepped inside.

A dark shape inside moved, and she spoke the lines she'd prepared. "I'm terribly sorry. I must have the wrong box number. If you will just give me a moment to catch—"

The shadow stepped out in front of her, grabbed her arm, and pressed her against a wall, thrusting his hand over her mouth. In the next instant, he slammed the curtains of the box closed, propelling them into semi-darkness.

"Don't scream."

Oh, no. She was not agreeing to that. She'd killed off too many characters who listened to Comte Traducer and didn't scream. She was definitely screaming.

As soon as he moved his hand.

She struggled against his grip, but he pushed his arm against her shoulders, holding her steady. She could feel her heart thudding against her chest like a hammer on an anvil. A thousand scenarios, each one more nefarious than the last, flooded her mind, and panic began to seep in.

At that moment, the theater around them erupted into applause. She jumped in surprise at the sudden noise as the actors spoke the first lines of the play.

"I have some advice for you." Her captor's voice was quiet, calm, and rich as velvet. Her heart thumped in her chest, but this was not at all from fear. She felt...something else entirely.

She blinked at him, wishing for a bit more light so that his features would come into focus. As it was, he was a hazy, dark shape. His hand and

arm were solid enough, but the rest of him seemed otherworldly.

On stage she could hear the actors. “What trade, thou knave? Thou naughty knave, what trade?”

“Are you listening?” he murmured. He sounded slightly annoyed.

She nodded. How could she do anything but listen? She was vaguely aware that she should be attempting to shove his hand aside and scream, but she could always do that after she heard the advice.

“Go back to your box and stay there.”

Alexandra frowned. That was the advice?

She pushed at his hand impatiently, the last of her fear trickling away. What was there to be frightened of anyway? At any moment the subscribers would enter this box. And if he tried to accost her, she would fight, alerting the people in nearby boxes.

She pushed at his hand again. He moved it away slowly, uncertainly.

“You pulled me in here and scared me half to death just to tell me to go back to my box? Are you worried I’ll miss the play?”

Around them, the audience erupted into laughter.

Her captor shifted, seeming less than amused. She squinted, trying to see his features more clearly. Her eyes widened. It was the spy’s compatriot—Roman!

“Don’t ask questions. You could be in danger.”

He’d obviously meant to scare her with that statement, but it had the opposite effect.

“Me, in danger? From what? Or...whom?” Her voice came out breathless from excitement, and now her captor gave a slight pause. His annoyed sigh indicated he wasn’t pleased.

“This is not a game, Miss Stanhope. Go back to your box and—” He broke off as the sound of low voices wafted over them. “Bloody hell,” he muttered and pulled her against him and deeper into the box. “Not a word,” he whispered in her ear. She shivered, but she did not think it was from fear. There was someone outside the box. She should scream, wrench away from the man, but her body rebelled against the idea of separating from him. And her

mind...well, she had always been curious.

“Do not fail me,” the voice on the other side of the curtain said. It sounded familiar.

“I won’t, sir. I’ll have the information by midday.”

“Good. Meet me at the boathouse in Hyde Park after dark.”

“Is that—?” Alexandra began before her captor put a hand over her lips.

“Vauxly?” he whispered in her ear. “Yes.” Slowly, he dragged his hand from her lips, trailing his fingers down her neck. She should not allow such familiarity, and yet she could not seem to manage to protest. She wanted him to continue touching her. She wanted him to whirl her about and kiss her.

“For if you do not have what I require...” Vauxly trailed off. “You know what happened to the Greek.”

She heard Roman inhale sharply. Alexandra might have had no idea who the Greek might be, but Roman obviously did. And he was shocked, if his quick intake of breath was any indication.

You know what happened to the Greek.

Oh, no. Had Vauxly killed the Greek? Vauxly and his companion were still speaking, but Alexandra no longer heard them. She had begun to shake, fear like a bubble rising inside her. And with the fear came something else—laughter. Alexandra clamped her own hands over her lips, but it was no good. She could not stop herself.

