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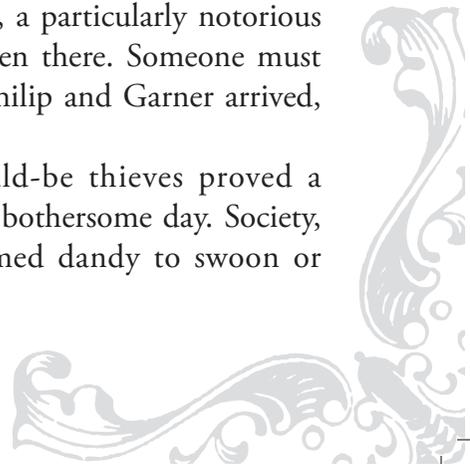
England, December 1814

PHILIP JONQUIL WALKED WITH DECEPTIVELY lazy strides down one of Maidstone's back streets. He'd traded his signature attire of bright colors and expensive tailoring for something far more subdued. Knowing he'd be walking about in an area of town known for thieves and cutthroats, Philip judged it best not to appear prime for the plucking.

The ruse hadn't proved entirely successful. Two nip-purses had been doing a ridiculously bad job of tailing him for several streets. They made quite an effort at not being seen, but he'd spotted them easily. Philip had less than a half-mile to cover before meeting up with Hanover Garner, a man known to the Foreign Office as something of a genius at tracking spies, a title Philip had earned as well over the past half-decade.

Not so ingenious this time, though, were you? They'd come to that particular corner of Kent on a solid bit of information and still managed to miss their man. Le Fontaine, a particularly notorious spy for France, was supposed to have been there. Someone must have warned Le Fontaine. By the time Philip and Garner arrived, the French spy was gone.

Finding himself the target of would-be thieves proved a fittingly annoying addition to an already bothersome day. Society, no doubt, would expect such a confirmed dandy to swoon or



flutter about in terrified agitation at being accosted by footpads. But society was far too easily duped. Philip had simpered and minced amongst the upper crust for five years, but underneath the carefully constructed persona, he was anything but a fribble. He encountered with shocking regularity criminals who would make the seediest of London neighborhoods seem like nurseries at nap time and, thus far, had always emerged relatively unscathed.

Philip could hear the knucklers drawing closer. He sighed in annoyance. He'd simply have to take care of the bothersome duo.

As their footsteps grew louder, he spun around without warning, catching them entirely off guard. "Let me guess. This is to be a bulk-and-file operation. Which one of you means to knock me down and which plans to go for my billfold?"

Obviously the pickpockets hadn't expected that response. They stood frozen a moment, eyes darting between him and one another.

"A gentleman?" the shorter of the thieves sputtered. He looked to his partner. "E's a thumpin' nib!"

Philip supposed he ought to have affected a lower-class accent, but, quite frankly, he hadn't the patience for it at the moment. "My apologies for not dressing the part of a well-twigged gentry cove—I wasn't expecting company."

They only looked further shocked at his knowledge of cant expressions.

"Now, if the two of you intend to relieve me of my burdensome coins, I suggest you get on with it. I've an appointment to keep."

The thieves looked briefly at each other before advancing on him. Had he not personally stood down a vast collection of hardened criminals and murderous spies in his time, Philip might have found their approach menacing.

"Hand it over, and we'll not give ye trouble."

Philip affected an expression of ultimate gratitude. "Very considerate of you."

"Come on. We 'aven't got all night." Apparently only one of the thieves meant to talk to him.

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out the small coin purse he carried there.

“Toss it over.”

Philip clicked his tongue and shook his head in disapproval. “That would get the coins dusty. Surely you’ve no desire to deal in dirty money.”

“Wha’?”

“Obviously we’re not destined to share any witty banter.” Philip shrugged and held out his coin purse. “There’s not much more than a few quid in here, but if you want it so badly . . .”

