

THE
Nobleman
AND THE SPY

BONNIE DEE
&
SUMMER DEVON

Loose Id

The Nobleman and the Spy

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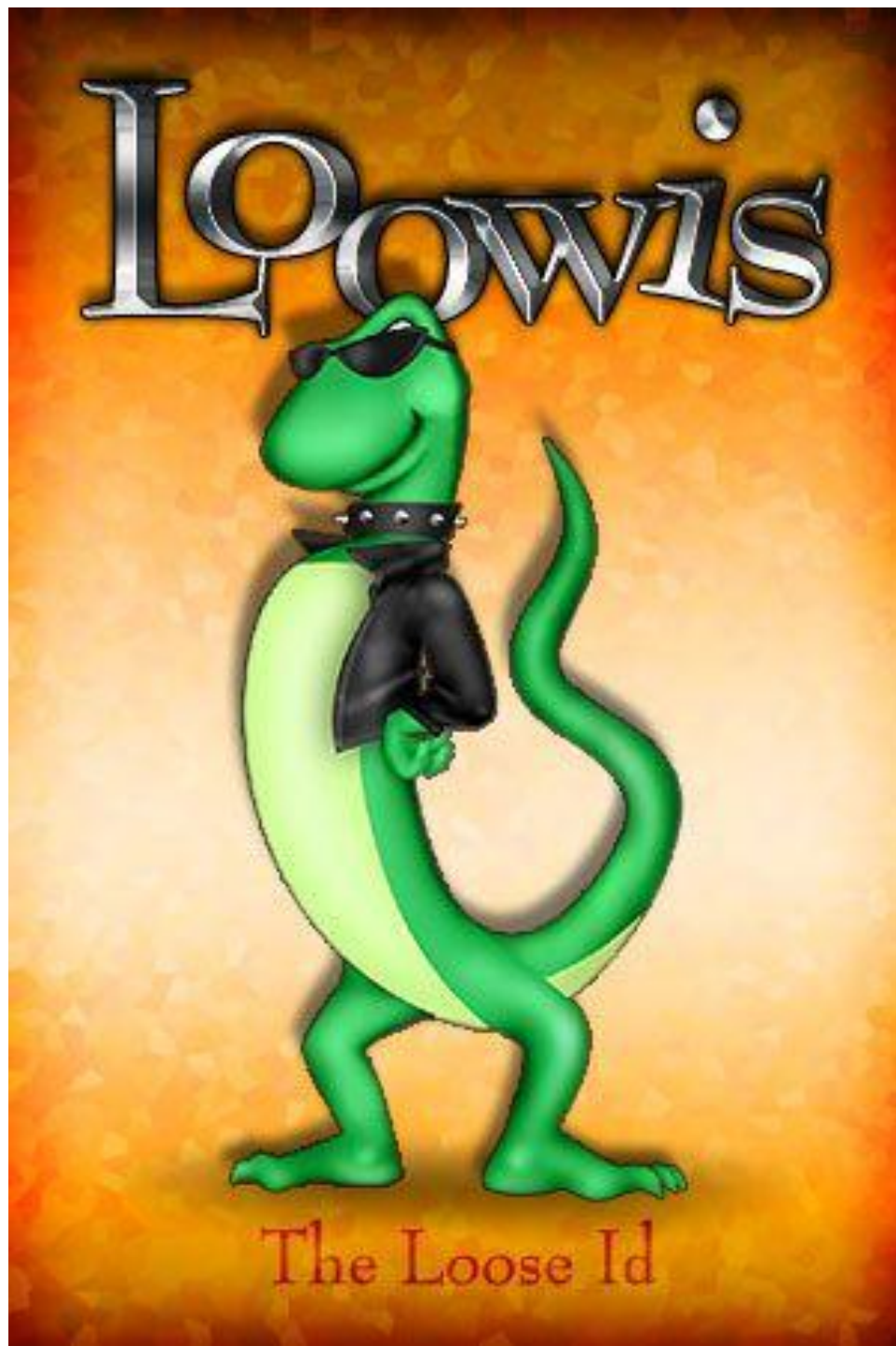
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Prologue

1866, England

“We’re not asking you to kill the man,” the contact said in a low voice. The young man had introduced himself as Toole, but Reese suspected that was his role rather than his true name. Toole was merely the implement of the secret government group that gave Reese his orders. The man cleared his throat, picked up his second glass of cider, then looked around. Again.

He was so nervous that Reese supposed he was new to the work, though not entirely without good instincts. Toole obviously didn’t like having his back to the door, but in this almost empty room, moving the heavy bench would make enough clatter to attract attention from the innkeeper and the three other patrons who sat across the room.

After the quick glance over his shoulder, Toole said, “You’re to watch the subject as closely as possible.”

Reese waited. He kept his breath slow and easy, his hands loosely clasped on the table in front of him. *I am unarmed; I am not dangerous; I am listening.* He canted his upper body forward ever so slightly. *Hurry, so I can go about my business.*

The inn was sparsely furnished with old, scarred wooden tables and benches, but it was clean. Only the glowing coals in the fireplace lit the room. Toole wouldn’t recognize Reese again if they met on the street in daylight. Reese had picked the table so that the firelight illuminated his companion and threw his own face into shadow. Toole was a fresh-faced, brown-haired man, no more than twenty-five,

likely a soldier, a junior officer in mufti. Both the character of the contacts and Reese's assignments had grown less fierce lately, which suited Reese. He knew any time the hint of danger or war arose, the small group he worked for would be the first to use violent methods no gentleman would approve of. He'd once been enthusiastic in his performance of those duties, had been in the track to command several men, but that had all changed. Now he worked alone, and he took no pride in doing this service for his country. In fact, he sometimes wondered how much of a service it really was.

Since his former contact, the captain, had died, the agency had sent a new person for each meeting. Reese didn't blame them. Keep the lone agent in the field unattached, and he'll do a better job of following directions given from above instead of the orders issued by the renegade contact, a man who used affection and loyalty for his own gains.

When he drank more than a single glass of brandy, Reese still wondered if any of the captain's affection had been real. But he rarely drank, preferring to avoid those dangerous thoughts.

O Captain! my Captain!... My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still. With half an eye on Toole, who drank and shifted nervously on his bench, Reese absently tried to recall the rest of that poem by the American.

Toole put down his glass. "If it comes to assassination, we understand you're no longer available for that sort of work." He stopped again, perhaps hoping Reese would contradict him.

Reese waited.

The young man rubbed his clean-shaven chin. "The fact of the matter is, we haven't evaluated the danger of this gentleman. He could well be in danger himself. We hope you'll alert us to anyone else who might be interested in his activities."

Reese waited.

This was going to take forever if the puppy threw in every detail of his job. "*Watch him. Report daily,*" had been all the orders he'd needed or would have got

under the captain's rule, but there was an advantage to all this babbling. He might learn why his employers wanted the subject put under surveillance, and that could be interesting. Purely an exercise to entertain himself. Reese had no intention of doing any more or less than his job.

Toole drank some more of his cider, then said, "We wouldn't be at all surprised if there were attempts made on his life. He's a nobleman from a volatile region and of high rank. There's a monetary aspect as well. He's wealthy and stands to inherit more."

Reese spoke. "Do you require me to protect this man if I detect threats to his life?"

The young man started. Perhaps he'd forgotten Reese could talk. "Well. Um. I'm not certain. I'll get word to you."

If Reese was not to interfere in how things played out, it must mean that the British government hadn't ruled out killing this poor sod, whoever he was, if it suited their political agenda. And they wouldn't want their own spy mucking up their operation.

It didn't matter to Reese. He no longer considered himself on the side of the angels. In fact, he couldn't recall what it felt like to believe in angels. But the late captain had made him a promise—no more dealing death—and so far his superiors had kept that promise, despite the captain's treachery.

Reese waited. He still hadn't got the most vital bit of information from Toole.

"We know you usually observe from a distance, but there could be some advantage to cultivating an acquaintance in this case." Toole reached into an inner pocket and pulled out a thick purse, which he plopped on the table.

"He travels in wealthy circles, so funds are provided. You are to keep a strict accounting and to detail your method in final reports, however." Toole drew in a deep breath, and his back stiffened. "You are to formulate your own plans for infiltration. No need to report on your method until the assignment is complete."

Clearly that particular order annoyed Toole. Perhaps he wanted to see himself as a director of Reese's activities rather than a messenger boy.

The purse disappeared inside Reese's coat.

Toole reached for his cider and tossed the rest down. If he kept up this pace, he'd have a thick head in the morning. "I think our business is complete now, and—"

"You do realize," Reese interrupted gently, "that you have not given me a name?"

The other shifted sideways to look around the room before answering. "A gentleman called von Binder," he said at last.

Reese blinked. He reached for his own glass of untouched ale.

Toole said, "He's in London now." He adopted a lecturer's tone and continued. "The man is also known as Karl von Binder, or sometimes as Charles Binder. He's a nobleman from the duchies Neuschlosswold and Binder, and is therefore Karl, *Erb-Pfalzgraf von und zu Neuschlosswold-Binder*—"

"And Karlo too, in certain circles," Reese interrupted. He put down his now empty glass. "Yes, I know of the count's son."

Toole abandoned his formal manner. "Does he know you?"

"I doubt it." Reese remained in the shadows when he could, the best plan for one who was still employed by the secretive Special Services.

"But you'd recognize him? Oh. Perhaps you've seen that etching in the *Daily Telegraph*?"

"I didn't see the paper, but I've seen the man."

He'd first encountered Binder in person in the Crimea all those years ago. But even before that, he'd heard stories about the wealthy young man who could act as chameleon and pass himself off as a German, a Frenchman, a Russian, an Englishman—or a Crimean Tartar.

On that brutally cold day, Reese had lain flat on his belly, gazing through a nautical telescopic glass into the enemy encampment. He'd seen the young Karlo, dressed in a magnificent, opulent uniform, laughing and talking with the Russians. And then, weeks later, he'd seen the man on the battlefield, less ridiculously dressed but still splendid as he delivered death on horseback, his saber slicing with lethal grace.

Exhausted, staggering from a wound he'd received as he'd killed a man, Reese watched von Binder strike and strike again, killing British soldiers, his fellow men-in-arms. The young nobleman had given a wordless cry of triumph that Reese had heard over the gunfire and the screams of men and horses.

Karlo had galloped in his direction, then suddenly pulled his horse to a halt. Worn beyond fatigue but furious and ready to fight, Reese had watched the approach of death that would come from the edge of his enemy's bloody saber.

Then he had looked up into his enemy's eyes.

For several seconds—hours in battle—they'd studied each other, Reese and the man on horseback less than ten feet away. Reese was out of ammunition, so he raised his bayonet, ready for the attack.

After that one long, measuring look, von Binder had abruptly wheeled and ridden away.

He'd left Reese alive and wondering why for all the years since. Many sleepless nights he'd relived that moment, turned it over and over in his mind, examining it from every possible angle and trying to make sense of it. Why save him? What inexplicable, silent exchange had passed between them on that battlefield?

"Bloody Sevastopol," Reese muttered.

Toole cocked his head. "You were there? You fought?" He sounded almost eager, as if he'd missed out on a big party. The idiot must have been even younger than he appeared.

Reese rose to his feet. He had no reason to stay. “Unless you need to reach me, I’ll see you—or someone like you—here again. One month exactly. I’ll leave word of my whereabouts via the usual methods.” He left without looking back.

Chapter One

The waiter approached silently and placed the greasy pile of sausage and kippers in front of Karl, who groaned with joy. The server bowed and moved away while Karl expertly tapped off the top of the boiled egg cradled in its porcelain cup.

Cohen stood and glared down at Karl's plate. "English breakfasts are repulsive. Your choices are plebeian. A miner's meal."

The manservant's prematurely gray hair was already losing its battle with the pomade he'd used to plaster it to his head. Several curls had popped up. Cohen's pale skin showed the dark rings under his heavy-lidded eyes. He was popular with the ladies, and Karl supposed that Cohen's almost cadaverously thin, lanky body drew nurturing women who wanted to feed him. Perhaps they also tried to console him. The huge shadowed eyes and downturned mouth gave him the appearance of a man who'd just had a rumor of disaster confirmed.

"Sit," Karl commanded. Cohen pulled out a chair and primly took his seat at the linen-covered table. Karl motioned to the waiter. "My companion would like a plate of everything except the kidneys."

"Also not the scrambled eggs," Cohen said. "They look as if they're made of leather," he added in German.

Karl handed him the toast rack. "Please. Quit *klagen*." The two of them usually spoke a combination of German, English, and Yiddish, but at that moment, Karl decided to make a change. "No, wait. I should say, stop complaining." Karl picked up his tea and drained the cup. "We'll make the effort to speak only in English now that we're in London."

"You and your England," Cohen said.

Karl grinned. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed England until he'd spotted the cliffs of Dover from the boat deck, and his heart had beat so fast, he'd wondered if he might see its pulse under his jacket.

Home.

He'd lived in other places that were more breathtakingly lovely. He knew many other countries with a better climate and a prettier people. Almost every nation offered better cuisine. But London was the city he visited in his dreams, the city of his mother, and his happiest memories were of England, childhood holidays, and university years. For the past several months, he had longed for overcooked vegetables and boiled puddings. He'd been in London for weeks and still felt moments of pure joy at his return.

Cohen gave the tiny cough that indicated he was about to conduct formal affairs. Through years of service, he'd become more like a friend than a mere servant to Karl, but Cohen never truly forgot his place and always brought Karl's attention back to performing his father's business.

"The Pfalzgraf—pardon, I am to call him the count in English—the count wonders why, now that he wishes you to stay longer and to put off that journey north, you do not choose to temporarily reside with your uncle. He feels that Lord Merridew's home is large enough to host your retinue."

Karl guessed his father's comments had not been phrased so pleasantly. "I prefer to make my own arrangements."

Cohen frowned thoughtfully. After a minute, he said, "Don't want to strain Lord Merridew's resources, I suppose?"

"Thank you, that's a good reason, and you may pass it along to Father as my answer if you wish. I don't want to burden my mother's brother with the cost of feeding the whole entourage my father insists should accompany me."

He wouldn't bother to share his real reason. His sense of danger had been aroused, and he'd learned to trust his instincts. He didn't want to bring any trouble into his uncle's home by staying there.

“So, good. We will stay here at Claridge’s. The accommodations are sufficient.” Cohen spoke English with a thick German accent that Karl noticed only when they were in England.

“Yes. If it was good enough for Empress Eugenie, it’s good enough for us. Although I might send some of the lads home.”

“Lads? You Brit.” Cohen gave him one of his rare smiles. He poked at the no longer steaming sausage with the prongs of his fork. “Pork, no doubt.”

Karl dipped a strip of toast into the yolk of the boiled egg, smiling as he remembered how his mother and British nursemaid had called them toast soldiers.

Cohen cut into the sausage, speared half with his fork, and ate it gloomily. “So. We all stay here in London because you need us. You’re representing your father’s interests here, yes? You must have servants.”

Karl didn’t answer, but Cohen went on speaking. “I can see shedding only Greber, Villiards, or possibly Sechsman. You need a retinue befitting a member of the noble Neuschlosswold-Binder family.”

Karl finished the egg, then leaned back in his chair. The time had come to tell his father’s advisor—now Karl’s confidante and friend—the truth. “I know it’s not possible, but I would have liked to have come back as plain Charlie Binder again,” he said. “I will do the bare minimum, Cohen. I plan to see Oxford again. I will visit my uncle and listen to him complain about the Tories. As for duty, I will go to a few of those parties—you pick which—dressed like a performing monkey in full regalia. God, how I hate tassels, sashes, and medals.”

Cohen made an unsympathetic sound. “Now you are the one to complain. Naturally we shall do more than attend parties.” He picked up a newspaper and shook it out. The hotel ironed it, so the scent of scorched paper reached Karl’s nose. Another English scent. He rose from the table and tossed down his napkin.

Of course Cohen had risen to his feet too. “Wait, we must speak of your role, *Hochgeboren*.” The formality of Cohen’s speech was a gauge of how upset he was. “There are certain people you *must* meet with and certain policies your father

wishes you to promote to them. The current state of unrest about German unification must be addressed.”

Karl reached over and patted Cohen’s shoulder. “I have no interest in whatever intrigue my father has you and Smelter coordinating. This trip I’m not here to play politics, but simply to visit my uncle and enjoy a brief holiday.”

Cohen looked around the room, which was empty except for a large gray-haired lady in furs, who sat with her companion and a small poodle.

“I do not know what to say, *Erbgraf*.” He’d reverted back to German, an even greater sign of his anxiety. “Acting on your family’s behalf is your *raison d’être*.”

“I will be as decorative as you require, but I have no stomach for my father’s brand of political intrigue. While I am here, I shall visit the British Museum, the galleries and the shops on Bond Street. I will go to Oxford and wander nostalgically for a day or so.” He paused. “And I promise to stay away from any controversy.”

Cohen’s eyes narrowed. “Your father feels that if you meet with the late Prince Regent’s cousin to discuss *Ministerpräsident* Bismarck’s proposal to—”

“No! I have no interest in my father’s latest squabble. He will try to drag England into some petty German Confederation business. Ah, Cohen, I will never fit in England again properly because of the Crimea. If he wishes to clutch at power and stave off the Prussians, he may contact his friends, the Russians, again. I’m done. I have had enough of it.”

Of course, Cohen ignored the gist and picked at a detail, the damned diplomat. “Fit this country? What does this mean?”

Karl’s brief bout of temper and self-pity dissipated. He grinned and shrugged. “I am not exactly sure myself. But do not mistake me, my friend. I will not tell lies or spy for the count again.” He shook his head. “Which means I will not act as his spokesman, for I have no notion which of his words are truth or lies.”

“Oh God.” Cohen groaned. “What shall I tell the Pfalzgraf?”

“Nothing, of course. I shall remain as a mute figurehead, so there’s no reason anyone should know I am not part of my father’s latest positioning.”

Karl turned and walked from the small breakfast room. He nearly ran into a man in the corridor. “Do pardon me.” He took a side step, then stopped. Ah, perhaps this man was the reason he’d felt the alarming tingle of imminent danger pricking the hairs on his nape these last couple of days.

Brown eyes met his. He knew those eyes. How did he know them?

The man was very good at blending in, but Karl had a lifetime’s practice of intrigue. He’d first spotted this stranger in the public house he’d stopped into yesterday. The man, not a gentleman, was dressed as he had been the day before—in a well-tailored businessman’s frock coat, stiff white collar, and polished boots.

A prosperous businessman on the exterior, but with that one look, Karl had seen past that bland expression of a patron waiting for a drink in a pub. And just now, when he’d bumped into the stranger, he’d run against a hard wall of muscle. Those clothes covered the lithe body of a warrior and the tension of a man used to violence.

Something from the past whispered through him, and Karl felt cold down his spine, as if a ghost had traced an icy finger there. He stared hard into the brown eyes, and he knew.

He’d seen that narrow face once, covered with blood, the thick brown hair matted with it. It had been years ago that he’d seen this man dressed in the stained red uniform. Those eyes had looked into his with pure hatred. The beard was gone now, but the eyes were the same, even with the polite, neutral nod the man now gave him.

These days Karl no longer flirted with death, but he was in a reckless mood. He took a few steps back until he stood at arm’s length in the well-lit carpeted corridor before saying in a very soft voice, “Sevastopol.”

The man raised his eyebrows. “I should beg your pardon, sir. Is that your name?”

Oh, he was excellent. But Karl had spotted him in action several times that day in the Crimea, before they'd exchanged that vital look, and the memory had clung. More than once he'd dreamed of those eyes in that bloodied face of death. Karl was not superstitious, but he paid attention to his dreams.

He asked, "May I buy you a drink?"

"This early in the day?" The man smiled, showing white, nearly even teeth. Karl was distracted by another damnable emotion. Attraction to the snake? Ridiculous. He didn't care for danger any longer.

Karl returned the smile, hoping to hide his fear. "I saw you in the public house yesterday, and it was barely later than this."

The man didn't look astounded, nor did he protest. He only shrugged. "I was thirsty."

"And today? What time is it?"

The man pulled a watch from his waistcoat and looked at it. There was no wasted motion with this one, no fumbling or twitching. Karl hoped that meant he was a professional rather than a crazed ex-soldier out for vengeance for old war pains.

"It's nine o'clock," his onetime enemy said.

Enough speculation; he'd find out the answer. "May I buy you a cup of coffee? Or tea? Have you breakfasted?"

"I could do with a cup of tea." The man sounded almost jolly, but those eyes remained cold. "There is a pleasant restaurant not far from here."

"I don't want to walk into a trap."

The man seemed to tighten. Did he hold back anger or surprise at Karl's bluntness? Karl continued. "We will go downstairs to a place here in this establishment, shall we?"

They walked in silence, side by side but keeping their distance in the broad corridor and down the wide staircase. A uniformed bellboy trotted in their direction,

slowing and touching his cap respectfully as he passed between them. The British ex-soldier twisted to watch the boy disappear. Another who suspected traps everywhere.

The man didn't lead him to the quiet reading room as he expected. Instead they went to the foyer. Four musicians played quietly at the far end of the room. The open room was decorated with huge mirrors, thick carpeting, and chintz chairs. In the middle of the room, a fat stone cherub stood atop a series of marble bowls, and water splashed down the sides of the fountain.

A few tables dotted the back of the foyer. The man walked past more comfortable armchairs to a table in a far corner. The space had a few tables of hotel guests and other visitors.

The music, the splashing fountain, and the low murmur of male and female voices would cover their conversation. Karl reassured himself—certainly the man wouldn't harm him before so many witnesses.

Before they pulled back the chairs to sit, he spoke. "Are you simply following me, or do you plan to kill me? I am difficult to eliminate, you know."

The man met his eyes and didn't move. Karl had to look away from the steady, unflinching stare. He shifted his gaze to his own fingers resting on the bow-backed chair. No more pretending for either of them, then. Karl slowly moved his other hand toward his inside jacket pocket.

"Don't bother to reach for your pistol, Mr. Binder," the man said.

Karl looked up to see the man deftly reach into his jacket pocket and pull out Karl's small pearl-handled revolver, flashing a glimpse of it before letting it drop back into his pocket.

"Ah. And how did you manage that?" Karl asked.

The slender Englishman sat in the chair, and with an exaggerated motion, folded his hands and rested them on the table. "We passed each other in the upstairs hall before breakfast."

Karl slowly pulled out the other chair and sat. “Apparently I am not always so observant after all. I thought I would remember you. Always.”

The man shrugged. His clear gaze searched Karl’s face before sweeping down his body. Searching out weapons? Or was something else going on here? That second possibility was intriguing.

Karl leaned back in the chair, feigning ease. “Why are you following me? And tell me why you lied about being at Sevastopol.”

The man splayed his strong, scarred hands. Ha! Those hands gave him away. He was no businessman. And then, for the first time, he gave Karl a real smile. For a moment he looked almost shy. “Hell,” he said without malice. “I suppose I might.”