“Shh!” Roman said. “No weeping.”

“I’m not...weeping. I’m...laughing.” In the dim light, she could just make out the look of incredulity on his face. It made her giggle harder.

Outside, the two men ceased speaking. “What was that?” Vauxly asked.

“Bloody hell,” Roman murmured. “You’ll be the death of us both.” And with that, he pressed her against the wall again and lowered his mouth to hers.

As soon as his lips brushed hers, the laughter ceased. Everything ceased—all thought, all movement, everything around her. There was only this man and this moment. On the stage behind them, Julius Caesar would shortly die a horrible death, but in this private room, there was only she and Roman.

His lips were cool and dry as they slid lightly over hers, teasing her,

making her want more. He caressed her mouth with his own, leaving her lips tingling first on top and then on the bottom. And just when she thought he would pull away and abandon her in an agony of desire, he darted his tongue out and ran it over her lower lip.

Heat, pure and consuming, raced through her, making her skin burn and her body uncomfortably warm. The heat seemed to coalesce in her belly, tendrils of it licking out along her legs and into regions she dared not think of. She had the ridiculous urge to thrust her fingers into this man's hair and pull his mouth to hers so that he took her fully.

Instead, when he moved away, she pressed her hands into the wall behind her until her fingers ached. Except for the actor's voices, all was silent around them. "You," she whispered. Reason and logic were slowly returning. When she had decided to follow Vauxly, there was one matter she had not considered—he might have enemies. "I thought Vauxly was the spy," she whispered. "But it's you."

Roman released her, and she felt suddenly cold. She glanced up at him, her eyes somewhat adjusted to the dim light now. He scowled down at her. "You couldn't leave well enough alone."

She blinked. "I cannot believe it."

"Good. Now, go back to your seat and forget this ever happened."

Impossible. How was she to forget the most exciting night of her life? She'd been kissed by the most handsome man she'd ever seen, and she'd met not one, but two spies. The evening was turning out better than she could have conjured in her wildest dreams. "But I do not wish to return to my seat. I could help you. I know something of spies."

He held up a hand. "You know nothing. And what you do know, you should forget. That's an order, Miss Stanhope. I do not want to have to save you again."

"Save me? I don't need—" But she was protesting to herself. He was gone, and the only evidence that he'd been in the box with her was the swish of the curtains and the tingling of her lips. As though she would ever need to be *saved*. She would rouse her grandfather and go home right now to write the

next scene of her book.

And tomorrow she was determined to do firsthand research.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Jackal,” Lady Lorelei whispered. “How can I ever thank you for saving me, once again, from Comte Traducer?”

“Your gratitude is payment enough, my lady.” He stepped out onto the window ledge, prepared to disappear until needed again.

“Wait!” she cried. “One kiss. Allow me to bestow that small token of my affection.”

“No.” The Jackal shook his head. “For if I accept your kiss, I will be your slave for life. Save your kiss, my lady. There may come a time when I need it.”

From Night of the Jackal (unfinished manuscript)

Roman’s knees were cold and numb. He’d been kneeling behind the stack of row boats in the dank, shadowy boat house for over an hour now. The structure was closed on three sides and open on the fourth, where the waters of the Serpentine lapped at two docks where boats were launched in warmer weather. No boats were tethered there now, and the openness of the building meant Roman was half frozen.

But he needn’t wait much longer. Vauxly or his minion would arrive soon. Roman had made his way through Hyde Park earlier today. The cloudy skies and cold temperatures meant there had been no one to see him enter the boathouse. Now it must be past twilight, and he’d heard no sound of anyone approaching.

Roman rose slowly, letting his knees and legs unfold and the prickles of numbness fade. He should not have sat motionless so long. He needed to be able to spring into action at a moment’s notice. But just as he rose on tiptoes in a stretch, he heard the sound of a latch lifting and then the creak as the door swung open.

