

Lucy Galloway pushed her tired legs up the steep incline of the hillock, not daring to look over her shoulder. He was there. Right behind her. She could sense him. At the summit of the hill, she doubled over to catch her breath. Her brown hair fell in her eyes. She pushed it away, along with the line of perspiration on her brow, and forced herself to keep running.

Down the hill, through the woods, and into the open. Not far now. Straightening, she raced down the hill, thankful for gravity's assistance, and entered the woods. She couldn't stop a quick look over her shoulder.

Damn! There he was. She could see his auburn hair against the yellow and greens of the hill as he crested it just as easy as you please. The dratted man didn't even look winded!

She might be winded, but she wasn't giving up. She couldn't.

Lucy dove into the thick line of bushes and trees, stumbling over roots and dodging tree limbs until she found a rough path. She began to run again, her hair flying out behind her. It was cooler in the shade of the woods, and the earlier drizzle had left her clothing damp. She shivered now but pushed on.

Another glance over her shoulder.

She didn't see him, but the distraction cost her. The toe of her boot caught on a root and her body flung forward while her foot stayed put. She hit the ground hard, knocking her breath from her lungs and hitting her head on another root.

For a moment, she lay on the ground, confused and disoriented. Her ears rang, and she couldn't catch her breath. Then strong arms grabbed her in a tight grip.

"Lucy? Are you hurt?"

She wanted to scream. She rolled over and looked up into the face of Duncan Slorach—her enemy, her competition, her fellow agent-in-training.

"I'm fine," she said. At least she tried to say the words. Her breath hadn't quite returned. She waved at him instead, indicating he should go on and leave her here. Why was he helping her? They were competitors.

Another agent appeared and slowed. "Galloway, Slorach! Are you hurt?"

"We're fine," Mr. Slorach answered. "Miss Galloway just took a tumble. I have her."

*No, you don't!* Lucy wanted to scream.

The other agent nodded and raced off. Lucy pushed herself to her feet and slapped Slorach's hands away. Then she pushed him. Her meaning couldn't have been clearer—go on without me. He hesitated and finally started away, barely jogging and glancing at her over his shoulder. What was wrong with him?

He would win. Again. He always won. Just once she wanted to beat him at something. Lucy and Slorach had arrived at the Farm, the training ground for agents of the Crown, at the same time eighteen months ago. In that time, Slorach had beaten her at nearly every challenge the instructors had set for the prospective agents. She'd sworn she would beat him on the obstacle course today.

She would beat all the agents.

She took a breath and started running again. This wasn't over yet. She raced past trees and markers. This time she didn't look over her shoulder. In mere moments, she'd caught up with Mr. Slorach, who was still jogging. He saw her coming and sped up. They passed the other agent and exited the woods together. Then he sprinted ahead and toward the round clumps of hay set uniform distances apart in the field. Mr. Pistol, their instructor for this part of the test, was waiting. He indicated one hay target for Lucy and one for Slorach. Lucy raced past hers to the set of knives laid out fifty paces away. She lifted a knife, turned, and threw it.

And missed the center.

Damn it!

Slorach threw his first knife. She wouldn't look. She would not look! She lifted her second knife and stared at the clump of hay. A red target had been painted in the center, but with the perspiration stinging her eyes and her blow to the head, the red paint had gone a bit blurry. She gripped a knife in her left hand, her dominant hand, and lifted it slowly, positioning as she had been taught. Not too high. Not too low. Arm steady. Shoulder relaxed.

A warm breeze lifted the loose strands of hair off the back of her neck. It might be June, but in northern England, the day was still cool enough that she needed a coat. She'd removed it an hour ago when the race had begun. No matter. She didn't feel the breeze or the chill. She felt the weight of the knife in her hand and the smoothness of the hilt beneath where she gripped it. She could even hear the faint metallic ring as the wind blew around the sharp blade.

Lucy let out a measured breath. She would hit the center of the target this time. The red target was hers.

Failure was not an option.

She heard a *thwack*, and the red target slipped out of focus. She couldn't stop her gaze from sliding to her right where, at the end of the line of agents in training, Slorach had just thrown his second knife. Lucy's eyes cut to his target.

