

“It’s exquisite, isn’t it?” Hew Arundel turned this way then that, admiring the wool superfine coat. The blue was the color Navy men wore. He’d chosen it because he had blue eyes, and blue was his favorite color.

“Exquisite,” the tailor at Schweitzer and Davidson’s echoed. But Hew was paying the tailor to admire the coat—not that Schweitzer and Davidson would ever create an item of clothing of inferior quality. Hew’s gaze met Randall’s in the mirror. Randall raised a brow.

“Surely you don’t need my approval.”

Hew shrugged, liking the way the material of the coat flexed with his movement. “It’s been so long since I’ve worn anything remotely fashionable, I’ve stooped to relying on your opinion.”

Randall snorted good naturedly. “It’s exquisite, though for that price, you could buy three coats.”

“Not *exquisite* coats.” Hew waved the tailor’s hands away when he tried to assist in removing the coat. “I’ll wear it,” he told the man. “Have this coat”—he gestured to the not-Navy blue coat he’d worn in—“sent to the Mivart’s.”

“Very good, sir. Might I interest you in—”

Hew waved him away.

“Mivart’s?” Randall asked as Hew stepped away from the cheval mirror where he’d been admiring the coat. “I assumed you were staying with your parents.” Randall rose from one of the dark leather chairs set against the wall of the private dressing room. Schweitzer and Davidson’s was an old and respected tailor and catered to the wealthy and privileged. That sort appreciated

the dark wood paneling, the sedate lighting, and the comfortable chairs with a decanter of port or sherry within reach. Some of his friends would have said Schweitzer and Davidson's was too traditional and patronized Henry Poole & Co. But after nine months crawling through mud at the training ground he and the other agents called the Farm, Hew wanted his little comforts.

"They're not in Town," Hew said. "They've gone to the country." Most of his friends and all of his family were in the country now that fall had descended. The Season was over, and there was no reason to stay in London. But Hew wasn't looking for dinner parties and balls. This was his first leave since joining the Royal Saboteurs, and he wanted a large slice of civilization.

"You should have said something," Randall said, following Hew out of the curtained dressing room and into Schweitzer and Davidson's showroom. Like the dressing room, it was dark and quiet, smelling of tobacco and cedar. "You might have stayed with Lydia and me."

Hew gave his friend a narrow look as he stepped past the man who held the door open for him and emerged onto Savile Row, which was teeming with people despite the chill in the air. "Your wife, lovely as she is, does not need a houseguest at the moment."

"You're just afraid she'll give birth while you're trying to sleep. But the doctor says she has several weeks yet."

Hew didn't believe that for a moment. He *had* intended to stay with Randall and his wife. Randall was an old friend from Oxford, who had disgraced his family by choosing a life in trade. Randall had a knack for finance and kept the bankers in Threadneedle Street busy managing his investments. But when Hew had stepped off the train and spotted Randall in the station, he'd also spotted his wife. Mrs. Lydia Randall looked ready to burst. Of course, Randall had written to Hew that his wife was expecting. Hew just hadn't thought she would be expecting any moment. He'd allowed the couple to assume he was staying with family as Randall had been correct that

he hadn't wanted to be wakened in the middle of the night with the screams of a woman in labor. God knew he was awakened in the wee hours of the morning enough at the Farm.

Now that he'd completed his first mission—a successful mission at that—he wanted rest and relaxation. “I don't want to impose on your marital bliss,” Hew said. “Besides, at Mivart's I can sleep until noon and no one accuses me of sloth.”

“No one would dare accuse you of sloth. From the little you've told me of your training, it sounds as though you work as hard as three laborers.”

Hew doubted the laborers would agree. It was true he spent his days at the Farm crawling through muddy fields, practicing evasive maneuvers; learning how to diffuse explosives; and shooting at targets until his fingers were numb. But there were servants there to cook and clean for him and the other agents, as well as doctors to tend any injuries. Not that training to be a Royal Saboteur had been easy by any stretch of the imagination.

Before he'd been accepted as a Saboteur, Hew had been a diplomatic aide on the Continent. The job, from his experience, involved mingling at dinner parties and collecting state secrets, which he'd passed on to the Foreign Office. He'd been good enough to be considered for the Royal Saboteurs, an elite group, which he had only heard whispered about before he'd been offered a chance to join.

“It is too bad that your family is not in Town,” Randall said. “They'd want to celebrate the successful completion of your first mission. Though I don't suppose you could tell them any more about it than you told me.”

“I'll go see them at Christmas.” That was assuming he didn't have another mission that kept him away.

“Will you dine with us tonight?” Randall asked.

“If your wife doesn’t mind.”

“She was the one who suggested it. Let’s stop at my club for a drink, and I’ll send word.”

The two spent an hour in the members’ only gentlemen’s club to which Randall belonged then made their way through the streets of Mayfair to the Randall town house. Randall owned the house, unlike Hew’s family, who leased theirs every Season. The lack of a permanent London residence was another reason he’d reserved rooms at Mivart’s.