Roman slid back into the shadows and waited until the door closed again before peering through an opening between the stacked watercraft. He'd expected to see Vauxly or another man. Instead, Alexandra Stanhope stood just inside the doorway peering about. Roman cursed silently. He should have known she'd come. He should not have believed that his orders and warnings would mean anything to such an obviously headstrong lady. He was about to step out into the open and chastise her when he heard the low hum of hoofbeats. Damn! Now Vauxly would discover her, and Roman would reveal himself if he attempted to save her. Lennox would have plenty to say in his report to the Foreign Office, and none of it complimentary toward Roman. At this rate, he'd never be sent back to the Continent.

But Miss Stanhope obviously heard the hoofbeats as well and moved quickly to hide herself. Unfortunately, she chose to hide in the same spot he was occupying. She scurried behind the stack of boats, crouched low, and then jumped when her leg bumped into his.

"It's Roman," he murmured before she could scream. "What are you doing here?"

"Helping you," she whispered back. To her credit, her voice was level and calm. "I knew you'd be here, and I wanted to make sure you had someone to watch your back."

"If I needed someone to watch my back—as you say—I would have brought another agent. You've only put us both in danger."

"No, I haven't."

"Shh!" The sound of hoofbeats had ceased. He pulled her closer, back from the edge of the boats and deeper into the shadows. He wanted her in the corner and his body on the outside, where he could protect her if they were discovered. He also wanted her out of his way in case he needed to act quickly. Unfortunately, this meant that he had to pull her close to change places with her. For just a moment, her body brushed against his. He was a spy but also a man, and he couldn't help but notice where she was soft and rounded and smelled faintly of rose water.

His thoughts jumped back to the kiss they'd shared the night before. He'd been able to put it out of his mind, but their proximity brought back the sensation of her lips pressing tentatively against his and the soft exhalation of her breath, and he wanted to kiss her again.

But Roman was now more spy than man, and he managed to resist the pull of her lips and the temptation of her body and move her aside before the latch on the door rose again.

The man who entered was shorter and slimmer than Vauxly. Roman couldn't make out any other details about him, except that he moved in that jerky way a man did when he was nervous. "Hello?" he called out, quietly.

Roman felt Miss Stanhope reach over and take his hand. Both of them had removed their gloves, and he held her small cold hand, offering what reassurance he could as they dared not move for fear Vauxly's accomplice would find them.

Not two minutes later another set of hoofbeats could be heard. Miss Stanhope squeezed Roman's hand harder as Vauxly entered the boat house. Roman had thought she'd taken his hand because she was scared, but she was straining to see between the stacks of boats. Was the chit excited about being here? Clearly, she had no idea the danger she was in.

Or perhaps she did, and that sort of danger didn't scare her. If that was the case, she was a rare female indeed.

Vauxly had brought a lantern, and he set it down, opening the shutter enough that Roman could see his face and that of the other man. Although man was a bit of a stretch. Vauxly's accomplice was no older than eighteen and quite possibly a few years younger. Roman glanced toward Miss Stanhope, noting the weak lantern light didn't reach her corner. She'd wisely worn a black cloak and was well-hidden in the shadows.

"Do you have it?" Vauxly demanded of the other man without preamble.

"Y-yes. Do you have my payment?"

Vauxly withdrew a small bag that clinked when he held it out. The younger man took it and handed Vauxly a leather bag like the sort a courier carried.

“I’ll just be going now,” the younger man said, making an attempt to sidle past Vauxly and toward the exit.

“Not just yet.” Vauxly unwound the cord holding the courier bag closed. In the silence, the waters of the Serpentine lapped steadily against the wood of the docks. Vauxly pulled out a sheet of paper, held it close to the lantern, then nodded and shoved it back in the bag.

“It’s just as I told you,” the younger man said.

“You’ve done well.” Vauxly turned a pistol on the other man. “Too well.”

“What’s this—”

The pistol shot was deafening this close, and Roman felt Miss Stanhope drop his hand. She probably gasped as well, but fortunately the sound of the pistol covered her exclamation.