The more talkative of the few inched closer. As he came near enough to almost take the purse, Philip dropped it on the ground.

“Oh, dear. I’m afraid I always have been a bit of a clumsy fellow.”

The pickpocket bent to retrieve his loot. The moment his head came low enough, Philip slammed his knee into the man’s forehead, sending him reeling backward.

His partner came rushing forward, fists raised. After the day he’d had, Philip sorely needed to hit someone. Very thoughtful of the haggard partners in crime to oblige him as they were. He stepped into the punch. His knuckles burned at the force of the impact. The sting proved exceptionally cathartic.

“Ye broke m’nose, ye blackguard.”

Philip rolled his eyes. “Pot. Kettle.”

The first thief had recovered enough to take a swing of his own, which Philip deftly avoided. “I’d be much obliged if you’d avoid the face—black eyes are deucedly hard to cover up.”

Just as he knew they would, his assailants took that as their cue to aim high, leaving their midsections conveniently unguarded. Philip delivered a swift kick to the shorter man’s gut, dropping him to the ground gasping for air.

Philip turned immediately to the only pickpocket still on his feet. “That leaves the two of us, I suppose.”

With a grin of triumph, the thief brandished a decidedly unclean knife.

“Interesting choice. I would have guessed pistol, but this will do.”

The thief lunged. Philip dodged the blade. While Philip hadn't the infamous Duke of Kielder's penchant for being armed at all times, he made a point of not wandering about in questionable areas of town without some means of defending himself.

“This has been tremendously enjoyable,” Philip said, “but I truly am in something of a rush.” He pulled forth the menacing pistol he brought on every mission he ever undertook and made quite a show of brandishing it.

The thief backed up immediately. He lowered his knife, eyes darting between Philip's face and his weapon. “No harm done, then, gent?”

Philip shook his head good-naturedly. “If you'll just scrape your friend, there, off the ground and be on your way. No point parting enemies over a few paltry guineas.”

“Right, gov'nuh.” He kicked at his moaning partner, still prostrate on the ground. They stumbled their way back into the dark recesses of the alley.

In the very next moment, a rustling from behind spun Philip around. Hanover Garner rushed into the street, eyes wide and alarmed.

“Good afternoon, Garner,” Philip said, putting away his pistol.

“You were late,” Garner said.

“I was late?” Philip gave him a look of reprimand. “If you'd shown up five minutes ago, you might have saved me a great deal of bother.”

He retrieved his coin purse from the dirt where it had sat throughout the altercation.

Garner looked understandably confused. “What the devil?”

“I doubt the devil himself was attempting to rob me. *He* might actually have succeeded.”

“You were set upon by footpads?” Garner sounded alarmed, quite as if they hadn't both faced such things on multiple occasions.

Philip's mother would suffer endless heart palpitations if she knew just how often he'd found himself held at knifepoint. It

was an occupational hazard when one spent one's days tracking murderous spies. His mother was also unaware of the fact that he had an occupation, dangerous or not.

"I am getting too old for this," Garner moaned.

"You are my age, Garner, and I am certainly not old." Philip straightened his cuffs with exaggerated flamboyance. Laughable levels of flare had become a habit of his—part of his disguise in society. He hardly needed the airs in his current attire and company, but he'd grown so accustomed to the role that he rarely slipped from it regardless of his situation.

At the moment, Philip's companion was continuing to catalog complaints. "Thirty is far too old to have a bullet lodged in one's—"

"Twenty-eight," Philip corrected, recalling the very incident to which Garner referred. "And that shot went wide."

"Barely." Garner pushed out a tense breath.

Philip took up his lazy meandering once more. They had an inn to reach before nightfall. They arrived at their original meeting spot a few minutes later, a nondescript, abandoned building where Grimes, a Bow Street runner Philip had worked with on a number of occasions, kept watch over Philip's carriage and team.

With a swiftness borne of familiarity, they all took their usual positions: Philip and Garner tucked inside, Grimes up top with the driver, armed and ready should trouble arise.