Lydia Randall, tall and lovely, waddled toward them when they arrived just before the dinner hour. “There you are,” she said, taking her husband’s arm and smiling up at him. Hew was almost jealous of the look the couple exchanged—until he remembered not every woman was as faithful as Lydia. Some could look at you with adoring eyes while stabbing you in the heart. Lydia smiled at Hew, her expression turning friendly. “Mr. Arundel, I hoped you would join us for dinner. I told the butler to set another place. Darling”—she gazed back at her husband—“shall we go into dinner or do you want a drink first?”

“Arundel and I just had a drink at my club.” He was frowning down at his wife. “Are you well? You look tired.”

Lydia swatted his shoulder. “Just what every woman wants to hear.” She patted his arm. “I’m fine.”

The three went into dinner. It was a simple meal, but the food was very good. “What have they been feeding you at this farm?” Lydia asked the third time Hew complimented the fare.

“Gruel?”

Hew forced himself to set down his fork. “Not at all. The food is quite decent. Not that I generally care as I’m usually so tired at the end of the day I’m likely to fall asleep with my face in the plate.”

“Oh, my. What do you do all day?”

Hew realized he had begun a conversation he probably shouldn't have. Randall must have seen the hesitant look on his face because he chimed in. “I believe that information is top secret, darling.”

“Surely you can tell us something,” she said. Then, with a glance at the footmen who had cleared the table, she tried to push up. “But I've stayed too long. I should leave you to your port.”

“Stay,” Randall and Hew said at the same time.

She hadn't yet been able to push out of her chair, and she ceased struggling. “Are you certain?”

“Yes,” Hew said. “Have your tea in here. In fact, if you don't mind, I'll have a cup myself.”

“You won't regret it,” Randall said. His smile stretched from ear to ear. Clearly, he was thrilled to stay at his wife's side. “Lydia's brother married the daughter of a prosperous tea merchant. It's the best I've ever tasted.”

“It's almost good enough to make my parents forgive him for lowering himself,” Lydia said.

Hew smiled. Neither Randall nor Lydia's family was titled, but they were both children of gentlemen who owned property and lived a life of leisure. To marry into a family involved in trade was quite frowned upon. Hew had often been told any labor at all was beneath him. He'd joined the Foreign Office anyway and with only a bit of muttering from his parents. Diplomatic work was an acceptable pursuit, even if they did remind Hew at every turn that he did not need

the salary. He had no idea what his parents thought he did at present. They certainly would not approve of the Royal Saboteurs.

“You were asking about my work at the Farm,” Hew said when the footmen had left to fetch the tea service.

“Is there anything you could tell us?” Mrs. Randall leaned forward, her gaze riveted on him. Randall was right. She did look tired. She had dark smudges under her light blue eyes, and she hadn’t eaten more than a few bites of the excellent dinner. “Charles says you are a member of the Royal Saboteurs.” She lowered her voice on the last two words.

“Darling!” Her husband shot her a quelling look.

Hew waved a hand. “It’s fine. I am a member.” With the completion of his first mission, he had been asked, formally, to join. He’d been told that six short months as a probationary member was quite impressive, but it had felt like years to Hew. “I’m not allowed to give any details about my mission, but I can tell you a bit about the group in general.”

“Please do. I assume since the group has the word *royal* in it, you work for the queen?”

“I suppose that’s true, but I’ve never met her. It’s more that our mission is to protect Queen and Country. We’re called saboteurs because we sabotage efforts—both foreign and domestic—to harm either the queen or the country.”

“Are there people that wish harm to Her Majesty?”

“Of course. There are many individuals and foreign governments who would benefit from the chaos that would result if something were to happen to the queen or if widespread violence or disruption were to befall England. Our task is to sabotage groups and individuals trying to cause harm or disruption, whether that be an assassination attempt or a riot over grain prices.”

“Oh, my. I fear asking you questions has only piqued my curiosity and raised many more. I remember last spring reading about the queen being shot at in the park. Were you involved in protecting her?”

Hew touched a spoon on the table, straightening it. “I was not, no.” But Hew knew who had been called to the palace to infiltrate the Court and ferret out the assassin. The fact that Willoughby Galloway was able to apprehend the would-be assassin and keep the subsequent attempts on the queen’s life from becoming public knowledge spoke of his unsurpassed abilities.

“But I’ve no doubt the Royal Saboteurs kept her safe,” Randall said.

“We’re not bodyguards,” Hew said, avoiding the topic. “But we are trained in both firearms and hand-to-hand combat.”

“And that’s what you do at the Farm?” Lydia asked. “Train?”

The conversation ceased as the tea service was brought in and tea poured for all three of them. Hew spoke as he allowed his tea to cool. “We do train in the skills I’ve mentioned as well as explosives, evasive maneuvers, languages, cyphering...” He sipped his tea then paused and lifted it to his nose to inhale the fragrance.

Lydia was watching him. “I told you the tea was exquisite.”

“Quite,” he said. “Well worth the scandal of a mesalliance.”

“You’re making me envious,” Randall said, “with all your talk of explosives and evasive maneuvers.”