Vauxly’s accomplice crumpled to the floor, and Roman felt sorry for the man for a fleeting moment. He was a traitor to his country, but he seemed to genuinely think Vauxly would allow him to leave tonight. But Roman knew that a man like Vauxly can’t take the chance of anyone knowing his identity.

Vauxly bent to retrieve the bag of coins he’d given the man then took him under the arms and dragged him to the edge of the dock and dumped him into the water. Roman used Vauxly’s distraction to lean close to Miss Stanhope and whisper, “Stay hidden. Do not show yourself. No matter what.”

“But—”

He didn’t give her a chance to respond. He couldn’t. Vauxly’s pistol was spent, and his attention diverted. Now was the perfect time to act. Roman stepped out, brandishing his own pistol. “Hello, Vauxly,” he said.

Vauxly, who had been facing the water, spun around. “What the devil are you doing here?”

“I’ll take that.” Roman nodded to the courier bag Vauxly had slung across his body.

“I knew I couldn’t trust you,” Vauxly sneered. “How did you find me here?”

“The bag,” Roman said.

“Sure. I’ll give it to you and then what? You work for the Foreign Office. You won’t shoot me.”

“Don’t be so certain. The bag, Vauxly. Now.”

Vauxly removed it. “You want it? Catch it!” He tossed the bag. Roman was smart enough not to take his attention off Vauxly to try and catch the bag, until he saw that it would go over his head and into the space behind the stacked boats.

The space where Miss Stanhope hid.

And then he couldn’t seem to stop himself from reaching up to intercept the satchel. If it went behind the boats, a thousand things could go wrong—Miss Stanhope might scream, Vauxly might run back there to retrieve it and spot her. If she became Vauxly’s hostage, this would end badly.

Roman jumped for the bag, but it was too high. The tips of his fingers grazed the leather as it sailed over the boats and into the darkness behind them.

Roman twisted back, but it was too late. A moment later, Vauxly rammed into him, sending him sprawling and his pistol sliding underneath the boats. Roman fought back, and even managed to get in a punch, but Vauxly was behind him and had the upper hand. He pinned Roman to the ground, arms behind him. Roman would rather a broken arm than give up, and he fought harder. Until something hard struck the back of his head, and everything went black.

#

Alexandra had never been so frightened in her life. First, she’d witnessed a murder. Then Mr. Roman attacked and was disarmed. Vauxly had him pinned to the ground. She didn’t know what had happened, but Roman wasn’t moving any longer. Vauxly had grabbed rope used to tie boats to the dock and was binding Mr. Roman’s hands behind his back.

She had to do something!

But what could she do? She wasn’t a spy. She invented stories about spies. Very well then. What would her fictional hero The Jackal do? She remembered a scene she had written in *The Jackal and the Rose* where The

Jackal was left without powder or pistol balls. He'd used the butt of the weapon to knock Comte Traducer unconscious.

Quietly, she bent and peered under the boats blocking her from sight. Roman's pistol lay within reach if she flattened herself on her belly and stretched her arm. She did so, her fingers closing on the metal. Slowly and quietly, she dragged the weapon closer. When she had it in her hands, she peered through the boats again.

Oh no! Roman was moaning as Vauxly towed him to the edge of the water. As she watched in horror, Vauxly shoved Roman into the Serpentine. There was no time to think now. She had to act or Roman would drown. Her legs shook as she raced from her hiding place. Vauxly faced the Serpentine, watching his second victim of the evening sink under the black water. She had a clear view of his back.

The Jackal had hit the Comte on the temple, but Alexandra aimed for that soft spot at the base of the skull. Too late, Vauxly heard her coming and stiffened. But she was upon him by then and brought the butt of the pistol down hard. He cried out and rounded on her, but he moved sluggishly, and she hit him again—this time on the temple, as the Jackal had done in her book.

Vauxly crumpled, and Alexandra hoped the Jackal would have been proud.

But she had no time to revel in her success. Roman had surfaced from the water and was struggling to keep his head out of the murky darkness. He was spluttering and flailing, his bound arms making it impossible for him to swim.