"Why is it that every time we fail to find one criminal, you manage to find another?"

"I appreciate your concern," Philip said, his tone more than a touch theatrical, "but I assure you the cutthroats were laughably incompetent. Only one knife between them."

Garner sighed. "I *am* too old for this."

"Tell it to the Foreign Office."

"They'll never let us off this one." Garner rubbed his eyebrows. Philip knew that gesture. From the time the Foreign Office had paired them up for their first mission, Garner's eyebrow-rubbing

meant he'd nearly reached his endurance for the day. "If it is important enough to risk the life of the Earl of Lampton"—Garner motioned toward Philip—"then they will think nothing of placing the life of a mere 'mister' on the line. Besides, we're—"

"—too amazing to be replaced?" Philip answered with abundant confidence. He'd learned early on that an increase in foppishness on his part kept Garner from falling completely into the doldrums. If the man weren't a genius at tracking the movements of even the most elusive spies, Philip might have wondered why the Foreign Office kept him on. Philip continued his exaggerated recounting of their mutual assets. "It's a curse being wonderful, isn't it? Not to mention good looking and well dressed."

"Of what worth can such assets, real or imagined, be," Garner asked, "if we only ever spend time in one another's company?"

Philip grinned. "Pining after the ladies?" he asked.

"You never wish you could be searching out some sweet young lady instead of being a spy?"

"*Sweet?*" Philip scoffed at the thought. He'd far prefer a lady with a little fire. Garner was correct on one point, though. Their chances of meeting any young ladies, fiery or sweet, were decidedly slim of late.

After several moments silence, Garner spoke again. "Le Fontaine is proving very elusive."

Philip shrugged. "True."

"The entire reason we are in Kent has slipped from our grasp, *again*, and all you can say is 'true'? The Foreign Office is getting anxious, Lampton."

"I'm getting a little anxious myself," Philip admitted, his gaze shifting to the growing darkness outside the windows. He and Garner had attempted to track down the dangerous French spy for longer than he cared to admit, even to himself. The peace on the Continent was precarious even with the Corsican in exile. If, as their sources hinted, Napoleon planned to escape . . . No. They must capture Le Fontaine. The damage the spy could do didn't bear thinking of.

“Le Fontaine wasn’t in Kent, after all—”

“Any longer,” Philip corrected. They had reached their designated meeting place only to discover the British agent they were to have met with had disappeared, leaving behind significant signs of foul play. Yes. Le Fontaine had been in Kent—they’d simply arrived too late.

Garner let out a deep, worried breath. Philip knew precisely how the man felt. Every person working for the Foreign Office would be in danger until they captured Le Fontaine.

“I, for one, will be quite relieved to reach the inn.” Philip painstakingly smoothed the hairs in his eyebrows. Garner allowed the slightest smile at the ridiculous mannerism. “I need to change out of these horrid clothes,” Philip added for good measure.

“Clothes? Hah! What I need is brandy!”

Philip clucked his tongue in feigned disapproval. “You, sir, will never be a hero.”

“Fabulous. Perhaps the Foreign Office will release me from duty.” Garner looked quite hopeful. “You could tell them I am a coward. Or a drunkard.”

Philip yawned, mostly for effect. “And be assigned a partner who suffers carriage sickness?” He shook his head, his eyes wide in feigned horror. “I would never subject my high-sprung equipage to such abuse. No. A cowardly drunkard suits me fine.”

“I feared you would say that,” Garner grumbled, slouching ever lower.

Nearly two hours later, they stopped at a small but relatively clean inn lit by the barest number of lanterns. It would do for one night, Philip supposed. After Philip changed into his brightly colored, fashionably tailored society togs, he met up with Garner in the private parlor for dinner. The moment the serving girl bowed out, they resumed their earlier conversation in low tones.

“So what comes next?” Garner dropped his head into his hand, looking beaten down and weary.