Chapter Two

Toole had told Reese to use whatever methods worked. It hadn't occurred to Reese to simply state a portion of the truth, but why not?

He'd have to pick an answer that didn't reveal too much, of course. After almost a week of following Binder, he could tell the man all sorts of truths. He might tell him that he'd spotted someone—a foreigner from Binder's own country, perhaps—following the count's son.

Or Reese could spill even deeper secrets. That his dried-up twig of a soul felt an unfamiliar flicker of life every time he saw Binder laugh. That he'd listened in on the conversations Binder held with his underlings and had grown to admire the way he treated his servants and staff. That he lay awake at night and thought of what it would feel like to put his mouth on Binder's lips and other parts of his body. He might admit that, in a crowd, he'd drawn too close to Binder more than once just to see if he could smell the man.

Except Reese had excellent self-discipline. He'd released the guard on his impulses only once in his life and had lived to regret it. He sure as hell didn't welcome this attraction to an enemy from the past, this very dangerous man.

Still, one truth would do no harm, and perhaps he'd be able to learn the answer to the question that had nagged him for years. "You're right. I was at Sevastopol. Why do you think you remember me?" He didn't add *for I recall you too*.

Binder's blue eyes glowed, and he smiled as if Reese had admitted something wonderful. "I don't understand it myself. That day of the battle. God." He shuddered, and Reese felt a ghost of that same response in his own body. "There

were hundreds—thousands of us—and it was a blur of bodies and pain and fear. My horse was slain under me. I was injured.”

Reese shook his head. He hadn’t known.

“Much of it comes back when I close my eyes. I expect it does for you too,” Karl went on. “But one of the most vivid images of that day, of that whole bloody, pointless war, is of you. You’d lost your cap, and you were covered in blood. I was looking for more...” He cleared his throat. “For the next to kill. I was filled with that lust. You know the feeling.”

Reese couldn’t answer. He knew and loathed the primal killing instinct that overtook him whenever he’d had to dispatch another man. He shrugged.

“And then I saw you watching me.”

Reese leaned forward, his entire being at attention. At long last it seemed he was going to receive an answer to the intolerable question—*why me?* Of all the men in the field that day, why had this stranger passed him over like the angel of death in Egypt?

“Yes, I admit I recall seeing you. What of that?” he asked with feigned casualness. Amazing he could sound so nonchalant when his heart was racing. “Tell me this. Why did you spare me?”

Binder inclined slightly toward him too and lowered his voice as he answered, his throaty rumble sending lust spearing through Reese. “Because I saw your eyes. I saw...” He shrugged broad shoulders.

Reese tilted his head to show he listened, and Binder went on. “I saw so many things. I saw myself when I watched you. So self-centered, eh? Angry, passionate, and ready to die. But I also saw a man who’d suffered too much. And, well...” He rubbed a blunt finger over the lace tablecloth. Reese watched those hands, large with golden hair on the back of his wrist, and he was almost too distracted by the sight of them to hear Binder’s next words. “I saw what a bloody monster I’d become.”

He stopped speaking, and for once, Reese wasn't patient enough to let silence linger. "We were all bloody monsters in war."

He should not allow his thoughts to venture in that direction. Curse the man for rousing the emotion of unwelcome memories. With one long, deep breath, Reese suppressed the ripples of disquiet disturbing his calm. He looked straight into Binder's face, but the other man didn't appear to notice. His blue eyes seemed sightless as he gazed at something else, those days in Sevastopol, probably.

Reese could examine him at leisure, a pleasant task. Even with Binder's large, Germanic features, there were touches of grace—the way his throat rose from the high collar, the line of his jaw, and the well-brushed, gleaming, wheat blond hair.

His enemy's low voice woke Reese from a fantasy of touching that hair, stroking it, seizing it, and gripping it while he drove into the heat of the man's mouth. His carnal fantasies about this man were getting out of hand.

"Ah. But your face, your eyes." Binder at last met Reese's stare. "Do you know the word *tzadik*?"

Reese knew German, but this word was unfamiliar. He shook his head.

"It's Yiddish. It means 'one who acts righteously.' Back then I didn't know the word. I'm not Jewish."

Reese knew that. He'd read the details of the man who'd been born to an English mother and a German Catholic father and who had been brought up in the Church of England.

"After the war, I heard a bit of the definition—just a little—and at once I imagined you. That day on the battlefield, your eyes sent a burning arrow into me. If a man's eyes could do such a thing, you would have killed me—a part of me—with that look. I saw the righteous judge who'd witnessed my failure as a human. I couldn't face you, and I certainly couldn't kill you."

His explanation was weighty and far more truthful than Reese would have expected.

“All that from a look,” Reese said sardonically, though he felt slightly dizzy. Through all these years, he’d also vividly recalled Binder, as if that scene were a fresh memory.

A moment later, Binder grinned suddenly, and his laugh lines showed Reese the man’s natural face—lighthearted, almost mischievous. Reese had already seen evidence of his mercurial nature, but this jump from grim to delighted was sudden, even for Binder.

“You are amused?” Reese asked.

“Now that I consider the matter, I wonder if I simply liked your appearance, blood-smeared and all. It was an impulsive decision to spare you. Shall we call it that?”

Jesus God, was this man admitting to physical attraction? Reese suppressed the urge to look around and see who might be listening. He was no green lad who would blush at bawdy suggestions—even those of forbidden practices—but this was no place to mention them. He smiled blandly but didn’t answer, as if he’d heard no suggestive meaning—and perhaps one had not been intended.

“So, tell me why you are following me,” Binder demanded, abruptly changing the subject.

Now he understood Binder’s game. The man was trying to confuse Reese and throw him off guard. “I might ask the same of you, sir. You turn up every place I go.”

“Oh, I am not following you. But never mind. Let us begin again. What is your name?”

On impulse, he gave his real first name. “Why don’t you call me Jonathan?” No one alive called him that.

Binder tilted his head. “I am to call you that, eh? At least you’re honest. You don’t say it is your name.”

Reese almost smiled. Ironical that when he told his true name to someone at last, he wasn't believed.

Binder rose to his feet, and with shoulders back and stiff, executed a perfect bow, clicking his heels together. The man certainly had Germanic blood and the proper formal training of an *erb-pfalzgraf*, the son of a reigning count, in him. "Herr Jonathan. I am Herr von Binder. But since it appears we are exchanging Christian names, you may call me Karl."

Reese stood and held out his hand. Karl examined it as though puzzled, then gave a peal of that deep, rolling laughter. "Yes, of course." He reached and pressed his warm, hard palm to Reese's hand. For such a long moment they touched. Neither wore gloves, and Reese should not have played this game. He flinched, surprised at the jolt of desire that passed through him.

A speculative gleam entered Karl's eyes. Nonsense, Reese chided himself. It was foolish to believe the other man had felt his reaction to their touch or interpreted it correctly.

Karl von Binder was broader and bigger than he, although he wasn't a huge man physically. Reese estimated he was a couple of inches taller than his own five-eleven, but the count's presence had a vigor that took up even more space.

He might be a polyglot, able to speak languages without a trace of accent, and he certainly could shift from the formal to the casual with ease, but Karl was too alive to be stealthy, while Reese could disappear into a crowd without problem. He supposed that with his average brown hair, nondescript brown eyes, and quiet manner, people simply weren't aware of him—a fact that made Binder's memory of him that day in battle even more unbelievable.

He pulled his hand away and reminded himself he wasn't here for his own entertainment. Time to scan the room for threats. Yet even as he looked for the man he'd spotted following the count, most of his attention was centered on Karl.

A man like Binder would be noticed anywhere he went. He radiated life; his face was too expressive. Although now Reese remembered hearing that von Binder was a fine diplomat, so that must mean that handsome, lively face could lie.

"Who pays you to follow me?" Karl asked. He sat again, and after another quick look around, Reese did too.

"I am a British citizen." He gave a vague reply that didn't answer the question at all.

"Of course. A soldier for his country still."

Reese didn't bother to correct him.

"And your attempt at stealth has been careless."

"I'm not required to remain hidden, merely to keep an eye on you." Christ, why was he telling the man anything about his assignment? He'd always been able to keep his thoughts clear, even when he felt lust. His cock never affected his thinking. But now he found himself blurting out all sorts of truths. What was the matter with him?

But then..."Shall we go to my room?" Binder asked very quietly. "You could keep an eye on me there."

Reese gave an involuntary huff of surprise. "Hey? What?"

The smile. "My room. To...talk...in private." His slight yet obvious hesitation made the message clear. Reese suspected the man had noticed his arousal and was taking advantage of it, toying with him.

"What makes you think I wish to talk to you?"

"As you wish. We needn't talk at all." Binder stressed the word *talk*, and that teasing smile lingered on his lips.

Reese rarely lost his temper. He knew better than to demand to know why his former enemy was torturing him. Perhaps the man merely probed to discover if he had any abnormal desires, but Reese couldn't stay quiet and calm. "Are you in the

habit of taking strangers you believe are dangerous to your suite? You say you've a good instinct for survival, but I can't see it myself. I have your gun, you fool."

The laughter. "But you see, I feel as if I've known you for years. And really, if you wish to kill me, you would have done so by now. You've been following me for more than twenty-four hours."

Reese had already regained his composure. "No. I will not go to your room with you. I don't like the odds. You have at least eight men in your pay during this visit."

"Ten," Binder said, amused. "Perhaps you are not so good at your job after all."

"Two directly report to Herr Cohen. I didn't count them as part of your retinue." There was also the obviously Russian gentleman he'd seen speaking to Cohen the previous day, but he hadn't managed to discover that man's name or if he even belonged with the entourage.

Binder's face glowed with delight. "I withdraw my criticism."

"You should have your bodyguards on duty even when you are in the hotel."

"Bah. They *are* on duty. They watch the doors. I don't want anyone stalking down the halls after me. Except you, perhaps."

Reese was about to protest that Binder shouldn't tell him, a spying stranger, the details of his protection, when he realized the *erbgraf* could well be lying. The man could play sincerity better than any spy or liar Reese had ever met.

With that glowing smile, Binder added, "If you're in my suite, you can relax your guard. You won't need to lurk in corridors or lobbies. I'll make myself easy to locate."

When Reese looked into those amused eyes, he knew Binder wasn't simply sounding him out but was quite certain of Reese's sexual inclinations. God above, how sick he was of games. Even more than that, he loathed having his desires used against him as the captain had once done. He rose to his feet.

"Come on." He turned and left, not looking to see if Binder followed, but a moment later he felt the man's presence behind him.

They walked side by side in silence from the foyer down a side corridor away from the busy front entrance. Reese knew the hotel, of course. Had examined the halls and closets. And there was a small room used for storage not far away. That would do.

As they approached the storeroom, he seized Binder's hand in a hard grip and forced his arm up behind his back. He propelled the man into the dusty room.

"Here, now," Binder protested, although he didn't sound alarmed. "You might just tell me where we're going."

Reese pushed him all the way into the room cluttered with a jumble of extra wooden chairs and tables from the dining room. A small, smeary window was the only source of light.

Binder stumbled as Reese shoved the door closed with his foot. He pushed the larger man up against the door, face pressed to the wood. There was a satisfying thud and *oof* as Binder's solid body met the more solid door. Reese leaned close and breathed in the exotic scent of cloves and smoke. He wanted to know how the other man had guessed his secret, but knew better than to ask.

"You bastard," he whispered. His breath stirred the other's blond hair.

"Jonathan." His name uttered in that quiet, deep voice melted his bones. With most of his body pressed to Binder's back, Reese felt the vibration of the word. Binder wiggled as if to make himself comfortable, not to get away. At once Reese shifted his hips so his erection wouldn't press against the other man's backside.

"I suppose I must apologize." Binder turned his face to the side and eyed Reese over his shoulder. He sounded calm though muffled with his cheek pressed against the door. "I'm an arrogant chap because I consider myself a good judge of these matters. Evidently I was wrong, and your inclinations aren't as I thought. Please forgive me. I assure you I meant no insult." He closed his eyes. "Look at it this way. You have something interesting to add to your report about me." His voice shook a little. What emotion—or feigned emotion—was this? Not fear.

Reese made a guess at what he heard in the other's tone. "What right do you have to be angry?"

"I told you, I misjudged your proclivities. I am annoyed with myself and with you too. Are you satisfied now that you've trapped me?"

Satisfied? He'd only be satisfied if he could give in to the temptation he pressed against, if he could strip off Binder's clothes and see for himself if that fine golden hair covered the strong body under his.

Binder pushed back from the door with a grunt, not escaping Reese's hold but coming up against the obvious evidence of arousal. He slid his free arm between their bodies and ran his palm over Reese's erection.

Twisting away, Reese was mortified by the fact he actually wanted to press into that hand. Hoping the other man hadn't noticed what he'd touched, Reese said, "You say I've trapped you. What do you mean? This?" He squeezed the man's wrist.

"It's no physical threat I'm referring to, as you well know. But tell me, are you always aroused by violence, or did I guess your inclinations correctly?" There was a smirk in Binder's tone.

Reese yanked up his arm slightly just to remind him who was in charge.

Binder grunted. "No need to break my arm. I am not struggling, am I? Under other circumstances, I assure you I'd be entirely cooperative. I might add that it would help if I knew what you wanted from me."

"You do like to talk." Reese's breath was coming fast. He had self-discipline and could still think, even when aroused. Though he couldn't recall being this aroused in years.

"So I've been told. But truly, why are you so furious? I would think you'd be glad to have the rumors about me confirmed."

"Rumors," Reese repeated. *Think. Think, damn it.* But his mind was too aware of useless details: the wide, bony wrist he gripped hard in one hand; his other hand

resting flat on the man's lower back, keeping their bodies separate; the heat of another body so close to his. Hunger pulsed through him.

Binder sighed and slumped slightly. That woke Reese from the lust-induced trance. He knew how an opponent could feign weariness only to rise up in attack. But Binder didn't move.

Reese flexed his hand against the man's back, feeling the tension of the muscles under the layers of wool and broadcloth and linen. They both breathed hard, the only sound in the small, airless room. Reese's whole body hummed. He loosened his grip on Binder's wrist, then released it and quickly stepped away.

Binder leaned against the door for a heartbeat or two before twisting to face him, eyes open, and rub his wrist absently. "Well now. I wasn't wrong about you, was I? Now what shall we do?"

God, he was magnificent. Blond hair rumped on the high forehead; darker eyebrows, a dramatic contrast to the pale hair; a straight nose; slightly cleft chin. Almost boyish features, except when he smiled and showed the lines around his eyes. He smiled now.

Reese's gaze moved over his enemy's body. Broad shoulders, narrow hips. The dark suit showed off his fine build. He must know how attractive he was. And then Reese saw the bulge under the blue wool trousers. The obvious erection made Reese understand the man's comment about rumors. The invitation to his room hadn't been meant as a trap for Reese. Binder wanted him.

Reese's gaze flicked back to his face.

Binder raised his hand slowly. Reese tensed when the man brushed a finger over his cheek gently, as if removing a bit of dust. Then Binder did it again, and this touch lingered.

"You want me," he said in German, using the familiar *du* for *you*.

Reese didn't answer. He couldn't.

"I wonder if you have even been with a man before."

Reese realized the man didn't know he spoke German, so he made no sign that he understood. He was as still as a statue—and as hard.

"You are so remote, my friend. You with those dark, fierce eyes. I'd suck you and watch you slowly lose that iron control. I long to see your eyes soften and your cock grow huge." He didn't as much as glance down as he spoke softly. "Although your already large erection has betrayed you. My God, I want it and you, your whole body. Would you be willing to fuck, I wonder? I have thought of that some nights, imagining you in my bed—a man I'd met but once on a bloody field. You have been my fantasy. An avenging angel who would forgive me and make me come until I was wrung dry. I had no notion I'd ever see you again in this life, let alone that you'd want me. It makes me glad to be alive, I tell you."

It took all of Reese's willpower not to moan or turn his head to kiss the hand that still cradled his cheek.

"I'm going to kiss you," Karl whispered, speaking English again, that upper-class voice without a trace of a foreign accent.

Reese closed his eyes.

"Coward." There was laughter in Karl's voice.

So he opened them again and watched, still unmoving, as Binder kissed his cheek, his chin, the soft, full lips touching him, marking him before moving to his mouth.

For however long the kiss lasted—seconds, minutes—Reese lived for that caress on his lips. Another person, so close. The smell of him, the taste of his mouth. Reese's mouth tingled. His lips were tight, tense.

Binder pulled back. "You kiss like a virgin."

His heart pounded so hard, Reese had trouble finding his voice. The truth was he'd rarely kissed anyone. He and the captain had not had that kind of closeness. "Kissed many virgins, have you?" he asked coolly.

“Several.” Karl smiled into his eyes, sharing a joke, but Reese was damned if he knew what or who he laughed at.

Reese had seen men and women kiss with their mouths open, as if they would eat each other. He wanted to taste one of those kisses. He was ravenously hungry for it, and suddenly he lunged at Binder, his mouth mashing against the other man’s with such force that his teeth cut into his own lip.

Reese pressed against him, stiff all over, trembling with excitement but unsure of what to do next. He’d never been the aggressor. The captain had taken charge of their encounters. He’d had a couple of bad teeth, so there’d been no kisses other than an affectionate buss on the cheek on occasion. He’d shove his hand into Reese’s trousers and bring him off fast. It had been rough to the point of painful, but absolutely arousing. Then Reese would return the favor. Those exchanges had been exciting, but the word *sensual* would have made the captain laugh. Nothing like this exploration, with Binder’s hand traveling over his back and spine and his tongue twining around Reese’s.

Binder pulled away to mutter, “Easy. Slow down a little. It’s good to take some time.”

Reese growled and pulled closer. He ran his hands over the other man’s arms, body, everywhere he could reach. He yanked at Binder’s shirt and burrowed under the cloth until he felt his hand slide against skin and fine, downy hair.

His cock was painfully hard, as if he’d been engorged for hours. He pushed against Binder. The excitement and the friction would be enough to bring him to orgasm. But he craved more, and he wanted to force the other man to spend too.

He backed away and fumbled with Binder’s buttons—first the waistcoat, the braces, then his fly. Within seconds, his trousers were undone, and his cock jutted out dark red from the folds of his linens—a shocking, lovely sight that made Reese swallow hard.

A couple of times, in the middle of nowhere and in the night, he and the captain had indulged in more stealthy doings—they’d brought each other off with

their mouths. He wanted to do that now. In the light—or in as much of it as there was in this dim room—with the other man fully aware and watching.

Reese dropped to his knees as if he'd worship Binder's penis. He licked the tip of his cock and watched the man's whole body shiver under that tiny touch. He licked him again and tasted musk and salt, and he grew hungry for the flavor as well as the moans the other man gave.

Reese needed to see more flesh. He pushed aside Binder's waistcoat and shirt to explore his taut, lean belly with hands and tongue, tasting the skin and hair, and for a moment, laying his cheek against the hard, muscular groin. But the thrusting cock demanded attention again. Reese opened his mouth and engulfed the head.

Binder tangled his fingers in his hair, and he moved against Reese's tongue. Reese opened wider, letting the large cock slide farther. He brought up his fist and wrapped it around the base of the man's cock.

"Touch yourself," Binder ordered in German and then in English.

For a few seconds, Reese pulled away from his licking and sucking. "No. You'll do it. Soon."

Chapter Three

Karl groaned. He wanted this moment to go on for hours, for years. He tried to concentrate on anything other than the man who touched him, the man on his knees. Karl ran his fingers through the stranger's hair, tugging at him to pull him off because he was going to spend too soon, and he wanted to savor the pleasure and stave off the driving need.

But his arousal proved too much. He recalled that he'd be allowed to return the favor, and just the thought of tasting Jonathan, kissing him again, nearly put him over the edge. He'd strip his onetime enemy naked and find all his weaknesses and watch him writhe with pleasure and... Release hit him, starting at the back of his knees and soaring up through his balls, which felt so heavy and tight. He shouted as the boiling need rose, and he exploded. He let go of his grip on Jonathan's hair so the man could back away, but no, Jonathan's eager mouth stayed on him as he shuddered and his legs went weak.

For an instant Karl stood with his eyes closed, swaying.

Thought returned, but no self-recrimination, though he wished he could understand why he'd done this—why he so entirely craved a man he didn't trust, a man who'd followed him, stolen his pistol, and attacked him. His arm still ached from being twisted halfway up his back, yet that rough treatment had only added to his intense arousal.

When he was in his early twenties, Karl had enjoyed numerous anonymous fast encounters with strangers, but now he would only bed someone he genuinely liked. He'd easily given up that pull to danger, until he'd encountered this most dangerous man, whose real name he didn't even know.

Jonathan, or whoever he was, rose to his feet. He seized Karl around the waist, pulled him close, and clumsily buried his face against his neck, rubbing against the stiff collar and tie, seeking out skin before simply pressing his mouth and body against him.

Oh. This was why he lingered with his enemy. Karl had never witnessed such need, and it called to something deep in him—his own need. He wanted this man beyond the excitement of risk and the pleasure of a good spending.

“Thank you,” Karl whispered. He rested his hand on Jonathan’s shoulder and caressed firm muscles through the waistcoat and shirt. Despite his climax, he still craved the other man’s touch and wished they’d made it up to his room, where they could’ve done this thing properly.

It was his turn to go to his knees. But no, he’d just admitted to himself he wanted more. He wanted to be able to touch more than cock. He had the hunger for skin.

“Lie down,” he commanded. Jonathan narrowed his eyes but slowly sank to the dusty floor and stretched out on his back between stacked chairs and broken-legged tables. He crossed his arms over his chest, and in his closed face Karl could see the caution, the promise of retribution for any attempts at trickery.

Karl wondered if the poor man had any notion of intimacy. He’d experienced mutual gratification, perhaps, but not affection. Even his kiss was inexperienced. And he might have pleasured a man with his mouth, but not often, Karl thought.

“Jonathan,” he crooned and sat on the floor next to him. He ran his hands over his belly and chest, unbuttoning more clothing than he needed to simply reach the man’s cock. He reached for Jonathan’s wrists and, ignoring his growl, pulled Jonathan’s arms down to his sides.

Karl eyed the exposed skin from neckcloth to groin. He loved the way the other man lay open and exposed to him. He leaned and kissed a path over the hard chest, expecting Jonathan to respond with caresses, but the man lay as he’d placed him,

although every muscle in his body was tightly coiled, as if he expected Karl to rip open his stomach rather than suck his cock.

Karl laid his cheek on the other's belly, duplicating Jonathan's earlier moment of tenderness. Jonathan's stomach twitched, and he pushed on Karl's head, urging him lower.

Karl lapped and nipped the skin near Jonathan's navel, nuzzling through the silky hair, such a contrast to well-toned muscles. Karl slid his hands up the sleek torso and stroked his thumbs over Jonathan's nipples. He tweaked one of the hard nubs.

Jonathan shivered and moaned. So much desire pent up in one man's body. Karl's cock hardened again in sympathy. He took pity on Jonathan and wrapped his hand around his cock.

"I think another time I'll have you naked and ready for more love play than this," he promised.