"I'm coming!" Alexandra shouted. Untying her cloak, she raced to the edge of the dock, discarded the heavy garment, and jumped in.

The water was cold and for what seemed a long moment, she was frozen by the shock of it. Then her senses returned, and she swam toward Roman, who was now telling her to get back on the dock.

"I have to untie you!" she wheezed. The water was so cold it made her lungs seize.

“You’ll catch your death in this cold!” he spluttered, water splashing into his nose and mouth.

Ignoring his protests, she swam to him then ducked under the water and felt for his arms. She grasped his body, felt in the darkness, and realized those were his legs—not his arms. She wouldn’t think too much about what she had touched just now. Instead, she moved to his buttocks then up to his arms and caught hold of his wrists. Untying Roman wasn’t easy. The twine hurt her fingers, which were already numb with cold. And he was thrashing about in an effort just to keep above water.

Finally, she loosed the binds enough that he was able to shake them off. Then his arms came around her, and he pulled them both to the dock. He pushed her onto it first, his hands on her bottom to boost her up. Then he pulled himself onto the wooden planks. For a long moment, they both lay panting on the wooden planks, shivering with cold and fatigue.

“I don’t know what to say. Thank you,” Roman said.

She turned her head to look at him. “I couldn’t let you die.”

“Did you shoot him?” Roman asked, gesturing to where Vauxly lay motionless a few feet away.

“No,” she said. “I hit him with the butt of your pistol.”

Roman levered up on his elbows. “How did you think to do that?”

“It was in a book I wrote.” She wouldn’t normally reveal her secret to anyone, but under the circumstances, she hardly thought it mattered if this spy knew.

He gave her a sharp look. “You *wrote*?”

She nodded. “I’m a writer.”

“And what book features a man hit with the end of a pistol?”

“*The Jackal and the Rose*,” she said.

“Oh, no,” he said. “Don’t tell me *you’re* A. Stanley Hope.” He closed his eyes. “Of course, you are.”

“You’ve read my books?”

“No. Only heard of them. All the agents like to elbow me about them.”

“Why is that?”

He gave her a wry smile. "Because my code name is Jackal."

CHAPTER FIVE

“If The Jackal had one fear, it was exposure. He guarded his identity more fiercely than he would any political prisoner. Unfortunately, for the ladies of his acquaintance, that also meant The Jackal guarded his heart. A man in love was a man vulnerable to the enemy and even himself.

The Jackal could allow no vulnerability.”

From The Jackal

By the time Roman had bound Vauxly and retrieved his accomplice’s body from the Serpentine, he was shaking so badly, his teeth chattered. He’d insisted Miss Stanhope change out of her wet clothes and into her dry cloak. Unfortunately, he had no dry clothing and his wet clothes were now a detriment. Too much longer in them, he’d catch his death.

Roman glanced over at Miss Stanhope. She sat on the ground near the stacked row boats with her arms about her. Her wet clothing, what looked like yet another orange dress, was in a wet pile beside her. He dared not think too much about what, if anything, she wore under that cloak. “How did you arrive in Hyde Park?” he asked.

“I took a hackney,” she said, her teeth chattering.

He had done the same. “Can you ride?” he asked, thinking of the horses Vauxly and his accomplice had presumably tethered outside.

“Ride?” She looked at him wide-eyed. “A horse?”

“I assume that means you haven’t ridden before. Well, you wanted an adventure for your books. Now you’ll have one.” He offered his hand, and she took it, allowing him to help her rise.

“What about him?” She nodded at Vauxly, lying face-down on the ground.

“When we reach the hotel, I will send word to my superiors to collect him.”

“Your hotel?” She looked even more shocked than when he’d told her she would have to ride a horse.

“I’d love to send you home, but we need to have a chat before I let you go.”

“I see.”

He wasn’t sure that she did, but she would soon enough. He wasn’t used to people knowing his code name or his business. Now that she knew, he would have to be certain she wouldn’t tell anyone else—or write about him in one of her books.