“The only other place Le Fontaine has been known to make port is Ipswich.”

“Suffolk?”

Philip nodded. “That is our next destination, I daresay.”

“Do you have property in Suffolk?”

“Sadly, no,” Philip answered, taking a generous forkful of roast beef.

“Then how do you plan to explain your presence? Wouldn’t want Le Fontaine to be suspicious.”

“That is where being unfathomably popular has its benefits, Garner.” Philip smiled. “I have been invited to a Christmas house party. ‘Where is this gathering of the elite?’ you may ask.”

Garner nodded, obviously guessing the answer. “Suffolk,” he said.

“Not twenty miles from Ipswich.” Philip raised his eyebrows repeatedly to communicate his satisfaction with his own ingenuity. “Lord Cavratt and his lovely wife have invited me and my horde of siblings to Kinnley, along with a few other choice individuals.”

“Then I shall leave you to sort out Le Fontaine.” Garner smiled with obvious relief.

“Nonsense.” Philip dabbed at the corner of his mouth with a clean but hopelessly stained napkin. The inn appeared a little less respectable than he had originally hoped. “Your cousin and his wife, Lord and Lady Henley, will also be in attendance. I believe Lizzie is the mastermind behind the gathering, as a matter of fact. You shall simply have to come by.”

“Uninvited?” Garner clearly didn’t like the suggestion.

“I daresay you hardly need an invitation to spend the holiday with family.”

“You will smooth it over for me, then?”

“Not a chance, man. You and I are not supposed to be acquainted. Or have you forgotten already?”

Garner let out a long-suffering sigh. “I shall have to impose?”

“Like any relative worth his salt.”

“I shall return to London, then, to make our report.” A healthy dose of resignation tinged Garner’s words. “I will make my way to Kinnley shortly thereafter.”

“Remarkable plan, Garner. How do you come by such ingenious stratagems?”

“You know very well that you laid out that strategy at least ten missions ago.”

“Ah, so I am the source of your genius.” Philip offered a succession of exaggerated nods. “Very good. Very good.”

“No. Not very good. I shall have to return to Town on horseback while you proceed to your destination in the best-sprung coach I have ever had the opportunity to ride in.”

Garner grumbled something about drunkenness and carriage sickness. Philip sauntered to an armchair near the fire and sat back lazily, absentmindedly playing with his ivory-tipped walking stick.

“When do you expect to arrive at Kinnley?” Garner asked, leaning against the mantelpiece after another glass of amber-colored numbness.

“Thursday. Perhaps Friday.”

Garner’s gaze froze abruptly on the doorway.

“Forgive me,” a voice said. “I did not realize the room was occupied.”

Philip looked up from the crackling fire across the room to the doorway and into the face of a stunningly pretty young lady, dressed well if not in the first waters of fashion. The pale green shawl wrapped around her thin shoulders looked Parisian. She was *Quality*, then, as the servants were wont to say.

Her nearly black eyes took in the entire room quickly but, no doubt, accurately. She had an air of observation about her that made Philip uneasy. How long had she been standing there? How much of their conversation had she overheard?

“Might we be of assistance?” Philip asked as he rose, tugging at his deep green waistcoat and leaning quite dapperly on his walking stick.

“I dined in this parlor earlier this evening and left behind a personal item. I have come to retrieve it.”

She was direct, Philip would give her that: no blushes nor demure posturing. Her frankness in the current situation, however,

did not appeal. If she had arrived in the parlor in time to overhear their conversation, this black-eyed beauty would not have missed nor misunderstood a word of what they'd said.

"We would, of course, be happy to help you search out whatever you have misplaced." Garner offered a bow along with his services.

Now the man wished to play detective? He had practically begged to be tossed off the list of national agents not five minutes earlier.

"No need to search, sir," the young lady replied. "Your friend, there, seems to have located the very thing for which I am looking."