"Love play?" Jonathan's voice was ragged. He'd probably intended to express scorn at the romantic term, but the gasp he gave at the end of the word turned it into a question.

"Hard and hot in a storage closet is good, but I'll see you completely nude in a soft, comfortable bed yet." Abruptly Karl moved down and engulfed the man's cock with his hands and mouth, devouring him like a second breakfast.

Jonathan groaned louder.

"You like this?" Karl pulled off long enough to ask. He caressed the delicate ball sac and watched Jonathan's face transported by pleasure. His enemy's guarded expression slipped, and Karl was privileged to witness the transformation from cold reserve to blossoming passion. Years seemed to shed from the man as Jonathan's eyelashes fluttered and his mouth opened.

"How about this?" Karl burrowed beneath the breeches to tease his finger along the sensitive path to Jonathan's rear entrance. He traced a finger around the

tight opening. The man's bunghole tensed, and Karl knew he enjoyed the sensation, but he pressed for an answer. "Is this what you want?"

He returned his hand to Jonathan's penis and stroked the thick column from base to tip. "Or this?"

Christ. Even while Binder was delivering the greatest pleasure of Reese's life, the man wouldn't shut up. What was worse, when Reese didn't answer, Binder stopped and sat up. "Alas, I fear you're not enjoying this."

Bastard. Reese wanted to howl his need. Instead he said in a strangled voice, "Yes! Yes, goddamn it, I like it."

"Which in particular?" the smug Karl asked.

"All of it. All." He cursed.

Karl chuckled and bent his head again.

Reese had never felt such sensation. Karl was clever with his hands, his mouth. Every part of him seemed to rub and touch Reese's body, arousing him beyond what he'd thought possible. That warm, sucking mouth made Reese gasp and cry out. The craving for more throbbed along with every heartbeat.

He'd been nearly silent during his encounters with the captain, except for some grunting and gasping, but he could no more remain silent now than he could hold back his climax. "No, no, please, yes." He heard himself gibbering contradictions. "Please, oh God."

He heard his own voice at a distance as his release seized him. At last, at last, he thought, and as he slowly came back to his senses, he wondered what that meant.

But the moment the glorious elation coursing through him began to dim, Reese grew too aware of his own recklessness. How could he have shouted out loud so any passing person could hear him? Cold reason slapped him across the face like a gentleman with a glove demanding a duel. The secret passion of his nature was

eclipsed once more and slunk away to hide in the dark recesses of his heart. Horror at his weakness in laying his body and soul open to this stranger—this enemy—flooded Reese. His heart no longer pounded with pleasure but with the need to run. He had to get out of here. Now. As soon as possible, he must escape.

He squirmed out from under Karl's head, which rested on his thigh, and sat up. Karl moved back, allowing him to rise. Reese hurriedly tucked himself away, buttoning and rearranging his clothing.

Karl looked up at him quizzically with a raised brow. "You're in a rush. Do you have an appointment to keep?"

Reese thrust fingers through his hair. Did the man expect him to moon about, half dressed, in a storeroom? "I must leave. I beg your pardon." He sounded entirely priggish to his own ears.

Karl stretched, yawned, and stood. He buttoned his shirt, moving at a leisurely pace. "I told you I'm difficult to insult except, of course, when it serves my purposes to be insulted. You'll learn that about me."

Reese ignored Karl's attempt to draw him into yet more conversation. The door filled his sight. He needed to get through it right now, if he had to knock the other man out of his way to do so. He couldn't breathe. The closet was closing in on him. His pulse was racing, and he felt dizzy. He pushed past Karl, grasped the door handle, and burst out into the corridor, heedless of anyone who might be passing. Luckily the hall was empty. Reese practically ran from the storage room and the man he was supposed to be following.

Assignment be damned, he would stay as far away from Karl von Binder as he could while still keeping an eye on him. No more face-to-face meetings. No more meetings of any kind, or he would lose his sanity.

There was a note waiting for him at the front desk. *Provide minimal protection.* He knew that meant he was to alert Toole at once if he felt Binder might be in danger. Some peril probably threatened the erbgraf, or the department wouldn't have bothered with the note, but the trouble wouldn't come from any of

Reese's people. Evidently the secretive little group hidden in the War Department of the British government wasn't going after Binder, or they wouldn't have given the new instruction.

Feeling curiously relieved by the news, Reese collected his hat and coat from his room and left the hotel. Although it was almost noon now, the day was bleak and overcast. The tall buildings were shrouded in a misty pall of gray, and the air was so damp, one could practically drown in it. Perfect. The weather exactly matched his mood. The ecstatic peak of only a few minutes earlier had completely evaporated, leaving Reese in a morass of confusion.

He strode along the pavement, past pedestrians shielded by a host of black umbrellas that hid their faces. Reese was a forgettable face in a city full of anonymous strangers, as he was meant to be. His breathing eased as he drew fresh air into his lungs and melted back into his surroundings, once more a nonentity. This was where he belonged. This was his peace.

He didn't walk far. After all, he still had a task to perform: watch von Binder and those who surrounded him, and keep the man from serious harm. Rain dripped from the brim of Reese's hat and rolled down his long black coat. Although his coverings were fairly waterproof, he felt the moisture infiltrating his clothing and even the very pores of his skin, until he was chilled and damp all over.

After finding shelter beneath the awning of a tobacconist's shop, where he pretended to look at the window display of carved pipes, Reese turned to examine the front of Claridge's. The red brick facade and ornate wrought-iron decor at the windows only hinted at the sumptuous world of wealth. Reese hadn't come from either money or privilege. His father had been a merchant, and even now, after years of exposure to how the elite lived, Reese's middle-class soul was sometimes dismayed by the elaborate inclinations of the rich and titled. Their meticulous attention to their clothing and coiffures, to their possessions and position in society, were anathema to his spartan nature.

Men like Karl von Binder confounded him. How could someone live for pleasure and indulge his every whim—such as they'd done just now in the storage room—without expecting repercussions? The world was not a playground, but more a battlefield in which one struggled to survive. Either one of them could've killed the other while he was at his most vulnerable. Reese still had the weight of Karl's pistol in his pocket to prove it. If he had been sent to assassinate rather than observe, the count's son would be dead right now.

But Reese could hardly cast stones. Today he'd been just as foolish as the carefree *erbgraf*, weakened by need. It terrified him to admit how very much he'd wanted what Binder offered, not only quick sexual relief. He hadn't known sexual encounters could be like that, and now that he knew, he wished he could forget what Karl had called love play. Love was not a commodity Reese could expect. He'd been content and never longed for more, except perhaps in those moments just before sleep.

His reverie and examination of the pipes in the store window were interrupted as Reese's assignment exited the double doors of the hotel. *Erbgraf* Karl von Binder descended the marble steps, which glistened from the rain. He was accompanied by several other dark-coated men—his bodyguards and servants. Although all the men wore an assortment of black top hats and bowlers, Karl von Binder's pale hair beneath his derby fairly glowed like a beacon. And Reese knew now that hair was soft to the touch.

Reese started to walk parallel to his quarry on the opposite side of the street. He wondered why in the world the *erbgraf* was walking anywhere on such a day rather than summoning a vehicle to transport him. Carriages and dray wagons, cabs and even a few intrepid individual riders with their caps pulled low to protect them from the rain, jockeyed for space on the slick paved street. Reese's view of Karl and his retinue—three men, all bearing umbrellas and walking close to their master—was interrupted by one vehicle or another. He had just decided to take a

plunge across the busy street to shadow his quarry from behind, when von Binder and company elected to cross the road in his direction.

They were at a corner. A uniformed police pointsman directed traffic, his white gloves conducting the vehicles in a sedate waltz. There would be no collisions on his watch, his assured hands seemed to say. Spotting the pedestrians waiting to cross, and clearly well-off ones at that, the copper held up his hand. A huge dray horse pulling a canvas-covered wagon obeyed the tug of its master's reins and stopped. Other conveyances also slowed and stopped while Herr von Binder and his entourage hurried across the street.

Reese saw the lightweight phaeton careening around the stalled traffic before the policeman did. The high flyer, with its huge wheels, was built for speed, not balance. The driver should never have had the vehicle out on such a day, on slick roads amid slow-moving traffic. And he certainly shouldn't have been speeding like an entrant in the Newmarket races.

Reese's stomach lurched as he leaped into action and raced for the corner. Karl and his men were nearly across, but the phaeton was coming on fast, barreling right toward them. The driver tried to slow the horse while dodging past other vehicles. The animal's neck arched as the reins pulled its head back. With front hooves pawing the air, it came to a halt, but the carriage itself was out of control. The phaeton slewed to the side, and a basket flew from the back as the straps broke.

All this happened on the periphery of Reese's consciousness while he ran toward Binder. The entire focus of his being was on getting the man out of the way of the unfolding accident. It didn't matter if it was his assignment or not. His instinctive response was to stop the accident unfolding before him. He barreled into Binder, threw him to the pavement, and landed hard on top of his body. Meanwhile the high flyer crashed onto its side, slid, and skidded to a halt a few feet away from their sprawled bodies.

Sharp pain skewered through Reese's arm from where his shoulder had hit the pavement. Karl's solid body moved beneath him, and for a moment the thought

darted through his mind that this wasn't what he'd hoped to be doing if he ever lay on top of Karl von Binder. He glanced over his shoulder to where the horse was screaming and struggling to get free of its traces, and the driver of the phaeton was lying facedown in a puddle on the pavement.

The world around them was a blur of motion and noise. Karl's lackeys clustered like worried hens clucking their concern. Other drivers and passengers stepped from their vehicles, and pedestrians gathered to watch. A few went to check on the injured driver. The policeman shouted for people to return to their business. In his mind, everything was still under his control.

"Are you hurt, erbgraf?" One of Binder's men unceremoniously pulled Reese off Karl so he could help his master to rise.

"Fine, Cohen. Stop fussing." Karl impatiently waved away the lanky man with the shadowed eyes and turned to Reese. "Are you all right?"

Reese grunted an affirmative as he climbed to his feet. He looked again at the phaeton's driver, who lay absolutely still, blood staining the puddle beneath his head. One of the onlookers turned the man over and dabbed at his face.

"Herr Smelter, will you tend to that man?" Binder's voice was imperious, every bit the regal nobleman. Reese hadn't heard him use that tone before.

A portly man wearing a black top hat and caped greatcoat went to do his master's bidding.

"Smelter is my physician," Karl explained to Reese, then held out his hand. "It appears you've saved my life, for which I owe you a great debt of gratitude. I am Karl Johann Peter, Erb-Pfalzgraf von und zu Neuschlosswold-Binder, but you must call me Karl. And you are...?"

Reese reluctantly took the gloved hand, remembering distinctly how the bare palm had felt sliding over his skin and the fingers gripping his cock and touching his anus. Good Christ, could this day get any stranger? "I'm honored to make your acquaintance, sir."

The erbgraf gave him a measured glance, and Reese guessed what he was thinking—*Why was this man on hand to save my life? Why is he following me?*

As Reese took back his hand, he winced at the pain that shot once more through his arm.

“You’re hurt.” Karl frowned and stared at his shoulder, as if he could see the injury through Reese’s sodden coat and all his layers of clothing. “You will come back to my rooms and allow my physician to examine you.”

It took Reese a moment to remember that he should not know their party had come from the hotel, not in front of Karl’s staff. He glanced at the front of Claridge’s, then at Binder. “But it appears you were heading somewhere else.”

Karl waved a hand. “Not at all. I was merely taking my afternoon constitutional. Rain or shine, I walk for my health. Keeps a body fit.” He smiled grimly. “Unless, of course, one is struck by a runaway carriage. I must thank you again for possibly saving my life.”

Reese bowed his head and stepped backward. Now that the crisis was averted, he wanted nothing more than to slip away into the crowd and disappear, but Karl seemed to sense his readiness to escape and gripped his good arm firmly. “Come with me now, my good man, and let me help you. I insist. Cohen, please bring Dr. Smelter back to the hotel when he’s finished tending the poor sod who crashed his carriage.”

Before they could walk away, another policeman who’d joined his traffic-directing colleague insisted on taking down their statements concerning the accident. It was some time before the mess was sorted out and they were allowed to leave the scene.

Karl walked close by Reese’s side on the way to the hotel, his entourage trailing behind him. “We have some more talking to do, you and I,” he muttered. “I do believe you are a very good friend. That, or yet another agent sent by my father to look after my interests. Which is it?”

Reese thought fast. If Binder wanted to attribute his spying to intervention by an overprotective father, why not let him? Eventually he'd find out the truth—that the count hadn't sent Reese to shadow his son—but for now it was as good a cover as any.

"Your well-being is of importance to your family," Reese said. "You should be glad of that." There, that was vague enough. He admitted to nothing but the truth.

For once Karl said nothing, but his brow was furrowed and his lips tight as he strode quickly beside Reese. It seemed Binder was not necessarily on good terms with his father. Reese wondered why, but supposed it really didn't matter. The familial relationship had nothing to do with his assignment—to keep an eye on Binder's movements and those who might harm him. Well, he was certainly close to his quarry now, practically in his hip pocket after his actions today. He'd saved Binder's life, and Reese wasn't going to explore whether he'd been following a directive to get close to the man or if he instinctively couldn't have borne to see him injured.

As they entered the foyer of the hotel, then climbed the stairs to Binder's rooms on the third floor, Reese took mental notes on the members of the *erbgraf's* entourage. He had already been watching them from afar, and even from quite close up on occasion, as he'd blended into nearby crowds to listen in on their interactions.

He already knew that Karl's most-trusted confidante was Cohen, the tall, thin manservant. The man wasn't afraid to speak what he perceived as the truth to his master. Reese had observed the *erbgraf's* personal physician, Herr Smelter, spending much of his time in the hotel dining room, drinking beer, snacking on sausages, and smoking his pipe. He was a man who appeared to love his small vices.

Reese wasn't yet clear on the identities or duties of the other men in the party, although he knew them all by sight.

At last they reached the top floor of the hotel, the deluxe accommodations fit to host traveling titled individuals or the very wealthy. Karl was both.

Reese waited with the erbgraf while Cohen unlocked the door and gave a quick glance through the rooms. Then the man ushered them inside. The ache in Reese's shoulder was spreading down his arm. He'd wrenched it somehow while tackling Binder to the ground. No doubt the other man's rib cage was hurting him, since he'd hit the pavement hard.

The assortment of servants went about their duties, ringing for hot tea from the hotel kitchens, poking up the fire, taking wet coats and hats to hang in another room to dry, drawing off the master's boots, and pouring brandy for both Binder and his guest.

Beneath his topcoat, Karl was as fresh and well groomed as when Reese had first faced him. Although his fair hair was darkened by rainwater and his trousers damp, his white shirtfront was still pristine and his expression unruffled. He stood before the fireplace as the flames began to crackle. In contrast, Reese knew he was as bedraggled as an alley cat dragged in from the rain. Somehow his coat had not protected his clothing. His shirt, waistcoat, and trousers were sodden and dirty.

"Do take your shirt off, my friend, and let's see what we have," Binder suddenly said.

"Pardon?" Startled, Reese darted a glance at Cohen and the other servants, secretaries, attendants, or whatever they all were, who bustled around the room.

With a smile, Karl nodded toward the door through which the physician had just entered. "Dr. Smelter is here now. He will take a look at your injury."

"Oh." Reese hated the way this man was able to put him off balance so easily. The self-contained, poised persona he'd developed over years of undercover work seemed to evaporate every time he came in direct contact with Binder. He'd certainly not meant to run into him a second time today, but here they were.

With slightly trembling fingers, Reese began to unbutton his shirt.

Chapter Four

Karl didn't care for the way his mysterious new acquaintance made him feel—unsettled, excited, anxious, curious, and undeniably attracted and aroused. Jonathan what? The man still had managed to sidestep giving any kind of surname, either real or false. He hadn't denied it when Karl accused him of working on his father's behalf, but now that he thought about it, Jonathan hadn't really admitted to it either. Who in the world was he? Avenging or guardian angel? One thing was fairly certain: he was no assassin, or he would've let the phaeton do his work for him.

"Herr Smelter, how was the driver of the carriage?" Karl remembered to ask.

The physician removed his hat, coat, and wet shoes and surrendered them to a servant while he spoke. "I'm afraid he had expired before I was able to examine him, Hochgeboren."

"Good riddance," Cohen growled in German. "Idiotic young fool could've killed you with that ridiculous contraption. Such idiots shouldn't be allowed on the roads, putting everyone in danger."

"Cohen, a man is dead. Show respect," Karl snapped, also in German, then continued in English. "And please speak in English for the benefit of our guest, Mr.... What did you say your name was?"

There was only a hairbreadth of hesitation before the brown-eyed man answered. "Reed, sir. Jonathan Reed." He met Karl's eyes, transmitting some silent message Karl couldn't understand. This man's mind and motivations were a mystery to him. All Karl knew was that he wanted to find out more about Jonathan Reed and to see more—literally.

He watched with interest as his guest took off the waistcoat and shirt Karl had so recently unbuttoned. But this time, instead of merely a tempting slice of chest and stomach, Jonathan's entire upper body was unclothed—his shoulders, arms, and then his naked back when he turned to lay his folded shirt and undershirt over a chair. There was a long, pale scar down Reed's back that surely had a story behind it.

The shadows beneath his shoulder blades, the knobs of his spine, and the curves of his biceps sent a sharp pang of hunger through Karl. He would have liked to freeze Jonathan in that position to study the beautiful angles of his body. Except he would have him remove his trousers too, so he could view taut buttocks and solidly muscled legs.

Jonathan sat on an ottoman so Smelter could reach his shoulder to manipulate it. The doctor carefully rotated the shoulder in its socket, his pudgy, clever hands pale against Jonathan's skin. "This hurts? What about this?"

"I've simply wrenched it," Jonathan declared, pulling away from the doctor's grip.

"That's for me to decide, although I believe you are correct." The doctor examined his collarbone, the top of his shoulder, and his back. "*Gut*. Nothing broken. You should rest. A warm compress should reduce swelling, and a headache powder will ease any discomfort."

Jonathan impatiently rose and reached for his shirt.

"You heard the doctor," Karl said. "You mustn't hurry off. I've ordered tea, and the fire is lovely on such a chill day." He lifted his glass. "Besides, we have our brandy to sip. You will stay and visit with me. I insist on knowing more about my rescuer."

"There is someplace I need to be." He pulled on his undergarment, then his shirt.

"I will send a messenger with a note. Please, humor me. Take a seat." Although spoken as a request, Karl imbued the words with command.

Jonathan gazed at him for a moment with narrowed eyes, then sat down on the other chair before the fireplace, so close Karl could reach out a hand and touch him.

“So shall we send a message for you?” Karl tried not to sound triumphant.

“No. No need,” Jonathan said.

Karl beckoned Cohen and spoke to him quietly in Yiddish. “Please clear the room. I wish to speak to Mr. Reed alone.”

Cohen looked at the stranger, then back at his master. “Are you certain that is wise, Hochgeboren? You know nothing about this man.”

Karl didn’t answer, merely shot Cohen a glare that reminded him who was truly in charge. Sometimes he needed that reminder.

Cohen snapped his heels together and gave a sharp jerk of his head. More a statement of displeasure than a bow, but he went to do as he was bidden.

Within moments, Smelter, Greber, Villiars, and the odious Sechsman had left Karl in peace to entertain his guest. Cohen paused at the door before going. “I shall return shortly with a tea tray.” He made the simple statement a warning.

Jonathan Reed, if any part of that was his real name, sat on the edge of his seat as if he would bolt at any moment. To put him at ease, Karl reclined deeply in his own chair, with his stocking-clad feet stretched toward the hearth. The brief time out in the wet and cold had chilled him. How spoiled he’d become in the years since the war, like a cream-fed cat that no longer remembered how to hunt.

“I think it’s well past time we had a discussion.” Karl steepled his fingers beneath his chin, then quickly abandoned the pose as he realized it was exactly what his father used to do before lecturing him. Instead he rested his hands on the armrests of the chair, feeling the smooth leather beneath his palms and forcing himself not to nervously grip the chair. For despite his calm demeanor, he *was* nervous to talk to this man who had catapulted into his life like a mortar, blasting away his defenses.

Jonathan waited, saying nothing. Karl understood silence was a tool he used to force others to talk more. Not hard to do with Karl, since he was naturally gregarious.

“I believe you know everything about me, and I know nothing about you,” Karl said. “No more truths like ‘I am a British citizen’ or ‘I saw you once in the Crimea.’ I want a full account of precisely who you are and who has hired you to follow me. At the very least, you will tell me your background.”

The man remained silent for several more seconds, gazing into the fire before looking back at Karl. “I *am* a British citizen and the son of a shopkeeper. My upbringing was standard. I excelled at my school studies enough to attend university, but after a year I decided to join the military. I wished to travel and see foreign lands.” He paused, gave a sour smile, and added, “I was young.”

Karl nodded. He’d gone to war with the same young man’s foolish dreams of adventure and glory. Although he’d purely enjoyed his time as an English lad attending university, he’d considered himself primarily a member of the Neuschlosswold-Binder lineage, so when war broke out, he’d gone to fight on the side of the Russians. He’d regretted the necessity of fighting against the British, but his father had convinced him the Russians would be the best long-term allies for their little corner of the world.

“What did you do after the war?” Karl prompted, surprised he’d got even this slim history out of Reed and eager to learn more.

Of course, if the man was his father’s spy, every word out of his mouth could be a lie. The count enjoyed having some of the servants or hired men play such little games with his son, although he claimed he was trying to train Karl to discern lies and half-truths and to test loyalties.

Jonathan hesitated before speaking. “I found a different way to serve, for there was no returning home after...after that.” He stopped speaking abruptly, but Karl knew what he left unsaid, the horror and the loss of innocence.

Karl nodded again. Although he and Jonathan came from vastly different backgrounds, Jonathan's story ran parallel to his own. His view of the world and his place in it had changed radically after the war. For far too long, he'd continued to perform tricks for his father, jumping through the man's hoops and promoting his political agenda, but mostly Karl had indulged in every vice life had to offer. *Carpe diem* was his motto, and he lived it to the fullest until he could no longer stomach another drop of false pleasure. Not entirely false, he corrected himself. Karl did not indulge in regret. It had simply been time to move on.

That's why he was in England now, ostensibly to continue his father's work, but actually searching for something real, perhaps even something he could do to make himself useful in this world. Not that he intended to become a priest, by any means. He would continue to enjoy life, just with a little less fervor.

"I understand your feeling," Karl said at last. "The war forged us both into something harder and colder, I think. But, my friend, you still haven't really answered my question. For whom are you spying exactly?"

Jonathan gazed into the fire. The light flickered over his face and glinted in his deep-set eyes. His features might appear average, making it easy for him to blend into a crowd, but his eyes and the set of his mouth were stunning if someone took the time to look. Karl was looking now, and his heart beat faster. What was it about this man who spurred him like a bootheel to a horse's flank? He didn't understand this strange connection between them.

Jonathan met his gaze at last. "That, I cannot tell you. But my superiors intend you no harm." He looked away again.

