

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 men 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.