Usually, he killed anyone who knew his true identity.

That wouldn’t be an option considering this time the person who knew about him was an innocent female. But he could frighten her into compliance.

He collected the satchel with the information Vauxly’s accomplice had died to deliver then led Miss Stanhope outside. As he’d expected, there were two horses tethered to a nearby tree. He chose the smaller and seemingly more docile one and led Miss Stanhope beside the mare. “I’ll help you up,” he said. “You’ll have to ride astride, but if you keep the hood of your cloak up, hopefully no one will realize you’re a female.”

He showed her how to put a boot in the stirrup then boosted her up until she was able to throw one leg over the mare’s back. And Roman tried very hard not to notice the bareness of that leg when she threw it over and the seemingly endless amount of time it took her to cover it with her cloak.

Miss Stanhope might not have good taste in clothing, but she had excellent legs.

He instructed her to wait while he mounted then he untied her mare and took the reins, leading both horses out of the park. Sometime later they arrived at the Pulteney Hotel, and he was able to bring her up to his room without too many curious glances. He was a spy, after all. He could sneak a woman to his room with his eyes closed.

When they reached his room, he gave her the long, thick robe the hotel provided and went behind a screen to change out of his wet clothing. Then he wrote a quick note to Lennox and summoned a porter to send it. By then the tea and cakes he'd ordered had arrived, and he took it from the maid at the door and set the tray on a table between the two chairs he'd pulled before the fire.

Miss Stanhope sat in one chair, looking rather small. Her face was pale, and her dark hair fell in waves over the white robe.

"How do you take your tea?" he asked.

"Black," she said.

He poured and handed it to her then placed two cakes on a plate and pushed those toward her as well. "You look as though you could use a bit of sustenance."

"Thank you."

He allowed her time to nibble one of the cakes and sip her tea, and when the color had come back into his cheeks, he set down his cup and saucer and stood before the fire, facing her.

"First of all, I want to commend you on your quick thinking and your bravery. You impressed me tonight, and I am not easily impressed."

She stared up at him, her dark eyes wary behind her spectacles. "I think what you are saying is thank you for saving your life."

Roman folded his arms over his chest. "Let's not exaggerate."

"It's not exaggeration. You were drowning. I clubbed Vauxly then jumped in to save you."

"You were lucky," he said. "It could have very easily gone wrong, and we'd both be dead. This is real life, not a novel."

"It bothers you that a mere female novelist was able to save you."

"As I said before, let's not exaggerate. The more important issue is that you now know who I am. That's dangerous information for you and me. I'll need your word you will not reveal this information to anyone. If you do, I can't be responsible for what happens."

Miss Stanhope raised her teacup, sipped, and studied him over the rim. Roman was used to not showing his emotions, but it unnerved him that she appeared to be thinking his words over, as though she had a choice. “Miss Stanhope,” he said with a warning in his tone.

“It would just make such a wonderful plot,” she said finally.

“No,” he said.

“Surely, if I change Vauxly’s name and the location—”

“No.”

“And you’re already the Jackal.”

He moved in front of her, put his hands on either side of her chair, and said, “Absolutely not. You are not to use what happened tonight as fodder for a book.”

Her lips twitched. Was she teasing him?

“I’ll agree on one condition.”

He narrowed his eyes. “What’s that?”

“You admit I saved your life.”

“Miss Stanhope, this is not a game.” Moreover, she was not a woman he could afford to dally with. And that was increasingly difficult to remember when his bed was just a few feet away, and she sat before him looking all damp and warm and smelling faintly of rosewater.

“I’m not playing,” she said. And her small pink tongue darted out to touch her upper lip.

Roman couldn’t seem to stop himself from leaning forward. It would be too easy to brush his lips over hers, to feel the softness of her mouth and the taste of her. He still remembered it from that night at the theater.

A pounding on his door snapped him back, and he jerked away and cursed silently at his stupidity. Anyone would think the woman was a temptress rather than a bluestocking.

“Who is it?” Roman called as he strode to the door.