Karl suspected that even with this small amount of information he'd shared, the mysterious Mr. Reed hadn't told the whole truth. After all, his father had trained him well in the art of reading a man, even a walled-off man like this. He raised his eyebrows. "Your superiors? Not my father, then?"

Jonathan didn't answer for a moment, then, almost reluctantly, he said, "Not him."

Karl believed him. Not his father after all, and this was good. Excellent.

Karl continued. "Does whoever hired you believe I am in danger because I'm in England? I know my father's family has enemies here, but you seem to suggest my life is in danger."

Reed shook his head. "I don't know. It's possible. That carriage today... And you have been followed these past few days by someone other than myself."

"I haven't seen anyone."

"Then he is clearly a better spy than I," Reed said drily.

"What does he look like?"

The man smiled, a sharp-edged grin that looked positively wolfish. "Like me. Completely average. A man who blends in. Hard to recognize if one saw him again."

"Ah no, Mr. Reed. You do *not* blend in. Not to me." Karl leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees to gaze straight into Jonathan's eyes. "When I see you, I see a man of substance, an intriguing puzzle, a secret to be unlocked, and a body"—his gaze swept Jonathan's form—"that demands to be touched."

"You see all that, do you?" The wolfish smile turned to a chuckle, the first real laugh Karl had heard from him. "Then you have some imagination, sir, for I swear, I'm not that interesting."

Karl took a gamble, reached out, and touched the other's knee. "I believe you are." He lowered his voice to a silken caress. "Whatever or whoever you are, the attraction between us is magnet to steel, so why should we deny it? Here we have this long, dreary afternoon, rain outside, a roaring fire inside, no servants to disturb us. We should take advantage of this time to—"

His seduction was interrupted by a loud knock on the door. Cohen banged through it, bearing a tea tray. He plunked it on the table between the two chairs and began to pour. Typical of him.

"Thank you," Karl said. Then he switched to German. "Herr Cohen, you are upset, and I know you don't trust our visitor. Do you have some specific information

that makes you believe he's a threat? Or perhaps you think he works for my father?"

"No, Hochgeboren. I've heard nothing about the man." He handed Karl his tea, a touch of milk, no sugar.

"Sir." Cohen addressed Jonathan in English, who absently rubbed his arm and stared into the fire. "How would you like your tea?"

"One sugar, please."

Cohen prepared the cup, then in a low voice lapsed back into German. "I have sent Sechsman to search out what information he can find about our visitor. Perhaps after you talk to him, you will be able to give us more details later."

Karl watched Jonathan. He smiled at the way the man sipped his tea and studied the fire, intent on sliding out of their notice and not appearing to listen to his conversation with Cohen.

Really, he'd been blinded by his lust before, when they were in that small room. All those words that had come out of him when he thought Jonathan hadn't understood—he was a fool. Another man might be embarrassed, but Karl decided it wasn't worth the bother.

He reached for a gingersnap and answered Cohen in German. "I wonder if there's something to your suspicions. I'm not so sure this gentleman who calls himself Herr Reed has even a touch of innocence in his makeup. For instance, I've come to believe that this handsome man sitting here with me speaks German and is a pigdog for pretending he doesn't understand us now. A rotten *blödes arschloch* who should be grilled in hell forever if he understands us."

He paused. "Indeed that would make him a most terrible person, and what's far worse, a very fine actor."

And finally there it was—the blank look had shifted, the mouth tightened. Could Jonathan be holding back a smile?

Karl continued in German. "He's definitely got something to hide and has been following me, Friend Cohen. Despite all that, I find I trust him. He could have harmed me earlier."

"Earlier?" Cohen scowled. "What can you mean, *erbgraf*? When was he following you?"

"I don't know why you sound surprised. I think you're right to worry, because I expect there will be some problems with our visit. There always are when it comes to my esteemed Papa's business. No, don't bother to look so offended on his behalf, Herr Cohen. You know nothing is straightforward, and there will be snags in our path. However, I don't think this man is one of them. And now, I excuse you."

Cohen started to say something, and Karl added, "Go on. Relax. Should you return in two hours to discover Herr Reed has vanished and my bloodied body lying on the hearth, I give you full permission to tell me 'I told you so.'"

Cohen handed him the plate of biscuits. In English he said, "Your Excellency, please do not forget you have to attend your uncle's small gathering this evening."

"Yes, I know. I look forward to it." In a firm voice he repeated, "Thank you again for the tea, Herr Cohen. You are dismissed."

Jonathan drank his tea and looked at the fire. Karl liked the way he cupped the fine china in his hands as if it was a workman's mug. "A rotten bloody arsehole," Jonathan said at last. "Grilled in hell. That seems rather harsh."

Karl felt a thrill of triumph. Not because he'd caught Jonathan's deception, but because the other admitted it in such a casual, almost friendly way. They were making progress. Why that mattered to him, he wasn't certain, but then he often preferred not to delve into his own motivations too deeply. Much better to simply go with his intuition. Was it any wonder his father used to tell him he was as *"irrational as a woman"*?

"Perhaps," Karl replied finally and put down the plate of biscuits and the tea.

Jonathan looked at him, those eyes turning deep amber in the firelight. "You don't have to fear me," he said simply. "I no longer kill to earn my living."

Karl was going to say something about a man's actions in a time of war, but then he realized Jonathan might have acted as a killer even after the peace treaties had been signed. "You've been an assassin?"

Jonathan's gaze shifted back to the fire, and almost imperceptibly his body went rigid, as if preparing for a blow.

"You needn't answer," Karl said. No need—he'd already read the answer in Jonathan. In an elaborate show of ease, Karl stretched his stockinged feet toward the fire again. "Shall we talk of other matters, or shall I help distract you from the pain in your shoulder? That is what I'd enjoy most."

Chapter Five

Reese carefully set the teacup and saucer next to the brandy glass that was still half full. He wouldn't drink more alcohol because that might relax him too much—or stir the dangerous need until he stopped thinking with his brain again. The warmth in the room and in his host's face was weakening his resolution to be on his way. Bad enough that he'd looked into that pleasant face and found himself telling all like a schoolboy.

He must return to business or be gone. No more personal confessions to Binder, and no more allowing distracting waves of lust to wash over him. “Erbgraf—”

“For heaven's sake, Jonathan, if that's your real name. I'm Karl. And that *is* my name. You may use it whenever you wish.” The man reached over and touched his thigh.

Reese had already noticed that Binder was unusually outgoing. He seemed a product of a sunny climate like Greece or southern Italy, where people easily shared emotion and affectionate contact.

Reese willed himself to ignore the weight and the heat of the hand resting on his leg for a second. He began again. “Karl, then.” He cleared his throat. “I'm not at all certain that incident with the carriage was an accident.”

“Yes.” Binder shrugged and leaned back in his armchair. “I wondered that myself. But I have learned that suspicion is almost as dangerous as fear. One starts down that path, and soon one can barely set foot out of doors. I leave it to my staff to protect me.”

“Do you ever suspect any of them?”

"I have suspected nearly everyone all of my life," Binder said softly. "I think the only time I ever felt safe was here in England, when I was a student. No one bothered with me then."

He drank, then carefully returned the teacup and saucer to the tray. As he picked up another gingersnap, he paused and grinned at Reese. "I think I know why I trust you. You've never attempted to hide behind polite smiles or flattering speech. You simply stole my weapon, then grabbed me and pulled me into a room." His smile widened, finishing the rest of his unspoken thought: *where you had your way with me, and I had mine with you.*

Reese would not be distracted. "Do you mistrust any of your servants in particular?"

"Are you going to act as my investigator?"

"I want to know if someone would hurt you."

"Does your employer want to know? Or do you, personally?" He delivered the last word on a lazy drawl.

Would the man *never* stop? Reese reached for his tea to regain his calm. He wasn't sure he knew the answer to the question. After all, following standard procedure, he was to contact Toole if he detected danger to Binder. Throwing himself into the situation was more than "minimal protection." But he could no more have let that carriage mow down Karl than he would have stood in front of the vehicle himself and let it run him over. Except that's almost precisely what he *had* done—stepped into the path of danger for the sake of this near stranger.

He asked, "What difference does it make?"

"A great deal, but I shan't pester you about the matter."

"The incident with the carriage—" Reese began.

Binder held up a hand. "I think it was an accident caused by a careless driver. What does it matter to us? He is dead, poor fool. Even if he had set out to kill me—

and I'm not sure how he could have known where I would take my stroll—he succeeded only in killing himself. Accident or murder attempt, the matter is closed.”

Reese put down his empty cup with an audible *clink* and shifted in his chair, irritated. “There are ways to stage events like that one even if you're not certain of your victim's destination. Signals from accomplices, for instance. Or a way to—”

“The man is dead,” Binder said again. He pulled out his watch, an elaborate gold thing. “And we have one hour, forty minutes.” He tucked it back in his waistcoat pocket.

Reese folded his arms over his chest. “You have lost interest in the topic of your own safety?”

“I haven't lost interest. Later I'm sure I will ponder the matter. But now I prefer to live in the moment with you. I would rather not wallow in the worries of what might have been.” His half smile was hopeful, not a knowing smirk.

Reese understood then. After his brush with death, Karl didn't slink away as Reese might have. He wanted to move quickly in the opposite direction, toward life. Even his form of fear was joyful.

It had only been a matter of hours since their strange interlude, but Reese's body hungered for Binder's touch again. The thought of Binder's glowing face, twisted in ecstasy, made his stomach lurch with a sudden, surprising lust.

Reese picked up his brandy and swallowed it down. “Karl.” The name was coming more easily to his mouth, but the rest of what he wanted to say clogged in his throat, histrionic words he'd never in a thousand years speak aloud. *I want you, but it's too dangerous. You're too dangerous. I refuse to feel things that are more perilous than a runaway carriage bearing down on me. I want your warmth, but stop trying to get inside me.*

Inside him. He realized the meaning that could have with men like them. “I think I should go,” he said without conviction, looking toward the door. What if one of those servants should walk in?

Binder seemed to read his mind. "No one will even knock on the door. They are well trained from the moment they enter our service. My father would never tolerate disobedience to such a basic order as 'keep out for two hours.' Now one hour and thirty-nine minutes. Cohen is a very exact man."

A chunk of coal slipped on the fire, sending up a spray of sparks. Reese, once the steadiest of men, jerked slightly.

"You are nervous. I won't harm you," Karl said.

Reese laughed at the absurd notion that Binder could overpower him. "You could try. It would be good exercise for us both if you came at me with a knife."

"Sarcasm?"

Reese shrugged.

"It would actually be an enjoyable exercise. After all, we came together during a struggle last time."

Reese's already semierect cock went hard as iron when he recalled pushing Binder against the door, and then all they did...

"How long has it been since you've been with a man? Prior to this morning, I mean."

Three years. "Awhile," Reese replied. "I suppose it's only been a matter of days or weeks for you?"

"I am not promiscuous, but I enjoy sexual expression," Karl said. "You won't manage to offend me with the accusation that I am too loose with my affections. Haven't you figured out yet that I'm shockingly difficult to offend? But I suppose you think such things between men is a horrible sin. *Pfah*. That may be, but if you and I are going to hell, it won't be because we want each other. We've done worse than give other men pleasure, wouldn't you agree?"

There was no denying the truth of that statement, so Reese remained silent.

“When I said I wouldn’t harm you, I also meant here.” Karl tapped himself on the forehead. “I will abandon all weapons, Jonathan. I want nothing but pleasure for us both.”

He’d learned already that feeling nothing was good. Perhaps pleasure was better. Reese ignored the inner voice telling him no good could come of prolonging their association. The oh-so-wise inner voice went on to remind him what had happened last time he’d had an affair with a man. But damn it, he didn’t want to think about the captain right now. His body wanted what it wanted, and right now he would give in to it.

Karl rose from his seat and held out his hand, as if he’d seen Reese’s mental struggle and knew the very moment he’d reached a decision. “Come, *mein freund*.”

Reese took the strong, warm hand and rose to his feet. He looked into Karl’s cool blue eyes and knew he was in serious trouble. He would do anything for more of what they’d shared earlier, even if it put his life, his sanity—or his soul—in jeopardy. “Don’t...” he began, but left the sentence dangling.

“I won’t. I have already promised.” Karl smiled and led him from the sitting room into the bedchamber.

Reese noted the heavy cherrywood furnishings—a tall four-poster bed and an armoire. There were several large traveling trunks containing Binder’s clothing. The fact that they still occupied the bedroom indicated that perhaps Binder didn’t intend to stay in his hotel room long. Reese supposed Binder would move into his uncle’s home for the duration of his visit. Then Reese’s gaze lit on the counterpane and the five plump pillows piled invitingly against the headboard. He swallowed as he stared at the luxurious bed. He’d never lain with another man, decadent and leisurely as if they had every right to be together.

Karl guided him to the edge of the bed and bade him sit, and then the count’s son knelt at Reese’s feet like a servant. One of the servants had already confiscated his muddy boots, but Karl pulled off his stockings and cradled Reese’s cold feet in his hands. He sucked in a breath as he held them. “The fire hasn’t warmed you. You

could catch your death of cold with these feet like ice.” He glanced up with a grin. “I will personally make certain they are well heated.”

And then he did a most outrageous thing. Cupping an arch in each of his large hands, he drew one foot, then the other, to his mouth and kissed the tops. Reese caught his breath at the shocking intimacy.

Binder set his feet down and reached for his fly. “Take your shirt off, please.”

While the other man unfastened his trousers, Reese obeyed his command, unbuttoning his shirt and wincing as he pulled the sleeve off his hurt shoulder. He removed his undershirt as well, then lifted his hips from the bed so Karl could pull his clothing off his legs. Reese’s heart pounded like a big fist trying to punch its way out of his chest. Naked. He’d never been completely naked in front of anyone, even while in the cramped quarters of an army camp. Bits and pieces of him, yes, but not his entire body. And certainly not with another man studying every inch of him with a devouring gaze.

What made his body burn even hotter was the fact that Karl was still completely clothed. It made Reese feel exposed, vulnerable, and utterly aroused. His cock stood out from his body, reaching toward the other man.

Karl stood towering over him, adding to that subjugated feeling. “Look at you. So beautiful.”

Reese glanced down at himself, surprised. He’d never considered his body as more than a conveyance to move him from point A to point B. Beautiful? What an odd compliment for one man to give another. But he supposed he was fit, his muscles compact and hard edged, his body still young though a bit worse for wear with several ugly scars. If he were a stranger examining this body with the gaze of a man who was attracted to other men, he would find himself appealing. Reese smiled at the unexpected thought.

Karl caressed his cheek, letting his hand linger there. “And a smile at last. This tryst agrees with you, I think.”

“You talk too much,” Reese growled. “It’s your turn to take your clothes off and let me gawk.”

Karl bobbed his head, that curt, Germanic acknowledgment usually accompanied by a click of the heels. He stepped back from Reese and began to unbutton his shirt and waistcoat. He’d long since removed his necktie and jacket, and oh, how handsome he looked wearing only a white shirt with a dark waistcoat over it.

Watching each bit of flesh emerge, Reese longed to jump up and help strip his body. But he forced himself to sit and watch, letting the tension inside him build. With casual nonchalance, as though alone in his chamber, Karl stripped off his shirt, waistcoat, trousers, and underclothing, then stood straight and gazed at Reese, inviting him to look his fill.

Blood pounded in Reese’s temples, and he felt he might go blind from staring so hard. The count was a perfect specimen of manhood. With Karl’s mixed lineage, no doubt he had some Nordic forebears, and their blond beauty was evident. He was built big and blocky, with broad shoulders, a solid chest, and the arms of some Viking warrior carrying a battle-ax. His torso tapered to a narrower waist and hips and then a pair of legs as sturdy as tree trunks. Rather than European nobility, with that hard body Karl could be a laborer of the land. And his cock was a long, thick club jutting from a thatch of light brown hair. Reese’s entire body clenched just from looking at it.

Reese wasn’t short or slight by any means, but Karl’s body made him feel that way. Weak and tender and, Christ, was this a womanly feeling, this desire to submit to anything this man demanded of him?

Karl reached past him to pull down the covers. “Move up,” he ordered, and Reese scooted toward the pile of pillows as pure white as snow. His feet were no longer cold. Not one particle of his body was. He burned as he waited to see what His Excellency would command next.

Karl slipped into the bed beside him and drew the covers over both of them, up to their chests. He smiled at Reese again. "So...here we are, with plenty of time to do exactly as we wish. What do *you* wish, Mr. Reed?"

Reese couldn't speak. He believed he'd literally lost the ability to push words from his tight throat. He wanted. He needed. He desired.

The other man placed his palm flat against his chest, feeling for his heartbeat. "Go ahead. Say it. For once in your life, admit to what you want."

Reese took a deep breath and exhaled. "Everything."

Karl's smile grew wider. "That, I can do." He pulled Reese into his arms so they lay chest to chest, groin to groin, their legs entwined. He stroked his hand down Reese's spine and cupped his buttocks, cradling his body close. His cock pressed hard into Reese's stomach, and Reese's did the same, nestling into the other man's flesh. Fire crackled on the hearth, and heat built between them as, for long moments, they simply lay facing each other. Then Karl lowered his eyelids over those astonishing blue eyes and leaned in to kiss Reese.

His mouth plucked lightly at Reese's lips, playing before settling into a deeper kiss. Reese opened his mouth to meet Karl's tongue with his and moaned softly as he gave in to the pleasure of simply kissing. It was heavenly. He moved his hand up Karl's broad back, over his muscular neck, and into the soft strands of his straight, fine hair, relishing the contrast of hard, masculine muscles with that oh-so-silken hair.

They might have kissed for five minutes or fifty. Reese, who lived by appointments and deadlines met, completely lost track of time as he existed in a haze of pleasure and lust. He pushed his aching cock into Karl's groin, wanting release, but at the same time he was content simply to kiss and kiss. Exploring another's mouth with so much leisure and passion was far more delicious than he'd imagined. Everything about this encounter was far beyond any of his furtive fantasies.

It was Karl who finally pulled away and gave the next directive. "I want to be inside you now," he murmured breathlessly. "Turn over."

Apparently Reese had surrendered his will at the door. In these rooms, Karl was the ruler, and he had to obey. He rolled over. He suspected there would be pain, but he welcomed whatever the more experienced man would show him. Hell, Reese longed for any pleasure or touch even more than he craved release for the exquisite tightening in his balls.

Karl moved away from him for a moment, making noises as he got something from the night table. Reese's heart pounded, and his buttocks tensed in anticipation. Then Karl was back, crawling over Reese, his cock sliding between his cheeks.

Reese's anus clenched. His pulse fluttered erratically. He was both nervous and more excited than he'd ever been in his life.

"Am I correct in guessing you've never done this before?" Karl's low whisper floated through the stillness. He didn't wait for an answer before adding, "I will be careful. But for this to give you pleasure, you must relax and trust me."

"Trust is not my stock-in-trade," Reese reminded him drily.

The other man kissed his shoulder with those surprisingly soft lips. "Right now you are no longer a spy, a soldier, or even a merchant's son. When two people give pleasure, they must temporarily set aside the rest of their lives and focus only on being lovers. That is what you are at this time. A lover. *My* lover."

Karl's unselfconscious, totally sincere pronouncement made Reese cringe and glow in equal measures. The word *lover* sounded so romantically silly and wonderfully promising at the same time.

Karl chuckled. "I can feel you tensing. Surrender to it, my friend. Open yourself to joy and pleasure."

He moved his mouth over Reese's back from shoulder to shoulder, kissing, licking, tasting his skin. Strong hands rubbed Reese's injured shoulder, easing the strain with firm strokes, then roamed over his body, kneading his back all the way

to his waist. There, hands and mouth converged. Karl spread Reese's cheeks apart, and his tongue licked the crevice between.

Reese gasped, and his anus tensed even harder as the man's tongue touched him there, swirling around his entrance like a fish nibbling at bait. He'd thought he guessed the details of sodomy in his fantasies. A cock in his backside he'd expected, but not this teasing play, not the man's mouth exploring this most intimate place. It was depraved, shocking—wonderful.

When he tensed, Karl pressed his palm with splayed fingers across Reese's lower back. He pulled his mouth away to murmur, "Trust, remember?" And his breath tickled Reese's rear. With a conscious effort of will, Reese forced himself to relax into the boneless comfort the earlier kissing and touching had given him.

Karl delved farther between his legs, spreading them so he could lick the sensitive strip from Reese's rear entrance to his balls. The man lapped them, sending pleasure shimmering through Reese. How strange to feel Karl's hair brushing his inner thighs, his breath warming his balls, and the wetness of his mouth nuzzling all over. Karl gave a last playful lick before pulling away.

There was a moment's pause, and then his hand returned to Reese's rear to stroke some oily lubricant over and into the hole. The tip of his finger entered, pulling and stretching Reese's opening. His body contracted around that intrusion, and his heart rate increased. Excitement made every hair on his body rise and his skin tingle. This was it. In a moment, he would know how it felt to be entered, to give up all control and be possessed in that way. He wanted it and feared it in his very core. Not the physical aspect so much, but how the two of them joining might change him.

Karl murmured in German as he continued to work the muscle of Reese's sphincter, widening it with several fingers. Reese would have been embarrassed to hear Karl call him things like "sweetheart" or "darling" in English, but the guttural endearments in a foreign tongue only added to his excitement.

"Schatz, du machst mich so glücklich. Du gibst mir freude."

Reese relaxed into the stroking hands and thrust back onto the pushing fingers. He was ready for more, ready for the hard knob of Karl's cock now. And once more, it was as if the other man read his mind—or maybe the signals of his body—for he moved up behind Reese and guided the well-oiled head of his cock into him.

One slow, easy push, and Reese's body stretched around the thrusting member. He gasped at the burning sensation. It didn't hurt exactly, but he felt so full, so...invaded by the other man's body. His cock ached with desire, and as if sensing his need, Karl snaked a hand beneath his body to wrap a fist around Reese's erection.

Reese lifted up on his knees to allow him access, which pushed him back onto Karl's cock. Karl's body curved around his as he drove deeper, filling Reese to the limit. He groaned, his breath puffing warm and moist against Reese's shoulder. The friction of the other man's palm on Reese's cock built up heat that raged through him. In desperation, Reese pushed against Karl's solid body. He wanted more of that thick slab filling his arse. He wanted it buried to the hilt in him.

Karl grunted and swore in several languages. "Holy Mother, Christ!" He gripped Reese's cock hard, forgetting to pull as his own pleasure grew too strong. "*Mein Gott*, you cocksucking whoremaster."

Reese would've laughed at the random curses if he hadn't been so aroused by Karl's loss of control. It felt good to have the other man lose composure for a change, empowering even as he lay prone beneath Karl's bucking body. He may have surrendered the position of dominance by letting Karl ride on top, but he had his own kind of power here. A man didn't have to be in the saddle in order to have control. By giving up supremacy, he'd gained the ability to drive Karl to the pinnacle of ecstasy.