His knife vibrated in the exact center.

Infuriating man! In that moment, he reminded her of her brother, Willoughby, who she always said was perfect from the day he was born. Like Willoughby, it seemed there was nothing Duncan Slorach couldn't do.

But Lucy reminded herself she too had skills. She could still make a good showing today and prove her prowess. She drew herself up, adjusted her stance, and repositioned the knife. She was aware all eyes were on her, and she didn't mind. She liked being the center of attention. She drew back and—

“Miss Galloway!”

Lucy's arm jerked, and she threw the knife, sending it far to the left so it lodged in a tree a good two yards from her target. Several birds nesting in the tree took flight, calling down their disapproval. Lucy wanted to scowl but instead pasted a smile on her face and turned to the man approaching.

“Uncle Winn,” she said, forcing cheer into her voice.

Uncle Winn was the leader of the Royal Saboteurs, better known by his codename Baron. He was walking slowly but unaided. In the cold weather an old injury bothered him, forcing him to use a cane. His hair was mostly gray with only patches of the brown from his youth showing through. He had assessing green eyes on a handsome face. Those eyes looked pointedly at the tree trunk where her knife still vibrated. He paused, and Lucy pushed her shoulders back and went to meet him. He was a tall man with broad shoulders, which made her feel even smaller than her five-foot-two and three quarters inches.

“Hullo, Uncle Winn.”

He glanced at the weapons teacher. “Mr. Pistol, might I borrow Miss Galloway for a moment?”

“Of course, sir.” The instructor was a thin, agile man of perhaps forty. He turned back to his pupils.

Uncle Winn looked down at Lucy. “Walk with me a moment, won’t you?”

Lucy fell into step beside him, slowing her naturally quick stride to meet his slower measured one. The dry brown grass of the winter had turned green and grown rather long where the agents didn’t trample it. She was no farmer, but the multitude of rocks in the soil would have made the land difficult to till. The difficult land was excellent for growing, so to speak, agents for the Crown.

Once they were out of earshot of the other agents, Lucy said, “If this is about my progress with knives, what you saw just now wasn’t my fault. You distracted me. I would have hit the target.”

“Mmm-hmm. As there are never any distractions in the field, I find that very reassuring.”

Lucy felt her cheeks color. “Uncle Winn—”

“I didn’t come to speak to you about your skill with weapons. I had a letter from your brother.”

Lucy stilled. She didn’t mean to. Her feet simply stopped moving. “Is Will hurt? Is he dead? Just tell me quickly. Oh, no! He’s lost his arm, hasn’t he?”

“Lucy, calm down.”

“His leg?”

“Lucy, he hasn’t lost any appendages.”

“His ear?”

“Lucy, Willoughby is fine. He is well, at least he was three days ago when he wrote the letter.”

“Oh.” Lucy took a breath. “Good. He annoys me to no end, but I wouldn’t want anything to happen to him.”

“Of course not. And if something did happen to him on my watch, I would have to go into hiding because your father and mother would hunt me down.”

Lucy gave him a sideling look. “Do you really think there’s anywhere you could hide if Saint and Wolf wanted to find you?” she asked, using her parents’ codenames.

He chuckled. “No.”

They began walking again, and Lucy forced herself not to ask Uncle Winn any further questions, no matter how many bubbled up in her head. She had to remember that Uncle Winn was also her superior. Uncle Winn had been an agent with her parents in the now disbanded Barbican group. She'd known him and Aunt Elinor all of her life. But here at the Farm, the training ground for the Royal Saboteurs, he was the indisputable leader, and she a lowly agent.

"I only mention the letter from your brother because its contents necessitate a change in my plans. Your brother is forced to stay in the field a bit longer. I can't tell you anything about his mission, but he and Mr. Arundel are at a critical point in their work. I can't pull either of them to come back at present." Lucy knew her brother and another agent, Arundel, were on a mission. They'd been away for several weeks now.

"Why would you need them to come back?"

He glanced at her. "Because I have a mission for you."