“Lennox. Open the door.”

Roman was surprised Lennox was here so quickly. Surely, he would want to interrogate Vauxly. He opened the door, and Maximilian Lennox pushed inside. “Jackal, we have a problem.”

That was true enough. His problem sat in the chair just behind him. But Lennox didn’t know that. “Go on.”

“Vauxly is gone.”

Mr. Lennox’s words jolted Alexandra out of her daydream. Mr. Roman—the real Jackal—had been about to kiss her. She was sure of it. She couldn’t help but imagine what might have been had the knock on the door come only two or three minutes later. But her imaginings fell to dust when she heard the news.

She jumped to her feet. “What do you mean, Vauxly is gone?”

The man in the great coat, his hat low on his brow, jerked to face her. “What is she doing here?”

“It’s a long story,” Roman said, “but she was at the boathouse when I caught Vauxly.”

“I saved his life,” she said.

The Jackal glared at her.

“Is this true?” Lennox demanded.

“It’s a bit of an exaggeration.”

“No, it’s not!” Alexandra protested.

“Regardless,” Lennox interrupted, “Vauxly was not there when we arrived. I have my men searching Hyde Park for him even as we speak, but if he does manage to evade us, the consequences could be disastrous.”

“He could cost us the war,” Roman said. He crossed the room and grabbed the courier bag Vauxly had killed for. Opening it, he pulled out the sheets of paper within. “These are lists of dozens of spies working for the British behind enemy lines on the Continent. If their identities are revealed, their lives are forfeit.”

“Has he seen the contents of the satchel?” Lennox asked.

“He perused at least one of the sheets of paper,” Roman said. “If he committed any of the names to memory, those men or women are in danger.”

Lennox and Roman shared a look, and an unspoken agreement seemed to be made. “I’ll get my things,” Roman said.

“Meet me at my office in an hour,” Lennox ordered. “I’ll have the necessary paperwork ready.” Without taking his leave, he turned and lifted the latch on the door. But before he walked out, he looked back at Alexandra. “And do something about her.”

Alexandra took a step back. “What does that mean?” she asked.

The Jackal sighed. “I won’t kill you, if that’s what you’re thinking. If only because I don’t have time to do the deed then hide the body.”

“What?”

He gave her a small smile. “A bit of humor.”

“Humor?” She watched as he began to move about the room, collecting his books, papers, and clothing and stuffing it into a valise. “This isn’t a time for humor. Vauxly knows who I am. He’ll come for me.”

“Doubtful,” Roman said. “He’ll be after saving his own life first.”

“By leaving London?”

“Exactly. He’ll be on the next packet to France as soon as possible. He’s spy for the French, and he’ll want to pass on the names of any British spies to his superiors. I have to stop him.”

Alexandra opened her lips to beg him to take her with him. This was the sort of adventure she had always wanted. But even if he’d agreed, which he wouldn’t, she couldn’t leave her grandfather. He needed her and the income she made from her books.

“I suppose I had better dress,” Alexandra said, trudging behind the privacy screen in the corner. Never had she felt so dejected. She pulled on her wet clothing and draped the cloak over it. By the time she had finished, Roman was waiting for her at the door.

“I’ll hail a hackney for you,” he said. “I’d see you home, but—”

She held up a hand. “I understand. You must go save England.”

“Something like that.” He smiled and took her hand.

Alexandra's brows rose, surprised at the gesture. "I still need that promise," he said quietly.

She nodded. "I promise I will tell no one of the events of this evening or who you really are."

"Thank you," he said. "And thank you for saving my life."

Her head jerked up, and she saw he was smiling at her. Even in her damp, cold clothes, her body warmed at that smile. "Will I ever see you again?" she asked.

"Doubtful," he said.

"But not impossible."

"Nothing is impossible, Miss Stanhope."

Those parting words echoed in her mind even as he led her downstairs and hailed her a hackney and she drove away from the Pulteney.

If a fictional character could come to life, then nothing *was* impossible. Not even the chance of seeing The Jackal again.