Reese's climax rose to a peak as Karl rubbed him briskly while striking a place deep inside that opened a door like a key to a lock. The tightly coiled knot of desire came undone in a rush, ecstasy blossoming through him and shooting out of him.

Reese clung to the arm around him as he released in warm spurts. Hot tears squeezed from the corners of his tightly closed eyes. He shuddered and gasped for breath.

Karl groaned and continued to pump his hips, driving his shaft in and out of Reese like a piston. The slap of skin against skin and Karl's grunts filled the silence. That thick cock drilling his rear was close to painful, but Reese craved more of that slow burn.

Karl thrust once more and froze, spending in pulses. Reese clenched his muscles around Karl's cock, milking him dry. Karl's breath tickled Reese's neck and blew across his sweaty shoulder. He remained buried inside Reese, and for several amazing moments the two of them melded together as one.

Then at last, Karl's arm loosened, and he let Reese's cock slip from his fingers. "Are you all right?"

More than all right. I'm the best I've been in years, maybe in all my life. "Fine, thank you," Reese answered casually, hoping his voice didn't tremble and give away the depth of his feeling.

Karl's chuckle vibrated against his back, and he kissed Reese between the shoulder blades. "Mm, I think that was beyond such meager politeness. I believe we both earned a bit more exuberance than that. Perhaps an 'amazing,' 'astonishing,' or 'stupendous' is in order."

"You're the best I've ever had. Is that what you want to hear?" Reese meant it as a tease, but the words came out a bit sharper and more caustic than he'd intended.

Karl ignored the sarcasm and smiled as if accepting a freely given compliment. He hugged Reese and murmured, "You're a mysterious man, Jonathan Reed. Perhaps a little magical, for I don't know why you affect me as you do. There's no logic in it, but there it is. This was very powerful for me too."

Reese blushed at Karl's words. The man had a tendency toward the dramatic and seemed to have no shame admitting his feelings despite the fact he'd spent a good portion of his life in England. Where was the British reticence and reserve?

As the delightful pleasures of orgasm began to fade, Reese's barriers came up of their own accord. He felt awkward and embarrassed and wanted to pull away from Karl's embrace.

"Ah, I feel you tensing again. Stop that." Karl didn't let him go, instead giving him a little squeeze and shake. "Sexual encounters aren't always about getting through the act, then moving on. The lounging and chatting afterward are part of it. We have plenty of time. Stay in my bed awhile and relax."

Just that easy? Relax and lounge. "I don't know if I can," Reese admitted.

"You'll learn. Come now. You've told me the bare bones of your background, but nothing of personal importance. We shall each share a story from our boyhood and thus begin to know more about each other."

"We will?" Reese glanced over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow at the *erbgraf's* autocratic insistence on having his way.

"I will begin." Karl paused. "Once when I was eight, my aunt caught me and my little cousin Berta comparing genitals. The woman took the innocent curiosity of children and turned it into a bomb to lob at my father's side of the family. Arguments, recrimination, past slights, present disagreements flew back and forth like mortar shells, all because she chose not to deal with the situation in a circumspect manner. That is the kind of family I come from—one in which any excuse will be used to bring up past transgressions or to lobby for a better position. My relatives are an insane lot.

"And did such an uproar scar two children for life, causing them to fear their own sexuality and the effect it had on others? I think not, for my cousin Berta appears to be happily married, while I am quite comfortable with my choices. Still, this gives you a picture of what life was like in the extended von und zu Neuschlosswold-Binder family."

Reese had moved over to lie on his back so he might see Karl's face as he related this story. The man's expression belied his assertion that the incident hadn't affected him or his relationship with others. When a man couldn't trust the shifting allegiances in his own family, how could he learn to trust the world at large? It seemed Karl had learned to take what pleasure he could from life, but his cavalier attitude hid a bruised heart.

"Now you," Karl prompted, nudging him in the arm. "Tell me a story about you. And don't stop to think of how much you dare say or what the story will reveal. I can hear your mind working already."

Of course, he was right. Any nugget of information shared might be used against Reese. What harmless story of his youth could he tell without offering too much of himself?

"I had a sister," he found himself blurting. His throat closed. He hadn't spoken of Susan for years and usually tried not to think about her. The pain of her loss was of no use to him; it created a bewilderingly strong sensation that left him weak.

"What happened to her?" Karl's hand stroked over his shoulder and down his chest, then rested over Reese's right nipple.

"She died. Childbirth fever while I was away at war." He shrugged, glad he could speak in a normal voice. "But that is not my story. I was going to tell of a time when we were children. Susan loved to make dares or accept them. She was scared of nothing, not even our father. One day she bet with me that I couldn't walk the ridgepole of the shed."

"And the stakes?"

"Slopping the pig and changing her water. I would've agreed to anything for the chance of not having to do that chore. Susan didn't mind the job, so it wasn't much of a bet on her part, but she did love to throw out a challenge."

"Let me guess. You fell off the roof."

"Nearly broke my neck." Reese showed the small scar where the edge of the roof had caught him as he'd fallen and marked his shoulder forever.

“Which may be partly why you are such a cautious man now.” Karl tweaked his nipple, sending a sharp twinge through Reese’s body. “Perhaps you took too many of your reckless sister’s dares and didn’t like the results. But I think that is not the main reason you hesitate to trust.” He slid his hand down Reese’s stomach and brought it to rest right beside his twitching cock. “I will find out the rest of your story eventually. You can be sure of that.”

Reese wondered why the man would make such a promise. They had no future. And before, as they’d touched each other, why had Karl offered all that sweet affection when there was no need to seduce Reese with honeyed words? Karl could simply order him to drop to his knees. What did Karl gain from coaxing him to give more of himself?

Reese turned his face to look at the firelight flickering on the wall. For a moment, he felt like a fly that had accidentally flown into a spider’s web from which there was no hope of escape.

But then Reese realized as he turned to look at Karl’s handsome face once more that perhaps he didn’t mind. This soft, sticky web was quite a delightful place to land.

Chapter Six

Cohen's knock came soon after they'd donned their clothes again. Karl's cheeks were rosier, but other than that and the faint, musky scent of their sexual intimacy in the air, there was nothing to signal what had taken place in the room. Reese knew better. His life had been transformed.

Karl.

Good God. Reese now thought of him by his Christian name and had for some time, another sign that he'd been turned upside down in one day. He wasn't sure he trusted this man—hell, he barely trusted himself—but unless Karl came at him with a pistol, Reese wouldn't act against him.

He wished he knew why Toole and the others wanted him to follow the *erbgraf*. Were they trying to catch him in an illegal act? Reese winced as he realized he'd participated in at least some of Karl's illicit acts.

There was the hint that danger lurked. *Provide minimal protection*. They wouldn't tell him what to look for, perhaps because they didn't know themselves. More likely they still didn't trust him. Unwilling to kill for his country, part of the team led by the disgraced captain—Reese knew it would be a long time before his employers would entrust him with important secrets again.

He said farewell to Karl and strolled out of the suite, aware of the *erbgraf*'s company watching him cross the room and step out the door, which he closed very softly behind him.

He went down the stairs to his much smaller room, where he would wash, shave, and change, and then trail the party to Lord Merridew's house.

As he stared into the mirror, he thought of everything he'd done with Karl—the erbgraf. Reese had been insane. Remembering that heavy body on top of his and the hot, deep kisses made his cock twitch. Insanity still ruled him. The fever hadn't abated. Very well, it was like an injury. One simply functioned the best one could and did one's best to ignore the symptoms. He would focus his mind on other matters. Except the only matters that he faced pertained to Karl. And he couldn't help grinning at himself at that thought. He was a bloody fool.

Perhaps his time would be better spent researching the men accompanying Karl: Cohen, Smelter, Greber, Villiards, and Sechsman. But then he recalled the other shadow. He decided to arrive early to keep watch over Lord Arthur Merridew's residence.

When he left the hotel, the evening was drizzly with fog rolling in. He'd have a harder time spotting the other spy, but he'd be better hidden himself. Reese dressed in shabby, worn clothes and a cloth cap. After slipping out the back of the hotel, he walked to Karl's uncle's house rather than hunt down a hack for hire.

He waited for some time, his feet slowly turning to ice, before Karl's carriage arrived. Four men got out. Reese watched the indistinct figures from the doorway he'd settled into opposite the Merridew residence.

The rain let up, but still he heard no foot traffic, and only the occasional carriage or dray rattled slowly down the street in front of him.

At last he decided to give up and grope his way back through the soupy night to Claridge's. But just as he pushed his cap down over his eyes to start his long walk, a small orange light sparked. Someone lighting a pipe or cigar, Reese judged from the way the flame rhythmically brightened before the lucifer was dropped to the ground. The other watcher stood less than fifty feet away, also facing the Merridew house.

Reese slipped closer to the man, so close he could smell the smoke—from a pipe, it seemed. Was he a member of the erbgraf's staff that Karl hadn't bothered to mention?

Reese drew nearer but stopped when he heard the sound of footsteps echoing oddly in the fog. Reese pushed himself tight into a recess between two town houses. The footsteps stopped close by, and a man's soft voice called out a word Reese didn't quite hear.

The watcher with the pipe answered, but he faced away from Reese, and the thick fog muffled their voices. At last Reese caught a few phrases. "Not tonight. Three days hence, during the party." The man spoke German.

"And the money?"

"You'll get it afterward." The other voice dropped, and he only heard bits of the conversation. "Do not forget you... And then... Volkovsky."

Volkovsky. Sounded like a name, not a verb. Reese waited. One of the dim shapes moved away, the footsteps retreating quickly, returning in the direction of the Merridew town house.

Reese leaned against the wall, deeper into the shadows. A few minutes later, the dark shape of the other man appeared in the murk, and almost silently, the other watcher slipped away from his post. He was apparently done shadowing Karl for the night.

Who'd come from the house to speak to the spy? Not Karl. Reese would have known if it had been him. The energy of the man's walk would have given him away. Someone from his entourage seemed quite likely. Or perhaps it had been a member of Merridew's staff, an Englishman with a grudge against the German nobleman.

Reese walked back to the hotel slowly, thinking of all the reasons he had to contact Karl again the next day. The mysterious conversation, the intuition of dread that he'd learned not to ignore over the years.

But he knew there was no real reason to speak to Karl. He could take care of the matter on his own. He simply wanted to approach Karl again, talk to him and...more. So much more. Oh God, that couldn't be right. He quickened his pace, trying to run away from the need that had flared and wouldn't die away.

“Keep your distance, or you’ll be guilty of unprofessional, sloppy work.” He could hear the captain’s harsh reprimand. *“More than a threat to your career, my lad, any sort of familiarity could threaten your country.”*

And the captain had been right. Once upon a time, Reese hadn’t kept his distance. Worse, he’d become gullible and hadn’t questioned the source of the captain’s sudden wealth. By the time the whole of the wretched affair was over, at least two coastguard sailors and an exciseman had died at the hands of the North Kent smugglers. And the captain lay dead too, killed by Reese’s own hand after he’d tried so hard to stay out of the matter.

It hadn’t been his duty to watch his superior, but even after he’d grown suspicious, he hadn’t said a thing. Odd that those foreign agents and assassins he and the captain had tracked after the war hadn’t created a threat nearly as dire as some grubby smugglers.

He removed his shabby coat and cap and strolled through the doors of Claridge’s, determined not to allow himself to think about that night again. He’d concentrate on the present and went to the hotel clerk, hoping he’d find some annoying note from Toole or Gilley, but alas, no messages waited for Mr. Baker. He walked up to his room, wondering if he should go to the office and demand to speak to Toole. If he walked away from Binder, he’d be safe.

Reese had lost his ambition years ago, but he wasn’t about to toss away his life or risk his soul with an enemy again.

He pulled off his shirt and winced at the pain in his shoulder, an injury he’d barely noticed during the sexual activity with Binder. Reese studied himself in the mirror and saw the scar he’d got that windswept night on the coast. The last death.

The others no longer haunted him. For a time, in his dreams he saw the forms of the men he’d killed in battle, and then—so much more vividly—the faces of the three men he’d hunted down in peacetime.

The killing ended during an assignment they’d conducted in Spain. Reese had been up all night keeping watch on the men they’d followed from England. During

the afternoon, Reese had dozed off while lying under a tree. The captain had nudged him awake with the toe of his boot. “*You were sobbing like a baby in your sleep.*” The captain had dropped down to a squat and put a hand on Reese. He’d given Reese a rough shake and declared, “*No more killing assignments for you, lad. You’ve earned a rest. Others must take those duties.*”

Reese hadn’t truly believed he’d cried in his sleep, but he didn’t protest. As the days and weeks passed, he’d learned that the promise the captain made had lightened his heart to an astonishing degree.

The dreams had ended—until that night the captain had joined the fight, but on the wrong side, and Reese had been there to defend the excisemen. The weight of the pistol in his hand. The scuffle in the raging storm. He hadn’t known who attacked. If he had seen one of the men was the captain, would he have turned and run rather than fire a bullet into him?

No, not this again. He pulled on a nightshirt, dismissing the memories and the old questions with an impatient growl.

He readied himself for bed, determined once more to do his job from a greater distance. It might be difficult now that Karl knew his face, but he wouldn’t succumb to the man’s allure.

Reese lay between the hotel’s unaired sheets. Determined to vanquish the images of the captain’s death, he tried to summon something more pleasant and immediately recollected the physical pleasure he’d felt with Karl. That was hardly better for bringing on sleep.

Karl... The fucking was glorious. Reese imagined he could slake his hunger, then walk off without a backward glance, but the rest of it unnerved him. The way the man had called him Jonathan, the name he hadn’t heard since Susan’s death. His own fault for not giving one of his usual false identities. He’d signed the hotel register with one of his standard pseudonyms, Mr. Baker. What was he doing giving a name so close to the truth? Reese punched the pillow savagely, but it would not

yield to a better shape for sleep. He'd slept soundly on the dirt and in squalid hovels, so it wasn't the bedding making him restless now.

If only he could have enjoyed that body in peace, he thought as he pictured Karl's magnificent muscular form. But the dratted nobleman was too curious about the drab, ordinary Mr. Reed and seemed determined to peel back and inspect the layers he found. Dangerous, even if Karl meant no harm, and there was no way Reese could know that.

One day with Karl, and he knew he'd played long enough. Time to back away and become a professional again.

* * *

The following morning, he met Cohen in the hotel foyer. Reese recalled he still carried Karl's pistol, wrapped in a linen handkerchief, so he handed it over to him. "This belongs to the erbgraf," he explained.

"Indeed. I know. And it came into your possession how?"

"He should always carry it," Reese said.

The manservant gave him a long unpleasant stare, but Reese merely ducked his head and walked away without another word.

He decided to spend the morning tracking down the history of Karl's family. Reese called in a favor from Gilley, an acquaintance now at the Home Office. He was particularly interested in the notes about the ambitious activities of Karl's father, the reigning count.

"This doesn't seem up your street at all, Reese," said Gilley, who'd also served in the Crimea and with the captain. Now he had an office with a good view of the Thames. "You hate political intrigue." He put the file in the thin leather binder on the edge of the desk. Apparently his conscience didn't bother him as much if he didn't hand the file directly to Reese. "I know the count's brother-in-law well. A fine man, Lord Merridew. First-rate gentleman. And now I remember hearing the son is in town. Did you know that?"

“Yes.” Reese touched the file, then hesitated. Gilley was an excellent source of information. Reese wasn’t usually interested in gossip. He had to know the habits of the people he followed, but the feelings and tangled lives? That was dangerous. But he found himself asking, “Do father and son get along?”

“Like cat and dog. Water and oil. From what I understand, young von und zu Neuschlosswold-Binder was an idealist and his father took advantage of family friends, using his son as a weapon of sorts. Not sure what he did, but it seems Karl the *erbgraf* has developed a reputation for being a man without a heart.”

“What does that mean?”

Gilley shrugged. “I expect he is never interested in a woman for long. No real depth to the man, I hear. There’s also the fact that he had a difficult time in the war, as we all did.”

Gilley fiddled with his impressive desk display, rearranging the blotter, gold pens, and gold-and-ivory ink-holder to line up at the edge of the well-polished mahogany surface. Reese supposed the thought of battles he’d witnessed in the Crimea still affected the man. “Will you tell me why you want the Neuschlosswold-Binder file?” Gilley peered at him through his monocle.

“No.”

“Well. At least you’re still honest.” Gilley grinned for a moment. “You’re working for the, ah, special section, I take it?”

Reese didn’t bother to answer. He wasn’t allowed to speak of his employment, not even with Gilley, who knew the group existed within the War Office, ostensibly to gather intelligence about foreign nations.

Men like Gilley knew about men like Reese, but the gentlemen who worked as attachés for government would never take part in the grubby Special Services unit. They were gentlemen who wouldn’t lie and who would certainly never kill during peacetime.

“You could have requested the material through that office, your contact, you know. I imagine you’re allowed all sorts of access to sensitive material.” Gilley was turning into a regular bureaucrat.

“Dealing with you is less of a headache.” Reese stood. He held out a hand to the other man. “Thank you.”

Gilley hesitated before shaking Reese’s hand. Neither of them was wearing gloves, and Reese noticed Gilley’s hand was clammy. Did he regret allowing Reese entrance into his office?

Reese picked up the leather file from the edge of the desk. He held it up for a moment. “I’ll bring this back soon.”

Gilley pulled out a fine handkerchief and began to polish his monocle. He gave Reese a gracious nod, as he did when he occasionally attempted to push Reese back into his proper place on the social ladder. As the grandnephew of an earl, Gilley was superior to Reese, though now, in their work, they were more equal despite Gilley’s fastidiousness.

Gilley casually examined his monocle and said, “I trust you.”

No, you don’t. But Reese wouldn’t argue the point. It suddenly occurred to him that Gilley was frightened of him. The man knew his reputation, after all. Reese considered telling him he no longer took any job that required excessive violence. Except that he supposed fear made Gilley promptly give in to his requests for information, so he didn’t say anything.

He remembered the name from the night before. “Tell me. What do you know of Volkovsky?”

Gilley fitted his monocle back in place, frowning. “Vladimir Mikailovich Volkovsky. A dangerous pest who’s shown up here in London, so yes, I’ve heard of him. A wild-eyed young fool who’s devoted to the cause of revolution in Russia. Used to work with the *Kolokol* gang and Bakunin, but perhaps he was too fiery a fellow even for them.”

Reese waited, but Gilley didn't explain, so he was forced to ask, "And they are?"

"I'm surprised you don't know them." Gilley smirked. He obviously enjoyed Reese's ignorance. Reese shifted from foot to foot, and Gilley hurried on. "*Kolokol* is a newspaper printed here in London, or it was, at any rate. Means 'the bell,' I think. Bakunin's the lad in charge of it. All about overthrowing the evil tyrants, etcetera, etcetera. Using any means possible."

"In Russia?"

"Where else? But Volkovsky is in London, so he's considered a local nuisance. He's one of *my* nuisances, in fact. I keep an eye on him and his friends these days."

Reese thanked him again and spared him another shake of the hand. They nodded farewells, and Reese took a hack back to the hotel, hoping Karl and his crew hadn't gone out. He was in luck. One of the desk clerks he'd paid to spy for him told him the gentlemen of the foreign party were all ensconced in the suite.

Reese returned to his duties as an observer, lounging far down the hall from Karl's suite of rooms. He managed to avoid the *erbgraf* and still watch the group's activities. When they emerged from the suite, he waited for the other shadow to follow, but he did not appear. He seemed to have vanished again.

Reese followed them down the stairs a minute later, and from a distance, he could see how Karl scanned the hotel lobby—looking for him, he was sure, because he swore he could feel the magnetic pull.

Karl and two of the others went to the hotel's foyer. From his seat behind a potted palm, Reese watched as Karl sat and ordered from the waiter. As he and his three companions waited, Karl threw back his head and laughed at something one of his underlings said. White teeth, golden skin gleamed against the well-tailored black suit. Even with his rough-hewn peasant build, he was the epitome of wealth. More than money—he embodied life.

That thought made Reese wince. Christ, he was lost. A sentimental idiot who was allowing a satisfying, lusty interlude to evolve into something more in his mind.

Feelings he'd buried after his last affair were starting to come to the surface again, and Reese was a man who detested strong passions. He'd been raised to use caution and good judgment and to always keep his emotions firmly corralled. Well, at least he'd lasted most of a day and had even managed to think of other matters in the last twelve hours. Granted, most of them were related to Karl.

"Damn," he muttered to himself and rose to his feet. If he could just talk to him, perhaps the strange itch to be near him would be satisfied and he could think more clearly. They'd stay in public. That would prevent him from lunging at Karl and dragging him to the floor and tasting that soft, full mouth.

He moved past the plant, the column, the fountain, and walked toward Karl.

Karl looked up as he approached. He rested his hands on the table, leaned back in the chair, and smiled. His focus was so clearly on Reese that the others sitting with him twisted around to see what had captured his attention.

Moth, meet the flame.

What did it mean that all the stereotypes floating through his mind when it came to Karl ended with Reese's destruction?

He looked into the handsome face that was lit with pleasure. Some compensation to know the flame welcomed him, Reese the Moth thought.

"Please, take a seat, Mr. Reed," Karl said. "Join us. Your arm is better today, I hope?"

Reese nodded. "It's fine."

He took the chair next to Cohen, the only one who put his back to the wall.

Herr Smelter spoke in German. "We are not done with our business, Hochgeboren." The doctor with the pudgy, strong hands smiled at Karl as he added, "We are not certain about that guest list Lord Merridew presented. I have my suspicions about some of the party."

Cohen looked at Reese and started to say something, but Karl gave a tiny headshake. Interesting that he didn't want anyone else at the table to know Reese

understood them. Was he playing a game with his followers, or trying to win Reese's trust?

Karl turned his attention back to the doctor. He raised his eyebrows and looked entirely like the haughty aristocrat. "It is not up to me to tell my uncle who he may or may not invite to his own house," he answered, also in German.

The doctor's smiling expression didn't change, though Reese thought perhaps he flinched ever so slightly. He cleared his throat. "Your father has given us very specific instructions about which people you should be seen with and which you must avoid in your capacity as representative of the count's interests. Your Excellency must be guided in his wisdom. He does understand these matters."

"Yes," Cohen muttered. "The count knows his English politics."

Karl raised a cup of tea and drank. Reese could tell he held back a strong response. With his boundless enthusiasm and open nature, Karl didn't seem the type able to restrain himself, but apparently he could.

At last he spoke. "If there is a name on the guest list you believe I must avoid, then I will beg off with a sore throat. That must satisfy you."

A party hosted by Karl's uncle, Lord Arthur Merridew. Reese's instincts prickled. The man who'd approached the watcher in the fog had mentioned just such a thing.

The doctor heaved a sigh that shook his plump frame. Obviously he wasn't satisfied. "No, you cannot abstain from the event. That will not do."

"Yes," Cohen said in English. "That *will* do, Your Excellency."

A silence fell over the table, and Cohen watched Reese with those deep-set, knowing eyes. Reese wondered what the count's man had been able to discover about him since they'd last met.

