

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

And the man behind her was watching her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Margaret went very still.

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

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

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

speed, bent and flipped him over her back and onto the floor with a hard *thwack*.

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

No one moved.

The public house had gone eerily silent.

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

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

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

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

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

all, ignoring the stink and the noise and the strain practically vibrating off the streets.

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

This was if the newspapers were to be believed.

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

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

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

Well, one of them.

And so after three days in London and hours of asking the right questions and bribing the

right men, she knew where the man she sought was hiding. Maybe he'd come to this London rookery thinking he could disappear. Maybe he'd come here because he too was tracking someone. Or maybe there was a more nefarious reason he had abandoned his mission and disappeared without any explanation.

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

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

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

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

"Who are ye?" asked the child.

"My name is Margaret. Who are you?"

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

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

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

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

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

The little girl stopped chewing.

“You know him then.”

“I didn’t say that.”

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

“Is he living here?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Which room—”

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

“I ‘ave to go.”

“Thank you for the help.”

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

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

Margaret lifted her skirts and started up the steps. She moved carefully as the shadows made it hard to see, and she did not want to step on any of the scurrying shapes on the steps.

They might be shadows, and they might be rats. At the landing, she moved to the left where the stairs continued upward and a corridor extended the other way. She could make out three doors along the corridor. All three were closed and their chambers presumably occupied.

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

Margaret went to the door and tapped lightly.

No sound came from within.

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

No sound.

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

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

She knocked louder this time. “Holyoake!”

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

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

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



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

Margaret knew how to use it.

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

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

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

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

"And here I thought you'd be happy to see me."

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

"What the devil are you doing here?"

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

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

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

"Baron?"

"Yes, I was at the Farm."

"He has women training as Saboteurs now?"

Margaret ignored the comment as she came closer to the bed. She pocketed her knife again and felt for a tinderbox on the bedside table. Locating the box, she lit a match and then applied it to the wick of an oil lamp. Finally, she turned her gaze on Holyoake. "Not only

training but taking missions.” She blew out a slow breath. “Good thing he sent me after you.”

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

“How bad is it?” she asked.

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

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

He didn’t answer.

“What happened to your side?”

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

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

“I told you, it’s nothing.”

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

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

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

He sighed. “You’ll have to help me.”

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

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

Margaret leaned forward and undid his cuffs and the buttons at his throat. Then she tugged the shirt out of his trousers and, with a little maneuvering, over his head. There was

indeed a bandage on his right side and linen wrapped about his body to keep it in place. Blood had seeped through the bandage but not enough to stain the shirt. Still, she could see the bandage needed changing. And Holyoake was far too thin. He needed food. Probably medicine as well. His ribs and abdomen were covered with bruises. She touched a particularly vicious bruise, and he inhaled sharply.

“Sorry,” she said.

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

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

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

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