Both Garner's and the mysterious stranger's eyes focused on Philip. She hadn't taken a single step inside the room but stood leaning against the doorframe, her calculating gaze uncomfortably unflinching.

"And what precisely are you looking for?" Philip smiled a little, the selfsame smile that more than one impressionable miss had all but swooned over.

She appeared entirely unimpressed—annoyed, almost. "My walking stick," she said sans emotion, flicking her hand toward the stick in Philip's hand.

Philip laughed. A walking stick? *His* walking stick? "I do not believe I know a single lady who carries a walking stick."

"Congratulations," she said dryly. "You now know one. Will you return my property to me or not?"

She had backbone. But duty called. She might have overheard too much—dampening any suspicions was quite necessary. "My dear woman"—he minced his way across the room to where she stood in the doorway—"I realize Lord Byron has made limps quite couture, but I do believe you would be carrying the affectation a bit far with a walking stick."

"You are an expert on fashion, then?" She raised an eyebrow in disapproval. *Disapproval*. How often had he received just such

a look from society ladies for his simpering ways? It shouldn't still rankle after so many years.

"Beau Brummel has been known to consult me." True enough, though hardly the sort of thing Philip felt gratified by. He gave no outward indication that he felt anything but pride at Brummel's singling him out. Pretending to be a mindless dandy had protected him on more than once occasion.

"He consults you on how to insult and contradict a lady?"

"I understood we were speaking of fashion." Philip stepped closer to the open door and his inquisitor.

"Fashion being the all-important focus of your mental faculties?"

"You disregard fashion?" He cloaked himself in an air of shock as he stepped closer still, the ivory-tipped stick still in his hand. "That is rather single-minded."

"As is your view of a lady who possesses a walking stick."

"And now our conversation has come full circle." Philip bowed his head in acknowledgment of her wit.

"Hardly. You still have my stick, and I am still without it."

"But I profess this is *my* stick, and I have no intention of handing it over to you." Especially considering the very sensitive documents hidden in its hollowed-out center.

"You believe I am a liar, then? And a thief besides?"

"I believe you are mistaken."

"You believe I meant to come searching for my sewing but found myself overcome by the splendor of your walking stick, rendering my poor addled brain unable to focus on anything other than your appearance?" The baffling young woman fixed him with a look of utter disdain. "On the contrary. There is nothing in this room so devastatingly overpowering as to leave me unable to think clearly. I find the entire scene quite unimpressive, as a matter of fact."

Philip pulled his quizzing glass to his eye and inspected the daring young lady. She found nothing devastating about him? She

was unimpressed? Odd, that. A man couldn't wear such dangerously high shirt points as his and not make an impression of some kind.

"That, sirrah"—her disconcertingly pointed gaze narrowed on his quizzing glass—"is taking an affectation too far. One wonders if you are simply in need of spectacles but your vanity will not permit you to wear them."

"There is nothing wrong with my eyesight." Philip let the glass drop on its string as he closed the distance between them. He stood directly across from the maddening woman still leaning against the doorframe but glaring at him as if she were royalty.

"Then it is your hearing that is wanting. I have requested the return of my walking stick."

"But this is not *your* walking stick." Philip twirled it with the familiarity of a longtime owner.

"Because I am a female?" The militant glint in her eye caught Philip completely off guard.

"Because it is *mine*." He gave her a winning smile.

She let out a sigh of condescension. "If you will kindly glimpse at the wood directly beneath the ivory-tipped handle, I believe you will stumble upon a set of initials."

"There have never been—"

"Indulge me," she drawled.

Philip bowed absurdly deep to hide his smug expression. Returning to his full height once more, he made quite a show of lifting the cane handle to his line of sight. "As I suspected, there are no—" He stopped short. Initials. *SK*. Those had never been there before. He also spied a swirl in the grain he'd never noticed in his walking stick. "Oh."