It might be harder for Cohen to dig up any information about Mr. Reed because Reese had impulsively used a new name close to his own. Usually he went by Peter Banks or Godfrey Baker, two identities the captain had forged for him.

He had the papers for those names, but not for Jonathan Reed. As for Jonathan Reese, the greengrocer's son and ex-soldier, brother of the late Susan Michaels, that man barely existed anymore. Perhaps Gilley would miss him if Mr. Reese vanished entirely, but more likely the bureaucrat would breathe a sigh of relief.

Reese boldly stared back at Cohen but wasn't concentrating on the man. He was thinking about the end of Jonathan Reese with detached interest. Even *he* wouldn't miss that man much.

"I'm glad to see you again, Mr. Reed. I wasn't sure if we would. I had thought you were registered at this hotel," Cohen said in heavily accented English. "But they have no record of a Mr. Reed." He glanced at Karl. "There is a man named Baker who might fit such a man as this Mr. Reed."

That was fairly good work, Reese thought. Cohen had discovered where he was staying and his fake identity.

"No, they wouldn't know me," Reese agreed. "Did you hear about Baker from the thin red-haired clerk at the front desk? He seems a greedy type, willing to take bribes for information."

Reese wanted to laugh at Cohen's scowl of surprise. Why not as much as admit he'd registered under a false name? He hadn't known how much he appreciated the direct approach and was relieved Cohen wasn't hiding his distrust. Reese had no intention of giving in to Cohen's prying, but he liked this better than less direct methods of interrogation. "Have you had the hotel's scones? They are some of the best London has to offer, Mr. Cohen."

"You are truly English?"

Reese nodded and signaled a waiter. "A plate of scones, please."

After the waiter left, Cohen continued firing questions at him.

"How long have you been staying at Claridge's?"

"A few days."

“What were you doing yesterday afternoon when you managed to save the erbgraf?”

“Crossing the street.”

“Heading where?”

“I was simply walking. Like the erbgraf, I enjoy an afternoon walk, rain or shine.” Reese settled back in the chair and crossed his arms, comfortable. He didn’t mind bluntly deflecting Cohen’s questions or even answering some. It was a refreshing change to sit out in the open...well, as open as he could get.

At last Karl laughed and interrupted. “Cohen, enough. Mr. Reed obviously doesn’t wish us to know his business.” He smiled at Reese. “Though really, you should realize we know how to keep secrets, Mr. Reed.” God, he gave such a knowing smile as he said those words. Karl’s lascivious leer made Reed’s heart beat faster and his cock stir. Did anyone else at the table notice the heat in Karl’s eyes? They didn’t seem to.

“Your Excellency, once again, I am afraid you are too quick to trust,” Herr Doktor Smelter said in German. “We know nothing about this stranger. And you spent too much time alone with him yesterday. I beg you not to allow yourself to be too softhearted with any Englishman.”

Cohen snorted and picked up his cup.

“We are having a cup of tea, Herr Smelter.” Karl spoke in English and was once again the haughty aristocrat. “I am not selling family secrets. Furthermore, even if Mr. Reed knew where the skeletons were buried, there’s precious little he could do with them.”

Smelter recoiled, and another man, Villiars, protested that surely none of them had such worries. Interesting. It was one thing for Cohen to be blunt, but they didn’t like it when Karl took the same route.

“I’m glad you’re not worried about me,” Reese said. “I assure you, I have no interest in politics or intrigue.” He smiled at Cohen and realized that even though he was not used to speaking so much or interacting openly with his fellow humans,

he felt surprisingly fluent, almost giddy or drunk, on all the words. "I would like to visit your charming Neuschlosswold some day, but only as a tourist."

"In which other capacity could you possibly visit?" asked Cohen, who seemed incapable of giving up his useless questioning.

"As a rowdy? Lunatic? Pilgrim?" Reese suggested. Really, he was enjoying himself too much.

Karl watched him with approving laughter in his eyes. They were sharing this strange joke. The looks they exchanged felt almost as intimate as lying side by side had been the day before.

"My friend," Karl said, "after breakfast I planned to take a trip to my alma mater, Oxford, for a nostalgic tour. Would you care to accompany me?"

He absolutely would. Touring the grounds with Karl, listening to him tell tales of his university years, and learning more about him as a youth sounded exactly like what Reese would like to do with his afternoon. Certainly better than trailing after him like a shadow. Except he'd vowed to keep his distance from the man, and really, it was easier to look for Karl's other spies from a distance.

"Alas, I'm afraid I have other plans today, but I appreciate the offer."

Karl inclined his head. "Pity. But I will find another way we might meet again."

Cohen cleared his throat. "I know you objected to our communication with Lord Merridew, Your Excellency, but perhaps..." He allowed his voice to trail off, and the corner of his mouth twitched into a smile.

Karl threw back his head and laughed. "Good God, Cohen, you are bribing me to stop my kicking up a fuss about poor Uncle Arthur. Yes, yes, I accept your peace offering. Good idea."

Cohen nodded solemnly. He pulled out a small notebook and made a notation in pencil.

Karl swallowed the last of his tea and grinned at Reese. He'd never grow used to that smile that seemed to stab into him with its beauty. "I hope you will allow me, or rather Cohen, to request my uncle send you an invitation to attend his gala. It should make the evening much less tedious for me if you were there."

There was an offer Reese couldn't refuse, an invitation to be present at the suspicious event given directly to him. It was his turn to nod. "That would be lovely, Your Excellency, and thank you. I should very much enjoy attending the event."

"Very well, then." Karl's smile was so brilliant, it nearly hurt Reese's eyes as if he were staring into the sun. "I will look forward to seeing you then, if not sooner."

Chapter Seven

"I am grateful for your patience, Uncle Arthur. I had strictly forbidden our servants from interfering with your guest lists." Karl certainly had, and more than once, even if his disapproval hadn't stopped him from adding one more name to his uncle's list.

"*Pfah*. I'm well used to the von und zu Neuschlosswold-Binder habits by now. The count isn't going to allow anyone—not even you—to change long-standing protocol."

"That's quite true," Karl said, and as usual, he managed to hide the surge of irritation he felt whenever he thought of his father's high-handedness.

Or maybe he didn't hide it so well from Uncle Arthur. His uncle patted his shoulder. "Got to expect it with any sort of visit from your lot. At least your father hasn't sent along a small company of armed soldiers this time."

Karl grinned and scanned the room once more.

"Nephew, you appear to be expecting someone. Was there perhaps a particular young lady you'd hoped to see tonight?" Karl's uncle smiled and winked. Lord Arthur Merridew was Karl's favorite relative. The man's face and manner reminded him of the mother he barely remembered, Honoria Merridew. His mother had left his father to return to her relatives in England when Karl was still a child. He'd bounced between the two households like an india-rubber ball. But times spent at his uncle's country estate in Buckinghamshire were among his fondest boyhood recollections.

"No one in particular," Karl responded lightly. "There are so many lovely ladies here, I should be hard pressed to say which is the most beautiful or well bred."

No. It is the man I told you who saved my life that I am expecting. He will be a stranger here, so I want to be ready to greet him when he arrives to save him any social discomfort.”

There, that sounded plausible and not like he wanted to see his new acquaintance for any other, more personal reason. The truth was that he was as excited about seeing Jonathan again as a debutante about to attend her first ball. He hadn’t encountered the man since the other morning at breakfast. Jonathan had made no attempt to contact him again and had rebuffed Karl’s invitations to dine, drink, or take an excursion boat on the Thames. He’d even delivered Karl’s pistol indirectly. Karl had wondered over the past few days if Jonathan still watched him from a distance. The thought of the other man’s gaze on him made him hot. So yes, he was intrigued at the prospect of seeing Jonathan again tonight and a bit nervous the spy wouldn’t show.

Karl adjusted the cuffs of his shirt so they extended the proper length below the elaborately embroidered sleeves of his coat. God, he hated putting on full regalia, but it was expected of nobility to look impressive at events like this. He wore a navy blue dress uniform with epaulets and enough gold cord, tassels, brass buttons, and beribboned medals to choke a horse. The thing was patently ridiculous, horribly hot, and uncomfortable.

His uncle introduced him to a succession of names and titles with faces that left little impression on Karl, although he was trained well enough to memorize both names and faces even as his thoughts drifted elsewhere. He was too busy cutting glances toward the door to see if Jonathan had arrived yet. He hoped he hid his distraction from his uncle’s guests. It wouldn’t do to offend anyone by giving the appearance of snobbishness. And so he smiled wider and clasped hands even more warmly and forced himself to keep his gaze on the blur of faces.

“Pleased to meet you, madam” with a bow and a kiss to the back of a gloved hand. “I’ve heard much about you from my uncle, sir. It’s an honor to meet you” with a click of the heels and a smaller bow. Another man earned a mere nod of his

head. Karl had been raised to know the proper depth of a bow in relation to a person's importance and the appropriate tone to adopt in any given situation. Sometimes he enjoyed following the rules, as if they all played some sort of elaborate game. On other days, the falseness of the entire show made him ill. For his uncle, he'd put out his best effort.

Yet he couldn't contain his restlessness and found himself looking at the line of people he must still receive and calculating the time before he could make excuses and take a break for a breath of fresh air in the garden.

And then he saw Jonathan standing in the crowd, and Karl forgot to let go of the hand he was shaking as he stared at the man who had got under his skin, though God alone knew why.

Jonathan Reed was of average height, average build, and average looks, and tonight he wore a very average suit that did not stand up well in a room full of ladies in lovely ball gowns and men in gleaming black eveningwear or overdecorated dress uniforms. But to Karl, he shone like a beacon in the crowd and stood head and shoulders above the other men. He wore a sober, reserved air along with his shabby suit, which made him appear more substantial and deeper than his preening counterparts with their waxed moustaches and pomaded hair. Jonathan was as simple as a country parson, but Karl was drawn to him like a bee to the most colorful flower in the garden.

Maybe it was this somber aspect that drew Karl, since his own nature was more flamboyant. Jonathan seemed to have a stillness about him, an ability to sit quietly and take things in. He reminded Karl of a pool with a smooth surface and all sorts of dark, hidden depths. And every time Karl saw the pool, he was compelled to drag his hand through it and ruffle the waters. He just had to splash around, and he wanted to dive deep and see what secrets lay at the bottom.

"Pardon me," Karl murmured to Mr. Robert Something-or-other. "I see an old friend I must greet." Karl passed through the queue of people still waiting to meet him, bestowing smiles and nods, and headed toward Jonathan.

“Mr. Reed, we meet again. I’d begun to think you were going to cut me and not come tonight.” Karl felt himself smiling more broadly than was fitting, but he couldn’t seem to wipe the grin of pleasure off his face.

Jonathan gave a stiff little bow. “Thank you for inviting me.”

That’s it? That’s all you have to say? Couldn’t the man behave a little warmer, perhaps offer a smile at least? Although he understood the necessity for circumspection, Karl was tired of pretending Jonathan was a stranger to him.

“You still haven’t allowed me to truly thank you for saving my life. I thought the least I could do was invite you to my uncle’s little gathering.” He bent closer and murmured, “Although I honestly couldn’t say whether this is a reward or a torture. I shall introduce you to some of these people, and you decide.”

A hand dropped on Karl’s arm as Uncle Arthur came up beside him. “Is this the man I have to thank for saving my nephew’s life?”

“Lord Arthur Merridew, may I introduce Mr. Jonathan Reed,” Karl politely supplied.

“Honored to make your acquaintance, Lord Merridew.” Jonathan gave a polite bow.

“Your family’s from Devonshire, Mr. Reed? I believe I recognize a trace of an accent. My family has a small estate there, and I must admit I much prefer the countryside to my London home.” Uncle Arthur was a glib speaker who could make anyone comfortable while drawing out all the details of their lives.

Karl stood back and let him do what he was good at. Already his uncle had added to what little he knew about Jonathan, a simple grocer’s son from Devonshire. Karl watched his uncle gently thrust with pointed questions and Jonathan delicately parry with vague answers. It was highly entertaining, although not as entertaining as taking Jonathan to a secluded room for a breathless, highly dangerous encounter would have been. Karl imagined flipping up the tails of Jonathan’s frock coat, pulling down his trousers to expose his taut bottom, and rogering him hard. Both of them would pant and grunt while the noise of the party

floated through the cloakroom wall, a reminder of how close they were to discovery. Exhilarating! It made him hard just thinking of it. Thank heavens for the long jacket that hid his growing erection.

Karl plucked a pair of drinks off a tray as one of the servers passed. He intercepted Uncle Arthur's questioning by handing Jonathan a glass of champagne. "All right, Uncle, I think you've interrogated Mr. Reed sufficiently. He's a very private individual who doesn't like to share the details of his life."

Jonathan accepted the long-stemmed glass and sipped from it. His eyes met Karl's over the rim, only for a moment, but the heat exchanged made Karl's heavy uniform even more unbearable.

"I should love to breathe some fresh air. Care to take a quick turn around the garden with me, Reed?"

Suddenly Cohen was at his elbow, ready to accompany them.

"I don't need a guard, Cohen," Karl muttered in German. "Leave off, would you?"

"Do not be traduced by ignorant tongues, sir," Cohen whispered back.

Cohen had been reading Shakespeare again. He tended to pick out odd bits and pieces, but Karl knew what he was trying to say. Avoid creating gossip. People would wonder what business the erbgraf had with this stranger and why he stepped out of the party almost immediately after the man arrived. This was not the time or place to play games in the garden. He knew that. He simply wanted to be free of the stuffy rooms for a few minutes.

"Fine," he muttered. "Attend us. But stay at a distance, please." He turned to Jonathan. "Shall we, Mr. Reed?" he asked aloud in English.

"As you wish." Jonathan's face was neutral, and he fell into step beside Karl.

The crowd parted before them as they made their way to the door, but Dr. Smelter intercepted before they could reach it. "Your Excellency, you are going

outside?" he asked in German. He scanned Jonathan with a barely concealed grimace. "Do you think that is wise?"

"Yes, I do." Karl swept past him. There were some benefits to being a noble. He didn't have to explain himself to his underlings—except Cohen, whom he respected too much to ignore. The man had been too right too often since he'd joined Karl's retinue. He'd saved Karl from any number of small embarrassing episodes, such as the time Karl had accidentally given the cut direct to the wife of a Russian diplomat. And he never mentioned Karl's personal affairs to the *graf*, though Karl knew that was one of his main duties.

The brick-walled garden was a little bit of heaven after the overheated, noisy rooms where too many bodies were packed into too small a space. Their polished shoes crunched over gravel pathways that meandered pleasingly between beds of flowers and ghostly white marble statues.

The musical splashing of water came from a fountain in the center of the garden, but Karl headed away from it, into the darker reaches of the garden, farther from the house. He cast a sharp glance at Cohen over his shoulder, and his servant dropped back, leaving them to walk alone.

"You've been avoiding me." Karl stopped and turned to face Jonathan. He'd meant to say it offhandedly, with amusement in his voice, but the words came out a bit sullen and accusatory. He was surprised to realize he'd been hurt by Jonathan's rebuffs to his invitations that week. When had something like that ever bothered him before? Men, lovers, came and went from his life. If one dropped away, there was always another to replace him. This was the first time Karl had ever felt quite so annoyed when a man chose not to fall in line with his plans.

"I was occupied," Jonathan said briefly.

"Really? I thought your occupation was spying on me."

"Which is better done from a distance." That cool, collected voice was infuriating.

“And what did you find out? Are there lurking dangers, other spies, plots against me?”

“Yes, I believe there are,” Jonathan stated flatly. “Which is why I came tonight. I believe there may be a plan afoot for this very evening.”

Despite his attempt to act blasé, Karl felt a jolt of surprise and fear shoot through him at Jonathan’s calm pronouncement. This was more information than Jonathan had shared with him yet, and without any cajoling at all. “Here at my uncle’s house?”

“Where else would you feel most at ease?”

Karl tapped his fingers against the hilt of the ceremonial sword in the scabbard by his side. “You are serious. What form do you imagine such an attack would take? A shooting?”

“I’m not certain. Perhaps you’re not in any physical danger, but I overheard part of a conversation which seemed to indicate something would take place here tonight. Be on your guard.”

Karl nodded. “Thank you. I will,” he said sincerely. And then he realized why Jonathan had accepted his invitation to come tonight. The man was determined to keep him safe.

A frisson of happiness shimmered through Karl. Even if Jonathan considered looking after him a duty, his protectiveness was still touching.

“So you’ve kept your distance these past few days in order to better do your job. I appreciate your concern for my welfare. But I’d still like to spend some time together.” Karl pitched his voice low, although Cohen was nowhere near. “The moments we’ve shared continue to haunt me. Don’t you want more?”

Jonathan didn’t meet his gaze. He stared at the dark garden in which white flowers shone like stars. “I can’t afford the time,” he said, but Karl understood he meant he couldn’t afford the risk.

Leaning nearer, Karl whispered, "Make time. Please." He'd never begged for a man's attention in his life, but Jonathan's stubbornness was driving him to distraction. It was more than the man's reticence that drew him. His rare smile and his serious view of life charmed Karl. Odd that the bright and vivacious young men whose companionship he'd enjoyed in the past hadn't held such a spell over him. Karl brushed the back of his hand against Jonathan's, no more than that here in his uncle's garden with a house full of people nearby. But the lingering touch was a promise of more. "Next time I send you a note, come to me," he commanded.

Jonathan's gaze slid from the flowers to meet Karl's, a solemn stare that started a low-burning fire in his groin. "You should probably get back inside. Less chance of an attempt on your life in the midst of a crowd."

"Ah, but you're here to guard me. I'm sure I shall be perfectly safe," Karl teased. Nevertheless he headed toward the open doors from which bars of yellow light shone, illuminating the fountain and a couple sitting on a stone bench, heads close together.

Despite his flippant tone, Karl was alert. His gaze swept the area, searching the shadows for a sniper. "Who do you believe means me harm?" he asked Jonathan.

"I couldn't say. Tell me, what do you know about Volkovsky?"

Karl was good with names, and he'd heard that one before. "A man's name, yes?"

Jonathan didn't answer, but Karl could feel him waiting for more.

"I think he's a Russian," Karl said slowly.

"Do you know him?"

Karl shook his head. "Smelter mentioned him the other day. I can't remember why."

"Does he have anything to do with the duchies of Neuschlosswold-Binder or any member of the German Confederation?"

They stepped into the room again, but no one noticed their appearance, so they had another few moments of privacy. Cohen lingered in the garden by a rosebush, watching but out of earshot.

“Volkovsky? Not that I know of. Why are you asking? Is he the one who’s been trailing me?”

“No.” Jonathan’s flash of a smile didn’t reach his eyes. “He’s not our man. I went to the East End and took a look at young Volkovsky. All burning eyes and an unkempt beard. He couldn’t follow the trail of a barn.”

Karl wondered why he’d brought up the subject of an obscure Russian student, but before he could ask, Jonathan continued, still talking low and quick. “I’d recognize the man who’s been following you if he is here tonight.”

“Describe him.”

“About my height and perhaps a stone heavier. Dark hair, gray eyes, no scars. A slightly receding chin. He’s usually in the suit a well-paid London clerk might wear. But once I saw him in a dark green overcoat that looked Prussian made. No distinguishing features, unfortunately. He smokes a pipe with sweet cherry-flavored tobacco.”

Karl frowned, thinking. “He doesn’t sound familiar.”

“I’m fairly convinced your spy is a native of your part of the world. I never saw the face of the person he spoke with the other night—in German. But I heard the southern accent of your people.”

“Alarming,” Karl began, but at that moment a buxom lady had spotted them—Miss Bettina Williams—and he had to turn his attention to her.

Jonathan’s description had given the situation an entirely new complexion. One of his countrymen plotting something—who, why, and what were they planning? For now, there was nothing he could do but return to the party and be charming. But at least his eyes were open, and he was ready to react to anything out of the ordinary.

Chapter Eight

Watching the gloriously attired nobleman Karl Johann Peter, Erb-Pfalzgraf von und zu Neuschlosswold-Binder, interact with his uncle's guests, one would never guess the man felt any hint of danger. He appeared relaxed, jovial, and suave, yet with the slightest touch of reserve to indicate his noble status. Reese wondered if nobility learned from birth how to manage that delicate balance between gracious and distant. Karl was certainly an impressive sight to behold in this, his natural habitat.

The erbgraf kept Reese by his side, introducing him to this or that earl, lord, or lady, whom he'd only just met himself. It was amazing he could keep all their names and connections straight. But during a break, he leaned toward Reese to whisper, "I reviewed the guest list with Cohen ahead of time. See how knowledgeable it makes me look?"

Reese excused himself after a bit to complete his reconnaissance of the room. He wandered unobtrusively among the people, listening and looking for anything out of the ordinary. He earned a suspicious stare from both Cohen and Dr. Smelter, but didn't overhear or see anything unusual.

When it was time to be seated for dinner, Reese found his place at one of the tables from which he had a good view of the head table. Lord Merridew preferred this rather odd arrangement, reminiscent of a restaurant, rather than the usual one long table. Reese exchanged rudimentary pleasantries with his dining companions on either side, and then focused on watching Karl.

As one course gave way to the next, Reese took a few token bites of each but was far too tense to eat much. The feeling of impending danger made the hair on

the back of his neck rise, and he'd learned not to ignore such sensations. Sometimes his body almost seemed to signal him before events occurred. Reacting to that sensitivity had saved his life on more than one occasion. If he was honest, this inner sense had warned about the captain long before the truth came out.

Now, as they neared the end of the meal, Reese's dread twisted tighter and tighter, as if nearing a climax. He felt positive something would happen soon. From the bit of conversation he'd overheard, there'd been nothing to suggest an assassination attempt. Those men could've been talking about a meeting that would take place tonight or a less deadly treachery something to do with undermining the *erbgraf* in a social way. It was even possible the supposed plan had been called off. Yet Reese's anxiety mounted.

He could no longer sit still. Excusing himself to his dinner companions, he pushed back his chair and rose. Rather than leave the room, he walked around the perimeter, staying close to the wall, earning a few confused glances from the servants but little attention from the guests, who were all engaged in conversation. The din of their chatter filled the room.

Reese caught Cohen staring at him from his seat several tables removed from the main table. Reese tipped his head in a nod. Cohen frowned and stood.

Behind the head table, which graced one end of the room, was a large, multipaned window covered in elaborate swathes of dark green fabric held back by golden cord. The drapes pooled on the floor in rich swirls. Reese envisioned a bomb breaking through the glass and exploding in the room, but he could hardly clear the room on a hunch. And then he noticed a wire protruding from the drapery and a shape beneath the fabric—perhaps a box. A planted bomb.

He stopped doubting his instincts. Reese whirled around, and as his gaze met Karl's, he shouted, "Everyone clear the room. There's a bomb."

His voice filled the room, cutting across the subdued murmur of voices like a whip crack. The assembled guests were struck dumb and for a moment sat in

silence, all eyes turning toward Reese. For someone whose job was to never draw attention to himself, it was disconcerting.

“Get out,” he roared. “Now!”