“I promise you there is nothing to envy. Evasive maneuvers involves crawling through mud and brush in the cold hours of the early morning while an instructor yells at you and tells you to crawl faster. And this is before any tea or coffee or a bite to eat.”

“Barbaric,” Randall said. “And you say there is a waiting list of men wanting to join?”

“Women too,” Hew said.

“Women!” Lydia set down her cup. “Really?”

“Absolutely. We have two ladies in training at the moment, as well as one who completed a mission last winter.”

“And they crawl about in the mud?”

“They do.” He thought of Margaret Vaughn and Lucy Galloway. Neither had been faster than he on the obstacle course, but Margaret could decode anything, speak a dozen languages, and she was a wonder with a knife. Lucy, on the other hand, had no fear and had a love-hate relationship with explosives. She might not be the quickest through the obstacle course, but she could move like a phantom and be at your side before you ever knew she was in the same room. “There’s not a man or woman in the Saboteurs who doesn’t deserve to be there,” Hew said, and he meant it.

“Must you return to the Farm or do you wait in London for your next assignment?” Lydia asked. “I do hope you will stay a few more weeks so you might meet the baby.”

Hew smiled. “Unfortunately, I must return north by the end of the week, but Randall knows where to send word. Once the child is born, I will return posthaste.” He finished his tea. He considered staying for another cup, but Lydia Randall did look tired and Hew felt a bit melancholy now that he’d mentioned his fellow agents. He wondered what Duncan, Cal, and Will were up to. For all he knew, Cal and Will might be in London at this very moment.

“Now I shall take my leave,” Hew said.

“It’s still early,” Lydia protested, but Randall gave him a grateful look. Clearly, he was concerned about his wife and wanted to put her to bed.

Randall rose. “Mr. Arundel doesn’t leave for a few days yet. We’ll see him again.”



Hew motioned for Mrs. Randall to stay seated and crossed to her, kissing her hand and thanking her again for the exceptional tea. "I'll send a tin of it back with you," she said.

"I'll be the most popular agent at the Farm," he said, then walked out of the dining room with Randall. But instead of seeing him to the door, Randall accompanied him outside.

"Will you walk?" Randall asked.

Hew looked up at the sky, from which a steady drizzle fell. "I think I will hail a hackney. Knowing my luck, the heavens will open up halfway to the hotel."

Randall motioned to a footman, who moved to the corner to hail any approaching conveyances for hire. "Is it just my imagination," Randall said quietly, "or does she look tired?"

Hew did not have to ask who *she* referred to. "Your wife does look a bit pale and weary, but no more so than any other woman in her condition."

"She ate almost nothing."

Hew wasn't sure what to say. He didn't have any experience with breeding women, and he didn't know what Lydia Randall's lack of appetite might portend. Surely, he could not go wrong by reassuring the father-to-be. "I'm certain it's nothing a night of sleep won't cure."

"I hope so." Randall looked over Hew's shoulder at the sound of an approaching conveyance. "That one is occupied," he said, his tone irritated.

"You needn't wait in the rain with me," Hew said. "Go inside to your—"

He felt the prickle of something off—something wrong—and because he was not expecting it, reacted just a second too late. He turned, swinging his arm up to ward off an attack, but the attacker had already struck. Hew felt the blade of the knife sink into his ribs. Surprisingly, after the initial pain that took his breath away, he felt nothing. He swung out, catching the attacker on the jaw and sending him stumbling away.

“Get him!” Hew yelled. At least he’d tried to yell. His voice came out as little more than a wheeze. But Randall jumped into action, sprinting after the attacker who was now running into the street. Hew watched with annoyance as the approaching hackney slowed, the door opened, and the attacker jumped inside. Randall had to jump out of the way to avoid being trampled by the horses.

“Nicely done,” Hew muttered as he sank to his knees. Whoever had planned this attack—and there was no doubt it had been planned—had timed it perfectly. If Hew hadn’t turned the second he did, the knife would have plunged straight through his back and punctured his lungs. As it was, the knife had slid into his side, just below his lungs. He tried to rise, found his legs would not cooperate, and then put his hand where pain had begun to radiate. The knife was still there.

“Bloody hell!”

Hew wasn’t certain where the voice came from. The streetlights had gone out and the night was closing in.

“Call for a doctor. Hurry!” Someone caught him just as Hew fell over.

“Call for a doctor. He’s been stabbed.” It was Randall. Hew knew that voice.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” Randall argued. “You have a knife sticking out of your side.” Randall stiffened. “Lydia, darling, go inside. It’s not safe out here.”

“But Randall!” Her voice was high and sounded terrified. Hew’s vision cleared for long enough to see her coming toward them. The front of her dress was wet as though she’d spilled water in her lap. Except Hew did not think that was water.

“The baby. He’s coming!”

“What?”

“I told you it wouldn’t be several weeks,” Hew croaked. “Go to her.”

“Where is that bloody doctor?” Randall demanded, his voice bordering on panic. Lydia made a sound of pain and Hew felt himself lowered to the ground. He reached over to find the hilt of the knife again, and his hand brushed the wetness on his coat. His *new* coat.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered. “Not the coat.”

The streetlights dimmed again, and the world went black.