"If you would be so kind as to return it to me." The woman sounded and looked thoroughly disgusted with him.

"My apologies," Philip replied with a slight bow. "*Your* stick." He couldn't help the doubtful sound of his words. Ladies simply did not carry walking sticks. "It is quite nearly identical to my own."

"Then surely Beau Brummel owns a matching one, as well." She smiled insincerely and held out her hand for her cane.

“Um, Philip.” Garner’s voice came from behind. He had all but forgotten about the man.

Needing a respite from the shrew’s piercing look, Philip glanced over his shoulder at his cowardly partner, who, at that moment, held a walking stick that was the very copy of the one he had only just handed over to their visitor. “I found it beside the chair you were sitting in.”

“Thank you,” Philip answered dryly. “I suppose you could not possibly have mentioned your find sooner?”

“The two of you never paused long enough for me to get a word in edgewise,” Garner said. “Besides, the way you were going at one another, daggers drawn and what, I didn’t dare jump in.”

“You really are a coward.”

“As I have told you hundreds of times.”

He owed the blasted fishwife an apology for unknowingly claiming her walking stick as his own, for being fashionable when she so obviously disapproved—most likely she’d expect him to apologize for breathing. He turned back toward the doorway—the *empty* doorway.

“She leaves without a word. Fitting.” He turned back to Garner and claimed his walking stick. “I don’t suppose you saw her go?”

“Perhaps she disappeared. A witch, or something.”

“Witch? Probably, old man. Probably.”

“Black eyes.” Garner shook his head. “I tell you, I found the young lady unsettling. Skin so pale she must never venture out into the sun, hair and eyes both black as tar.”

Obsidian, Philip silently corrected. Her hair reminded him of obsidian. Hues ranging from green to violet infused the black, though Philip couldn’t say how that was even possible. Garner had described her eyes correctly, however. They were very much like tar, so black the pupils simply disappeared, and bubbling with fire. Despite himself, Philip found the anonymous young lady unnerving and intriguing. Warning bells rang in Philip’s brain. This Miss SK was trouble.

“This is where we part ways, then?” Garner held a hand out to Philip.

“Send along any instructions you receive from the Office,” Philip instructed, shaking Garner’s hand. “To Kinnley.”

Garner nodded his understanding and stepped from the parlor. Philip tossed an extra coin to the servant girl who entered to clear the table, thus assuring himself of his privacy. The moment she left, Philip ran his hand through his perfectly coiffed hair and slumped over the empty table. The only person in whose company he did not automatically revert to the role of care-for-nothing fop was himself.

Le Fontaine, or “The Fountain,” as the elusive French spy had fashioned himself, had provided a ceaseless flow of information for the wrong side of the Continental dispute. For more than a year, Philip had tracked and trailed the man. Hot on the heels of such a prized catch, Philip ought to have been shaking with anticipation, anxiously planning the hunt. He’d certainly found vast satisfaction in his assignments before. Instead, he felt restless, discontented. To own the truth, he’d felt rather dissatisfied with his life for nearly a year. Playing the idiot to the *ton* had lost what little amusement it had once held. His dissatisfaction, however, stemmed from more than his social mask. Philip simply couldn’t pinpoint what precisely was eating at him.

His uneasy thoughts settled on the odd young lady who had invaded the parlor only moments earlier. She was not a witch—Philip certainly didn’t believe in such superstitious nonsense. Something about her, though, weighed on him.

Years of evaluating people had developed into an almost sixth sense. Philip knew he wouldn’t likely run into the unsettling female again. Only chance had crossed their paths, after all. Chance seldom proved so unkind twice.

He rose to his feet and strode purposefully to the door before adopting his trademark mincing stroll to climb the stairs to his rented chamber. The next morning would see him in his carriage once more: warm brick at his feet, accommodating lap blanket

offering respite from the cold mid-December air, the smooth carriage ride protecting him from the wear and tear of road travel.

And he would hate every minute of it.