The clamor of voices resumed as people questioned one another about what was happening, and a few rose from their seats. Like a brood of frightened hens, they clucked and fretted and required a bit more shooing to get them the hell out of the room. After a last glare at Reese, Cohen took over the task, directing dinner guests out the door.

Reese headed for Karl, determined to get him out even if the boxlike shape beneath the curtain turned out to be nothing. Karl was busy prompting the rest of the ladies and gentlemen seated at his table to move. He grasped the satin-clad arm of a plump matron and dragged her upright, then gave her a push toward the door.

Lord Merridew intercepted Reese’s progress toward Karl. “What is the meaning of this? A bomb, you say? In my house? That’s preposterous.”

“I assure you it isn’t, my lord. Please, trust me and leave the room.” Reese took the older gentleman by the arm and guided him away from the window.

Within seconds of Reese’s announcement, the room was nearly emptied. The guests at the main table were farthest from the door and straggled behind the others. Reese’s heart pounded as he pulled on Merridew’s arm and argued with the stubborn man. Finally he left the uncle to his own devices and dodged around abandoned chairs toward his primary objective. He’d nearly reached Karl when glass shattered as something crashed through the window. Reese felt two explosive blasts, one right after the other, almost before he heard them. The air thickened and pushed him like a hot hand on his back, throwing him straight into Karl. Reese wrapped his arms around the man and tackled him to the floor while flames roared around them. They landed halfway beneath the table, which shielded them from the worst of the concussive blast and the shrapnel raining down.

For a moment, Reese flashed back to the Crimea, landing in mud rather than on a Turkish carpet. And when he’d risen after that bomb blast, it was to find his

fellow soldiers dead and no time to grieve since there were dozens of foe coming at him.

Karl moved beneath him, and Reese rolled off him. "Are you all right?"

He nodded and coughed. The air around them was thick with plaster dust, which choked them both. Reese squinted against the haze of particles and put his hand over his nose and mouth to filter the worst of it.

Karl crawled across the floor to his uncle's limp, dust-covered body. He stripped off his gloves, checked the man's pulse. "It's steady," he said.

Merridew groaned and stirred, then lifted his head. "What happened?" Reese barely heard the words over the ringing in his ears.

"You've been hurt, Uncle, and the room is on fire. We have to get out." Karl threw an arm around his uncle and hauled him upright.

"The bomb was meant for the erbgraf." Reese panted as he propped up the big man on the other side. "We must go toward the back of the house. Don't let the assassins know he still lives."

Several menservants rushed into the room and began beating at the flames that engulfed the draperies. The smoke was remarkably thick, as if the fog had suddenly formed outside and entered the room.

"We'll go to the smaller drawing room," Karl said. "There are no windows." The chamber next to the dining room was a perfect place to retreat and stay safe.

Karl began to close the door to the dining room. "Leave it open," Merridew said in a loud voice. His hearing must have been affected too. "I shall need to see to my guests as soon as I've caught my breath, and I want to make sure the fire is put out."

Reese and Karl led Merridew to a chair where he could watch the servants scurrying around the dining room. He sat down heavily and with a groan. "So you think this terrible thing was someone trying to get at young Karl, eh?" He grimaced as he touched the top of his head. His hair was a wild shock of gray dust. "Dash it

all, yes. The count mentioned something in his last letter. He was worried about a threat from Volkobstan or something.”

“Volkovsky?”

Merridew nodded. “Yes. I think so. But truly, I must see to my other guests.” He groped for his handkerchief and stumbled to his feet again, patting the white cloth over his face. “Where is everyone? I can barely hear.” He watched the servants beating at the last flickering flame on a burning chair.

“Wait a moment, please, my lord.” Reese gripped his elbow, and Merridew turned his attention back to him. Reese leaned close so the servants working in the next room wouldn’t overhear. “Should anyone ask, tell them the erbgraf seemed badly injured. You’ve had him carried up to your bedchamber and have summoned a physician. Don’t allow any of his servants to come to him, not even Dr. Smelter, since we don’t yet know who is involved in this conspiracy. I will summon Mr. Gilley, whom I believe you know. He’s not a doctor, but we can trust him.” *I hope*. A trickle of blood ran down from a cut on his cheek, and he wiped at it impatiently.

“You mean that Mr. Gilley who works under Lord Maxwell? I believe I may have met him once.” So much for Gilley’s claim that he and Lord Merridew were friends. “But what on earth is your plan?”

Karl’s golden brows were knit as he imperiously commanded, “Yes, explain yourself, please, Mr. Reed.”

“Your Excellency, this is an opportunity for you to disappear for a while. Let whoever wishes you dead think they were nearly successful in their attempt, that you are unconscious. It would give us time to figure out who your enemy is.”

“Ah, I understand. Yes. Indeed.” Lord Merridew coughed again; the smoke and dust still clogged the air. “I know you said he saved your life, but I must ask. Do you trust this man, Karl?”

There was only a second’s hesitation before Karl nodded. “With my life.”

“Very well. We shan’t even tell the police. Let the press spread the falsehood and see what comes of it. But the deception must begin now.”

“Deception. I have had more than enough of that,” Karl said under his breath. Reese’s ringing ears had cleared, and he heard the weary anger in the quiet words.

“It’s necessary. Even those closest to you are under suspicion in this matter,” Reese said. “Everyone in your entourage.”

Karl still gazed at Reese. “Except Cohen. I would also trust him with my life. He’s been with me for many years, and I *know* the man.”

Reese remained silent. He knew that sometimes the man you trusted with your life or your love was the most dangerous liar of all.

Merridew gestured to the door through which the servants brought the courses from the kitchen. “I’ll send for Mr. Gilley. You two, take the servants’ exit. Hide upstairs and wait.” He coughed. “I must go take care of this.”

He should have looked comical with his gray hair on end, the formal eveningwear dusty and ruined, but with his face set in grim lines, Reese saw the strength under the usually jolly, pleasant exterior.

“I’ll come down in a few minutes and help establish details,” Reese said.

As Reese and Karl made their way up the stairs, Karl stopped and peered at Reese’s face. “You’re bleeding.” His breath warmed Reese’s temple.

Reese tilted his head away slightly. “So are you.”

Karl nodded. “I’ve had worse injuries. We both have.” He rubbed the side of his thumb over the blood that had trickled from Reese’s cheek.

Reese pulled back entirely. He couldn’t give in to the need to embrace Karl—he might never let go, his relief that Karl was safe was so great. And he didn’t want to begin to examine why that was.

He began up the stairs again. “Which is your uncle’s room?”

Karl passed him on the narrow staircase and silently led the way down the back hall of the second story and into the wider front corridor.

After Reese entered the bedroom, he turned the key in the lock.

Karl sighed, and his mouth quirked in a rueful half smile. "At last we are alone together. Alas that it's under these circumstances."

He unbuttoned his elaborate uniform jacket and worked it off, pausing to examine the now stained and ripped garment before dropping it to the ground. He unbuckled the ceremonial sword and dumped it and the sash onto the floor. For a moment he frowned down at a cut on his arm, then crossed to the washstand, poured some water into it, and scrubbed at his face.

"My uncle is as wealthy as God, but has some strange ideas. For instance, he refuses to install running water above the ground floor." He reached for the nearby towel. "Just as well if we are to remain hidden away in one room. I won't have to sneak to a bathroom or water closet."

Reese looked around at the heavy mahogany furniture and the dark tapestry-covered walls. The bed was not huge, but it was tall, and the bedstead was an elaborate wooden creation, all carved fruit and flowers.

Karl carefully draped the towel on the wooden peg jutting from the washstand. Tendrils of his damp fair hair framed his face, and he pushed them back impatiently as he walked to the bed. "You should go back down and see if you can help my uncle and his poor guests. I think they all got out of the room in time, but did you see if anyone else was injured?"

"I wasn't paying attention to anyone else." As usual.

"So you think I must remain hidden away entirely? Wouldn't it be better to lure this Volkovsky or whoever out into the open? Use me as bait?"

"Not until we're certain who or what's behind this." Reese hesitated. "There are things I don't understand."

Karl sighed and hoisted himself up onto the bed. "Come sit beside me and explain." He patted the mattress.

If he sat beside Karl, Reese wouldn't be speaking. Even with the mayhem downstairs, he wanted Karl desperately. Just acknowledging that thought gave him

the now familiar soul-deep shuddering of desire. The threat to their lives had only served to fill him with needy hunger.

He ignored the request to sit, but decided he could explain. He leaned against the footboard of the bed and tried to focus only on Karl's face. "I've done a little research on Volkovsky. As far as I can tell, he has no interest at all in any country but his fatherland, Russia."

"It's mother Russia. We in the Germanies speak of our fatherland."

Reese waved a hand. "Never mind that...that sort of nonsense."

"I agree." Karl sighed and stretched his arms over his head, wincing. "I have no interest in great devotion of one country over another, although do I love my England, and the mountains of Neuschlosswold steal my breath. But pray, go on."

Reese examined him curiously. "Hard for a man in your position if you don't appreciate national pride. Your whole life is supposed to be devoted to it."

Karl laughed but didn't sound amused. "Indeed. So about this Volkovsky. I'm certain he cares nothing for Neuschlosswold. He lives only to help Russian peasantry. Why would he attack me, then? And why do you mention him?"

"I overheard his name that night I listened in on your spy's conversation."

"My *other* spy's conversation, you mean."

Reese ignored him. "I'd wager good money that they were discussing this attack. 'Hold off a few days,' one said. Volkovsky frequently advocates violence against the established powers. I read one of his pieces, and he described exactly those sorts of weapons and techniques, incendiaries with timers along with thrown explosives." He began to pace. "I haven't done a great deal of research, yet I don't believe Volkovsky has actually done anything more than speak of this sort of action."

"All talk and no action." Karl began to unbutton his shirt. "Something like tonight's bomber, who is clearly a sad amateur. No one died. He should take some lessons before he tries again."

How could the man joke under these circumstances?

"I still don't believe it was Volkovsky. Perhaps Volkovsky's name was brought up as a possible scapegoat for these men to blame." Reese was tired of trying to discover the truth when he wanted nothing more than to climb onto that bed and examine every inch of Karl's body to make sure he had no more injuries.

The sight of the blood on Karl's face and arm had roused a fear that now made it almost impossible for Reese to go downstairs and leave Karl alone, even with a locked door keeping him safe. Ridiculous, of course. Von Binder was a full-grown man, a warrior Reese knew could hold his own in battle.

And now the man was stripping off his shirt, exposing golden flesh over bands of muscles.

Karl dropped the shirt on top of his jacket. He lay down on his back and rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands. He caught sight of Reese staring at him and smiled. "You have a dangerous look about you, Mr. Reed. More dangerous than usual, I mean."

He'd been the target of an assassin tonight, and yet Karl joked—and continued to grab life joyfully. How could anyone resist such a man? Reese couldn't. He thought of Karl dead or injured, and his throat closed tight with a fierce need to keep the man alive. His body filled with lust and something more. Reese wordlessly shook his head. He moved close to the edge of the bed. "Reese," he said softly. "My name is Reese."

Karl's eyes lit with a smile. He made a small hum of triumphant pleasure. "I had wondered after you as much as admitted you'd signed as Baker at our hotel. Reed is close to Reese. You're not such a big liar with me, then. Unless your first name is Rutherford or some such?"

"No. Jonathan."

Karl must have seen the hunger in his face, the need to hear his name from Karl's mouth, because he repeated, "Jonathan."

Reese slid up the side of the bed. Karl's lower lip was puffy, a cut from the explosion. Reese touched it lightly. "Where else are you hurt?"

Karl pointed to the gash on his arm. "But it's not bleeding anymore. I'm lucky," he said with cool interest. "An inch or so to the left, and I would have required a tourniquet, I believe, or bled to death."

Reese placed his palm on the skin above the cut. It would leave a scar but would heal without the need for stitches.

"And my hand. I wasn't wearing gloves." Karl wiggled his fingers.

Reese grabbed Karl's wrist and laid a hand on his to examine the scrapes and blood on the back of Karl's long fingers and knuckles. "Move your fingers again," he ordered. "I didn't see if they all functioned well."

"I assure you, no bones are broken."

"Anything else?"

Karl turned his head and pointed to his neck. "Something hit me. You, perhaps, when you barged into me. You certainly do like to land on top of me."

Reese leaned close to examine his neck. "You'll have a bruise." He made a light circle on the patch of skin, which was already turning dark.

"And my chest will be bruised, but I don't have so much as a cracked rib. As I told you, I'm lucky, thanks to you."

Reese ran a hand over Karl's chest, just below the left nipple, feeling for swelling or heat.

"You'll touch every spot on me that's hurt?" Karl's voice had laughter in it. He reached for Reese's wrist. "Then I must tell you, I haven't escaped unscathed. I have a terrible injury here." The devil dragged Reese's hand down to his crotch.

Reese sucked in a sharp breath and tightened with desire as his fingers touched the warm bulge beneath the fine wool. There was no time for this. He raised his head to say so when their eyes locked. Karl's smile died away, replaced by heat and pleading.

Reese already knew the man's penchant for hiding fear by running to pleasure. It was a response that made perfect sense to him at the moment.

Reese should have walked away, but instead he explored the intriguing outline of Karl's hardening shaft.

"A few minutes," he heard himself croaking. "To make sure you're not badly injured."

Karl laughed softly. With his uninjured hand, he reached down and flicked open the buttons on his fly. "I can see you are experienced at dealing with wounds. Nurse me."

The crude suggestion made Reese's mouth tingle. God yes, he wanted to do just that. Replace the taste of anger and fear in his mouth with pure Karl.

"Come up here with me," Karl whispered. Reese vaulted onto the tall bed and on top of the sprawled form. He landed with his hands and knees supporting him on either side of Karl so none of his weight pressed the other man's injuries.

Karl gave an *oof* of surprise, then said, "Neatly done."

Reese wanted to be urgent, to seize Karl, but he paused for a moment to gently touch his lips to the uninjured corner of Karl's mouth, then kissed his neck. He pressed his tongue to the fast pulse, tasting sweat, dust from the explosion, and Karl. He moved down the long body, looking for more wounds, kissing and tonguing as he went.

Karl thrust up, and his fully erect cock pushed from his open fly and underlinen.

Reese gave in to his hunger. Without a word or a sound, he drew that delicious erection into his mouth. With one hand, he circled the base of Karl's shaft, then moved up and down; with the other he stroked his balls. He engulfed Karl's cock with his mouth, intent on exciting him. He'd bring his lover to a fast and furious orgasm.

Lover. The word echoed in his mind and made him stop in midpump. Karl put his hand on Reese's head tentatively.

Reese sucked hard, swirling his tongue over the hot, damp flesh, tasting the salt of Karl's excitement, feeling his own saliva grow thick with it.

"You." Karl growled and thrust. "Please. Let me feel you." He twisted to the side, trying to reach for Reese, who deftly moved from his groping hand.

Reese wanted to say yes because his erection throbbed, begging for touch, but he pulled off Karl's cock to glare into the blue eyes that watched, heavy with arousal.

Reese stroked once, twice, the well-lubricated cock sliding easily in his hand. "This is only for you. I don't want to be distracted."

He'd give Karl an orgasm he wouldn't dare forget, a memory to recall later, after they inevitably parted. He took all that he'd learned from the more experienced man and went back to his concentrated task. Press that spot there, lick just under the bulbous head, yes, and move his hand firmly. He paused to suck on Karl's balls, pulling them into his mouth just so, then returned to stroking, licking, sucking Karl's twitching, rock-hard cock.

"So fast," Karl groaned. "I'll spend too soon. I want more. Oh God, slow down. Kiss me." He breathed an astonished sigh of laughter and pressed his head back into the pillow. "Oh, no, no. You're ruthless."

He thrust up even as he begged and cursed in a low voice. "I want you, Jonathan Reese. Please, please." He cried out, and his cock swelled and spasmed as he pushed deep.

The hot spurts filled Reese's mouth and throat, and he swallowed instinctively.

He was close to orgasm too, dizzy with need, but he ignored his lust and concentrated on the groaning body under his hands and mouth.

When the last of Karl's spending pumped out, Reese wiped his mouth on his wrist, gave Karl's cock a final, careful lick all over, and pulled the underlinen up.

“That must hold us both for a time,” he said, too briskly because he felt his body’s disappointment in an ache that filled him from his toes up.

Karl twisted onto his side and heaved a sigh. He stroked Reese’s hair. “I wish I could do the same for you, my friend. I promise I will.”

Reese gave a single nod, then slid off the bed. He wished he could wait until his cockstand subsided, but the pressure was more likely to ease if out of Karl’s presence. “I’m going to lock you in, then slide the key under the door so you won’t be trapped should there be another emergency.”

“More bombs,” Karl said with a bark of unamused laughter. “Please beg my uncle to forgive me for bringing this to his home.”

Reese moved to the door.

“Wait,” Karl said. He got off the bed and grimaced. That rib injury had to hurt.

He hurriedly fastened his trousers and went to Jonathan. “Thank you, Jonathan, for all you’ve done for me.”

Reese glanced down at Karl’s semierrection, visible against the press of the dark trousers, and Karl laughed. “I meant thank you for saving my life, you single-minded gentleman. Ah, Mr. Reese, you are the best thing to have come into my life.”

Reese waited for the rest—*the best thing since...*? But that was all Karl said.

The *erbgraf* wrapped his arms around Reese and pulled him close for a fast embrace before backing away. “I eagerly wait for your return. Perhaps you will discover who is behind all this soon so I’ll be freed. I’ll be patient for a time, but I worry...” He shrugged.

“About hurting your father and friends.”

Karl’s eyebrows went up. “Yes. I worry about my friends, and I don’t want to stay hidden for long.”

He didn’t mention being anxious for his father, and Reese remembered what Gilley had said about the father and son who didn’t get along. Reese would find out

about that eventually. He felt an unfamiliar frisson of interest. So much he would learn about Karl. Later.

“My first priority is to keep you safe. If you were a normal sort of chap, you could go off on your own, but I don’t see your father’s servants letting you sneak off to the country alone under these circumstances.”

“All right, Jonathan. I will let you go weave your plans with Lord Merridew and Cohen.”

“Perhaps not Cohen,” Reese said.

Karl’s blue eyes grew cold. “There is no need to suspect him. I told you as much.”

“Tell me why you trust him.”

Karl shrugged. “I know him. He’s shrewd and loyal. And I have seen him act bravely more than once. Did I tell you about the time we visited Vienna two years ago? Of course I haven’t. We rarely speak of our past, do we?”

Reese knew Karl was needling him, but only said, “No, I haven’t heard about Vienna. Tell me what happened.”

“There was a fire at the estate where we were staying. A terrible one. It destroyed the main building entirely. Cohen and I worked together that night. He put himself in danger to save lives and only stopped when the place was empty of everyone. Servants as well. We sucked up so much smoke, we coughed for days. I find it difficult to mistrust him for many reasons.”

Reese understood that Karl had also acted selflessly that night, but he would lose that solemn air and laugh if Reese pointed that out. He might dismiss his own bravery with, *but I enjoy throwing myself into the fray.*

“I suspect everyone,” Reese said. “I will talk only to your uncle and Gilley because I must. And I won’t even alert my employer about the details of the situation.”

What would they do to him when they understood that he'd failed at his duty? No more than he deserved. The thought of that explosion nauseated him, and he had a cast-iron stomach.

Karl gave a weary sigh. After a long minute, he said, "Very well. For now, only Gilley and my uncle."

"Good. Thank you." Reese walked out the door, locked it, and shoved the key under the door. He felt a sense of urgency not only because he wanted to catch the bastard who threatened Karl, but because he suspected that the *erbgraf*, a man used to action, would soon chafe at being held quietly.

He'd worried that Lord Merridew wouldn't be able to aid in the deception of Karl's injury, but soon after he walked into the back parlor where the guests were assembled, he felt reassured.

Merridew was arguing with one of *erbgraf's* attendants and doing a fine job.

The other guests had been seated around the large room and were talking excitedly together. No one appeared injured or upset except Karl's servants, who were gathered in a semicircle around Lord Merridew.

"I don't care who you are," Merridew was saying in a peevish old man's manner. "He is my nephew, and I know what's best for him. And I won't have any of your foreign ways in my house. My doctor's been sent for, and that's all there is to it. No, you may not speak to my nephew. He's just barely conscious and said he wished to be alone. Besides, I don't want your kind jolting him all about the place. Here now." He looked up and waved at Reese. "This man's been with him. Any change?"

"No, sir."

"I must examine him." Smelter, the usually benign round man, was furious.

"And I say if you raise a fuss, you'll have to leave. I won't have this in my house. Too melodramatic by half. Isn't it bad enough that my poor nephew is injured? I must put up with you lot insisting this and that?" The quavering old man was autocratic. Reese wanted to applaud.

Smelter clasped his fingers in front of his chest, as if he were praying. “But Lord Merridew, I’m a doctor. I’m here precisely to take care of His Excellency.”

“You’re here as my guest. And that is all.”

The butler came into the room and whispered in Lord Merridew’s ear. “The doctor is here. A good British doctor, I tell you,” Lord Merridew said. “He’ll make an examination, and that’s that. We can rest assured my nephew is in the best possible hands.”

He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his hands dramatically. He turned to the butler. “Do make certain all my guests are comfortable and have something to drink.” He looked at Reese and said, “The constable on the beat has assured me that authorities have been notified and will come speak to us soon.”

“He said that a full ten minutes ago,” a well-dressed lady with blue gloves said from a chair in the corner. “They are taking their time. This has all be very upsetting, Lord Merridew.”

Lord Merridew hurried over to the lady and made reassuring noises as he pressed her hand.

“I will go and meet this doctor,” Cohen said. For the first time, Merridew looked flustered. He scampered back across the room.

“No, no, Herr Cohen, you stay here and help my butler. I will bring news down of young Karl after the doctor’s had a chance to look him over.”

Cohen’s deep-set eyes didn’t blink, his gaze remaining fixed on Merridew.

He knew.

Reese’s heart beat too fast. He could see it in the other man’s eyes—Cohen knew Lord Merridew and Reese were lying.

Reese would have to get up the stairs in front of him. Perhaps he could race into the bedroom, grab Karl, and drag him out the back door. Damn Merridew for being too obvious as he tried to keep the count’s servants back.

Reese tensed, ready for Cohen to push past his host and rush the stairs. Instead he clicked his heels together and gave a smart bow. "Very well, Lord Merridew. Please report back to us as soon as you are able."

* * *

Gilley waited in the smashed dining room, talking to a uniformed policeman. When Reese and Merridew entered the room, Gilley walked over to them and began complaining at once. At least he was smart enough to speak quietly instead of bellowing his displeasure. "Good evening, Lord Merridew. I'm terribly sorry to hear about the dreadful incident. Yet I can't understand why I'm here, Reese. Why did you summon me? The police are on the job, and I'm sure they will get in touch with Scotland Yard."

"Reese? I thought your name is Reed." Merridew shook his head. "My hearing is terrible these days, and that explosion didn't help."

Reese stepped forward and grabbed Gilley's hand as if to shake it, but held on tight. Gilley went pale.