Lucy gasped and only barely restrained herself from jumping up and down with glee. Finally! A mission! She had been waiting for so long, almost eighteen months since she'd begun her training at the Farm. Before coming here she'd been an agent with the Home Office and had an exemplary record, else she wouldn't have been invited to join the Royal Saboteurs. She'd expected her training here to last three months at most. Instead, she'd been forced to be patient—never her forte—as she saw other agents, even some who had arrived after her, go on missions, while she stayed behind. The waiting ended today. She had a mission.

Or did she? Uncle Winn said Willoughby's mission changed things. "How does Will's mission intersect with mine?" she asked.

"I had planned to send you out together."

"Uncle Winn! I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I don't need a male, especially my brother, to take care of me."

Uncle Winn glanced at the targets behind them, and Lucy sighed. "Won't you even give me a chance?"

"I will do more than that. I am sending you out, but I didn't want your brother to accompany you because I thought you needed a protector. It's because the prime minister has requested two agents."

"The prime minister?"

"Yes, I'll explain more inside with your partner."

“My partner. Who will that be? Mr. Stimple? Miss Vaughn?”

“Mr. Slorach.”

Lucy stumbled back as though she'd been punched hard in the stomach.

“Don't look like that, Lucy. He's a very good agent.”

“Uncle Winn, no! Not him. Anyone but him.”

“This is why I wanted to speak to you privately. I don't know why, but you seem to have an aversion to Mr. Slorach.”

“Because he—”

Uncle Winn, very much Baron now and not Uncle Winn, held up a hand. “I don't want to hear it. Mr. Slorach is perfect for this mission. He is excellent with knives and pistols. He excels at breaking codes, and while he isn't your equal at interrogation or languages, he gets top marks in evasive maneuvers. Your skill sets are quite complementary. Mr. Slorach is part of this mission. Now, do you want in or no?”

Lucy wanted to say no, but she knew that though Uncle Winn had a soft spot for her, if she was not willing to obey orders and do the work assigned to her, she would not ever be a Royal Saboteur. And for years all Lucy had wanted was to serve and protect the Crown from enemies, foreign and domestic. For eighteen months she'd learned every method possible to sabotage any effort to harm her queen or her country. Now she was being given the chance to put all that training into practice. If she said no, Uncle Winn would be kind, out of respect for his longtime friendship with her parents, but he would assume, and rightly so, that she cared more about having her own way than the good of the country.

“I want in,” Lucy said, swallowing the bile that rose in her throat.

“And I can trust you to work with Mr. Slorach?”

“Absolutely.” She looked Uncle Winn directly in the eyes, and she meant what she said. She might not particularly care for Duncan Slorach. He might think he was God's gift to the Crown and be annoyingly good at just about everything. Worst of all, he was annoyingly handsome and seemed to know it. But all of that aside, she could not deny he was a good agent. If he wasn't the best, she wouldn't have wanted to beat him.

“Now, what's this mission?”

“Come inside with me, and we'll talk.”

Lucy started for the farmhouse that held Uncle Winn's office as well as the room she shared with Margaret Vaughn.

"Lucy, aren't you forgetting someone?" Uncle Winn said.

Lucy paused and raised her brows.

"Please go tell Mr. Slorach I need to speak to him."

Lucy opened her mouth to protest then realized this was a test. Oh, Uncle Winn was good. Very good. But so was she.

"Of course, Uncle Winn." Smiling, Lucy marched back across the rocky field dotted with windswept trees until she reached the line of men throwing knives at targets. When she didn't arrow for her own place, the instructor turned to her. "Baron wants to speak with Mr. Slorach and me at the farmhouse," she said.

"Very well. Slorach!"

Duncan was just about to throw his knife, and Lucy bit her lip, hoping the distraction would cause him to miss. But he threw the knife with perfect form. It landed right beside his other knives, in the exact center of the hay target. Lucy gritted her teeth.

"Yes, sir?" Mr. Slorach asked, turning now that he'd completed his throw.

"Baron wants you at the farmhouse. You and Miss Galloway are excused."

Without waiting for Duncan, Lucy turned and began marching up the slight rise to the farmhouse, hoping to catch up with Uncle Winn, who had somehow managed to walk quite quickly and leave her behind.

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