"Mr. Gilley, thank you for coming here," Reese said pleasantly. "I require your help, and I would never have bothered you if it wasn't an urgent matter."

Gilley pulled at his hand a little, but not enough to free himself from Reese's grasp. He met Reese's gaze, and his own eyes widened slightly. "Er. Well, put it like that..." He gave another furtive, ineffectual pull at his hand.

Reese went on. "Tonight I shall need you no more than a half hour. You'll simply mount the stairs, wait above with me for a few minutes, then come back down and make a pronouncement to the erbgraf's servants." He released some of the pressure on Gilley's hand.

"Of course." Gilley wrenched his hand away. "Glad to help in an emergency, of course. I hadn't understood it was so important, and I'm always delighted to be of service to Lord Merridew." He turned to Karl's uncle. "What do you require from me, my lord?"

Reese was about to tell him all about the role he was to take on when he remembered Gilley's work might be of help. "Gilley. Do you happen to know what our friend Volkovsky is doing tonight?"

Gilley adjusted his monocle and peered at Reese. "Him? He's in East Dulwich."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain of it. He's addressing a crowd of at least fifteen, one of whom is my man."

"No chance he'd got away to do this?"

Gilley gaped at him, then around the room. "This mess? Volkovsky? No, no. Why on earth would he?"

Reese was determined to push as hard as possible. He described the two incendiary devices, then asked one more time, "You're convinced it's not him?"

"Yes, absolutely. We've been watching the man. He and his associates haven't purchased so much as an ounce of kerosene. And he's most definitely been in an entirely different part of town all day." He nodded solemnly at Lord Merridew. "What you have here tonight is someone adopting his style."

"Perhaps he has some apprentices?"

Gilley wrinkled his nose. "Perhaps, but I don't know of any." He gave a cluck of disgust. "They're all a bunch of damned fools, every man and boy of 'em."

"I think it best if we don't let anyone know the authorities are aware Volkovsky's innocent," Reese said slowly.

"I understand you," Merridew said. "Let the real culprit think he got away with it."

"Very good thinking, Lord Merridew." Gilley pulled his watch from his waistcoat and looked at it. He gave Reese then the door a sidelong look, reminding Reese of a schoolboy trying to make a break after a run-in with his headmaster. "Sorry I can't be of more help telling who is responsible for this, but if that's all you want—"

“We need more, I’m afraid. Those men who are keeping watch over Volkovsky, for instance—”

Gilley interrupted. “What about them? They do important work.”

Reese nodded. “We’ll only need a few of them for a few days. We require another group watched.”

“Ask your own crowd for help,” Gilley said. “The fewer people who know, the better. You’ll be in London. You can control them and keep an eye on who comes and goes. No need to tell anyone, not even your own men, who is or isn’t on the premises.”

“As a favor to me, Mr. Gilley,” Lord Merridew said. “And of course, I’ll speak to Lord Maxwell.”

“Of course if he says yes, I’d be more than delighted to help, my lord.” Gilley beamed at Lord Merridew.

Reese examined Gilley top to bottom. With his fastidious little mustache and gray suit and monocle with its gold chain, the civil servant could easily pass as a slightly out-of-fashion Harley Street expert. “There’s also the matter of the little show I described. You are now going to be Dr. Gilley.” Reese explained what they required.

“Oh, I say!” Gilley opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, as if he wanted to protest more.

But at that moment, Lord Merridew stepped in again. Smiling warmly, he put a firm hand on Gilley’s shoulder and told him he’d heard such wonderful things about him from Lord Maxwell.

It took some urging and a great deal of bracing talk from Lord Merridew, but Gilley at last agreed to act the part of a doctor.

Reese pulled him aside. “I’ll need you to visit my section and deliver a message.”

Gilley sniffed and looked uncomfortable. “Oh?”

“Tell them I’ll be incommunicado for a time, but that I’m still doing my duty.”
Duty. Such a grim word.

“And what sort of work is the captain arranging for you now? Never mind, I know you can’t say. The man always was a hard blighter for all he was a gentleman. Wouldn’t catch me working under him a moment longer than necessary.”

“The captain is dead. Has been for two years.”

Gilley looked astonished. “I had no idea...” he began.

You wouldn’t. We tend to be a secretive lot in that little corner of the government, Reese thought. He said, “I can’t speak to you any longer. I have too much to do.” Slightly awkwardly, for he wasn’t used to working with others, he added, “Thank you for your help, Gilley.”

Gilley’s face went pink, and Reese realized he blushed with pleasure.

With Gilley’s help and the cooperation of the police—achieved with the gentle persuasion of Lord Merridew—Reese was able to spirit Karl away in Merridew’s carriage several hours later. Cloaked in the dark of night, they left the damaged town house to head for Lord Merridew’s estate in the country. Of course the coachman didn’t question his assignment, but he cast curious glances at his unexpected passengers, traveling without so much as a valet between them.

Reese was certain the erbgraf’s retinue, particularly Cohen, was in an uproar, but between Gilley parading as a doctor and Merridew, they’d managed to convince the men that the count’s son was being well taken care of and resting comfortably in his uncle’s home. His London home. None of the staff was informed of the change of location. Reese intended to keep Karl safe and protected in the country while he healed from his injuries. Gilley’s men would do the legwork, and Reese would piece together who was involved in the conspiracy to end the erbgraf’s life. He made the arrangements, though it chafed to dole out responsibility he wanted for himself. God, but he hated letting anyone into his business. He blinked at the realization that Karl was his—business, he reminded himself.

Chapter Nine

Lord Merridew's estate, in the gently rolling hills of Buckinghamshire not far from Windsor Castle, was the kind of place that always made Reese feel like he should enter through the servants' door. Although the grandeur wore the patina of age, the front hall was still an impressive chamber, complete with suits of armor and portraits of ancestors gracing the walls. He was glad not to have the entire entourage with them as he followed Karl and the butler, who led them to the rooms that were being aired for them per Lord Merridew's note.

Two guest bedrooms, side by side. The enforced closeness was like waving a steak in front of a dog. Reese knew he couldn't long deny the urge to visit Karl in his room—merely to check on his well-being, of course.

He had no bag to unpack, the pair of them having fled London like the Israelites from Egypt. Merridew had said there were closets and trunks full of his sons' old clothing that, although outdated and perhaps scented of ancient lavender, would serve them. Upon Karl and Reese's arrival, a pair of servants had been sent to bring piles of the clothes to their two bedchambers.

Reese walked to the window to gaze out at the expanse of green lawn and well-kept gardens and the wild lands beyond. A sudden urge to walk—no, to run across that sumptuous landscape—tugged on him.

"What do you think of your room?" Karl's voice made Reese jump as he spoke from the doorway. "The mattress is lumpy and the air a bit damp and musty, but what does one expect in an English country home? Ah, I've always loved this place."

Reese turned to face the tall blond man. Karl's fresh white shirt was open at the neck to reveal a slice of lightly tanned skin. His hair was damp and freshly

combed, and his smile made Reese feel as if a hand were gripping his heart and squeezing until he gasped for mercy. Even though they'd spent hours in each other's company on the journey here, dozing restlessly in the seats of the jostling carriage, he was seized anew by the power of Karl's presence.

"I should be exhausted after traveling all night, but perhaps the close brush with death has me starting at every sound. I'd much prefer a walk in the fresh air to clear my head and help me to sleep. Would you care to go with me?"

As if he had a choice. He was His Excellency's bodyguard and protector now. Reese nodded. "A walk would be very nice."

He pulled on a pair of borrowed boots and slipped into a drab brown jacket, glad to be rid of the eveningwear. There was a light drizzle starting up outdoors, but that too was to be expected in the English countryside.

As they walked through the garden behind the house, Karl gestured to the white marble dryads and fauns—gods and goddesses on pedestals. "My dear aunt, God rest her soul, was an aficionado of all things Grecian, as you can see."

The arrangement of the beds was not one of formal precision, but a lush and romantic tangle of vegetation, the leaves of which were currently dripping rainwater. The marble statues were worse for wear from inclement weather—eroded, chipped, and mossy. Reese imagined in her day, Lady Merridew would have made certain they were covered in winter and cleaned every spring, but her widowed husband hadn't bothered, and a lazy gardener hadn't either.

"My aunt has a lovely Grecian temple hidden away in the trees by the brook. My cousins and I used to play in it when I was a boy. Come." Karl led the way through the shaggy, once beautifully maintained gardens, around the fountains and statuary to the woods beyond. A somewhat overgrown path led into the cool darkness of the trees. Beneath the branches, Karl and Jonathan were protected from the drizzle, but the patter of rain on leaves filled the quiet woods.

Reese moved single file with Karl along the path, his eyes riveted on the backside of the other man's tan breeches. They were made for a smaller man—one

of the cousins in his youth—and fit Karl very snugly. Following behind him, Reese was reminded of expeditions in the army—the mingled fear and perverse excitement as he scouted enemy territory. Here in this primeval green, it was easy to believe anything might jump out and attack them. He could imagine these woods would have been a paradise for young boys at play and tried to imagine what Karl might have looked like then, a towheaded Germanic lad standing shoulders above his English cousins.

The white building glimpsed through tree branches could indeed have been a temple to Dionysus, a secluded and ancient monument to a long-abandoned god. Ivy grew on the columns that supported the roof. Benches invited one to sit inside and view the stream at the foot of an incline. Bushes had grown up, but Reese could imagine a time when the view had been clear and the stream less brackish.

“Look at this. Young lads and their penchant for war.” Karl indicated mismatched pieces of wood marring the symmetry of the columns, nailed between them with haphazard, childish abandon. “Auntie would’ve killed us if she saw what we’d done to her temple, but she was quite bedridden by the time we took it over for our fort.”

They sat on the marble benches. The damp and cold seeped through Reese’s trousers, and the chill in the dark woods made him shiver.

“Ah, you’re all done in,” Karl murmured. “We should’ve stayed in my room in front of a roaring fire.”

“No. This is quite all right. I enjoy seeing where you grew up. There was a similar woods near my boyhood home, and of course, we acted out our battles there too.”

“So it continues. Every generation of young man goes off to war thinking it’s going to be like the fun and excitement of those childish games. Such a shame and a waste.” Karl smiled to chase away his momentary melancholy. “But I did not bring you out here to brood on the topic of war.”

Reese raised a brow. "What did you bring me here for?" he asked as if he didn't know the answer.

Karl rose and came to sit by him, and he pressed his leg against Reese's. Crowded close together like this, the hard marble bench beneath them didn't seem so cold. Karl smelled of soap. He'd taken time to wash up and shave at the basin in his room. Reese rubbed his hand over his own chin, still gritty with plaster dust, and wished he'd taken the time to make himself presentable.

But Karl cupped his face and ran his thumb over the rough stubble. "You look good with a bit of beard, Mr. Reese. Rather dark and dangerous, which I'm certain you are." He slipped his other hand around Reese's back and leaned in to kiss him. Drawing away after a light press of lips, he added, "Dangerous to some, but you've saved my life twice now, so I believe you're my hero."

His devilish smile drove the last of the shivers from Reese's body. He was well heated now as Karl sank to his knees before him on the floor of the pavilion and began to unfasten his fly.

"*Da hast du es, mein liebhaber,*" he said as he released Reese's erection and lovingly stroked its length. Karl glanced up at his face, eyes twinkling. "It is time for me to return the favor of last night."

He brought the tip of Reese's engorged cock to his mouth and laved it with his tongue. He then licked all the way up his shaft with a broad stroke. The sight of that wide pink tongue and the warm wetness of it on his member had Reese quivering with pleasure. He gripped the edges of the bench and braced his feet against the floor. His knees were on either side of Karl's broad body, hugging him lightly. The rain continued to drum on the roof, and this precise moment, on this gorgeous, rainy afternoon, would be imprinted on his mind forever after.

The loamy scent of wet earth and the tang of pine needles teased his nose. Reese leaned back against a column of the temple and closed his eyes nearly all the way, but kept them open enough to watch Karl make love to him with his mouth.

The other man's hand moved expertly up and down his shaft while Karl sucked hard on the tip. Reese groaned quietly and thrust into his grip.

Karl glanced up, and his eyes smiled. He moved his hand lower and cupped Reese's balls in one large hand while he swallowed more of his cock, taking it deep into his throat. The heat and wetness bathed him and enfolded him. Reese reached out to rest his hands on Karl's soft blond hair. He rifled his fingers through it and gripped while Karl continued to bob up and down on his cock.

As the speed and hot friction of his sucking mouth increased, the pressure inside Reese mounted. He twisted handfuls of Karl's hair and thrust his hips faster until at last the tension released and bliss shot through him like an arrow from a bow. Energy sizzled the length of his cock and exploded from him. Reese thumped the back of his head against the hard column and gasped as pleasure poured through him.

Karl drew back, swallowing. He pumped Reese's cock a few more times to finish him off and continued to hold him as he murmured a few more endearments in German. A light kiss on the tip of his depleted cock, and then Karl tucked it away and began to refasten Reese's fly.

Karl remained kneeling, forearms resting on Reese's legs as he looked up at him.

Reese pulled himself back from the edges of rapture and focused on the man at his feet. "Thank you."

"It was my pleasure, as you well know. But now, my friend, I believe it's time for some serious talk between us. We managed to travel hours and many miles without a word spoken. I was dazed and half asleep, and not ready to discuss what had happened, but now I'd like to know who you suspect." He paused, then added, "And what part you play in all of this, my guardian angel."

Reese frowned, snapped back to real life and his habitual disposition—the suspicious man who didn't fully trust what anyone said. He'd been lulled by sexual

excitement and Karl's warmth into becoming someone else for a moment, someone softer and weaker. But a spy didn't survive long by giving in to desire. He sighed.

"I've learned to trust hunches, and I have a strong feeling someone in your entourage is involved in the attack."

Karl frowned and stood, his arms leaving behind warm imprints on Reese's legs. "I won't say it's impossible, but I find it highly improbable. They were all present at my uncle's house last night, putting each of them in as much danger as myself." He stared down at Reese, who said nothing. He waited and watched the disbelief in Karl's eyes change into resignation. "Very well. You've met most of them and talked to some of them. Who do you suspect?"

Reese rose to face him. "I couldn't say. But logic tells me there was someone who knows you and your habits, as well as the confederate who threw the second bomb."

Karl walked away from Reese to stare out at the frame of dripping tree branches and the bit of slow-moving brook glimpsed between them.

Reese watched him, giving him an undisturbed moment to acclimate to the idea that one of those closest to him might be a betrayer. He almost saw the moment Karl came to terms with it, as the man's shoulders straightened and his head rose higher. He turned back to Reese. "Why would someone want me dead? Who stands to gain from this?"

"If I knew that, I'd know who your enemy is."

Karl shrugged, and with the lift of his shoulders, the serious air vanished, and mischievous light filled his face. "I must say, I wouldn't be at all surprised if Villiards had been planted in my retinue by an outside agent. I quite despise that man."

He came over to Reese and slipped an arm around his back. "Now, shall we go back to the house and get some rest and something to eat?"

Reese nodded, suddenly bone tired and wanting nothing more than to sleep for several hours.

They trudged back through the woods and gardens. When they reached the house, Karl informed the butler they would be retiring after the rigors of their journey despite the fact it was midafternoon.

“We’ve been through something of an ordeal and wish our sleep to remain undisturbed by any servants, please. And tell the cook not to worry about planning dinner. We will take a cold plate and tea when we awaken.”

After delivering those imperious instructions, Karl led the way upstairs. They reached Reese’s bedroom door. He opened it, went inside, and turned to face the *erbgraf*.

“Good afternoon...Karl.” It was the first time he’d called the man by his given name.

Karl gazed at him with a look so intense, Reese felt stripped bare by it. “I would advise you muss your bed before you come to mine,” His Excellency suggested.

Chapter Ten

Karl woke in the night, sweating like the very devil, his body wrapped intricately around hot, naked flesh. His nose was pressed against Jonathan's nape, and his cock was buried in the groove of his bottom. One of his arms had gone numb from being trapped beneath the other man's body. It felt like deadwood. The other draped comfortably over Jonathan's hip, and his hand curved around Jonathan's semirigid cock. He smiled and licked the salty skin near his mouth. What a delicious way to awaken.

Even with the drapes drawn, Karl could see daylight had faded from the sky. He had no idea what time of night it was, and he didn't really care. Right now he wanted nothing more than to rouse Jonathan with the erection probing his rear, and when they were finished squeezing every ounce of pleasure from each other, go down to the kitchen and rummage up a massive meal of cold cuts from the pantry.

The simple pleasures of life were so good.

Karl peeled his sticky flesh from Jonathan and threw back the blanket to let cool air bathe their skin. Reese murmured a protest and shifted restlessly.

Karl stroked his arm, kissed his shoulder, and nudged him with his cock, beckoning Jonathan toward consciousness. He slid his hand down the man's well-muscle chest, over his concave stomach to his cock. It was harder now and grew even thicker as he wrapped his hand around and began to tug.

Jonathan grunted and pushed into his hand. Ah good, he was awake at last. Karl slid from behind him, pushed Jonathan onto his back, and crouched over him. He gazed down into sleepy eyes as he continued to pump Jonathan's erection.

"I want to take you this way," he said huskily, "so I can see your face when you come."

"From the front?" Jonathan's eyes opened wider. Perhaps he hadn't been aware men could join that way. Karl believed his new lover was quite ignorant about much of lovemaking. He was curious to know more about the man in Jonathan's past who'd done such a poor job of fucking him and had left him afraid to trust.

"Yes, just like this. I'll show you. Are you flexible?"

"I don't know if I'm *that* flexible," Jonathan said wryly.

"Let's find out. Shall we?" Karl grinned and pushed Jonathan's legs up, tilting his pelvis. He leaned down and licked the other man's musky penis, then tongued his balls until Jonathan groaned. When he had him fully relaxed, Karl traced his tongue along the soft strip between balls and anus. He circled the puckered rim, gripping the backs of Jonathan's trembling thighs in his hands to keep them apart.

A louder groan came from the other man as he squirmed against Karl's probing tongue. Karl pulled away and reached for a jar of lubricant he'd placed on the night table before they'd retired. Oh yes, he'd come prepared for this, knowing even before he left his uncle's house he was going to fuck the life out of Jonathan Reese sometime soon. He'd taken a bottle of oil from a cupboard in the water closet. Even an old man like his uncle had needs, and Karl had guessed he would find a lubricant there.

He splashed a bit of the fragrant oil in his hand and slathered his aching cock with it, drawing in a breath at the smooth glide of his hand over the sensitive flesh. Then he set to work on loosening Jonathan's tight hole, pushing in and stretching it with several fingers. Jonathan fiercely clenched the sheets, bunching the material with the strength of his grip.

"Do you like this? Tell me how it feels," Karl prompted as he frigged him with his fingers.

"Full. Good," Jonathan snapped tersely.

“Do you want more?” he teased.

“Yes.” The harsh, gritty snarl made Karl smile.

He moved up, pressing Jonathan’s legs farther back on either side of his head. He placed his cock at Jonathan’s entrance and watched his lover’s face as he slowly pushed inside.

Jonathan grimaced at the initial thrust, his mouth tightening and his brows drawing together. Then his lips parted and rounded into an *O* of pleasure. A soft breath escaped him.

Karl grunted as the ring of muscle stretched around him, barely allowing him entry into the narrow channel. Heat hugged him, and his own breath was stolen by excitement. “Mein Gott, you are so tight,” he murmured.

And then, noticing that Jonathan’s eyes were closed in pleasure, Karl demanded roughly, “Open your eyes and look at me while I fuck you.”

Jonathan obeyed immediately. He looked much younger like this, so open and amazed. He was barely recognizable as the world-weary agent whom Karl had first met as he gazed up at him with wonder in his eyes.

Karl took his time filling Jonathan with the entire length of his shaft before gently withdrawing. He pushed in again, the lubricant easing his way and Jonathan’s loosening muscles granting him easy entry this time. Over and over he retreated and advanced, like an army set to take a position but not quite ready to overrun it. And all the while Karl refused to surrender to the urge to close his eyes and plunge. He continued to look at Jonathan, challenging him to meet his gaze and be with him at the moment of climax.

“Harder,” Jonathan gritted between his teeth at last. “Do it.”

That was the signal Karl had waited for. He began to pump with more vigor, his belly slapping against the backs of Jonathan’s thighs. Need built inside him, growing exponentially with every thrust. He wanted to possess Jonathan’s body, to drill him into the mattress, and he gave in to that desire, pounding, pounding, pounding while the bed squeaked and groaned beneath them.

Jonathan rolled his head on the pillow. "Too much. Keep going." He muttered the contradictory phrases. "Jesus God, right there!" he cried out. His legs, braced against Karl's shoulders, shook as he came. spurts of cum streaked his belly. Ecstasy suffused Jonathan's face, and his eyes had closed when the peak of ecstasy overtook him.

And then Karl couldn't either. He closed his eyes and gave in to the sensations raging through him. The friction of their two bodies gliding together like flint and tinder burst into flames. He was consumed in fire as he exploded inside Jonathan.

After riding out the waves of climax, Karl pulled out of Jonathan and lowered his legs to the bed. He stretched out on top of him, pinning him down and laying his head on the pillow beside him. Karl watched the pulse leap in Jonathan's neck, and the pool of sweat collected in the hollow of his throat. He blew a breath across him. "Hot?"

Jonathan nodded.

"Me too." Karl winced as all the aches and pains he'd been ignoring—his bruised ribs, damaged arm, and various cuts and bruises—began to clamor their disapproval of all the activity. He gingerly rolled off Jonathan to lie beside him on the big bed.

"Are you in pain?" Jonathan looked over at him. "How's your side?"

"It will heal. I've had worse."

Karl deprecated the pain, but Jonathan sat up and began examining him. He brushed back the hair from Karl's temple to reveal the wound there, then moved his hands down to lightly touch his bandaged arm and red- and purple-flushed side.

"You shouldn't be doing strenuous things. You'll strain this rib."

"Yes, Doctor," Karl responded lightly. "I'll be sure to stay on my back next time and let you do all the examining and probing."

"I'm serious." Jonathan frowned. "I've seen small injuries become serious problems when they weren't properly tended."

Such solicitation coming from this aloof man was precious. Karl would've enjoyed teasing him more, but didn't want to drive Jonathan back into his shell.

"All right. I'll be careful," he promised.

Karl's stomach rumbled loudly. "I think we should sneak down to the kitchen and see what the cook has left for us in the pantry. I haven't eaten since yesterday evening, and I'd wager you barely touched your food at the dinner since you were intent on guarding me." He pushed himself up off the mattress with a groan. "Come on."

As Karl pulled on his smalls, trousers, and shirt, he watched Jonathan dress with efficient economy of movement. Another smile shimmered inside him. It seemed every little detail about Jonathan delighted him—from his calm demeanor, to his cleverness, to his sweet vulnerability when at last he put his defenses down. Karl was a bit dismayed by the strength of his feelings for this man he barely knew. He told himself he was being emotional because Jonathan had saved his life twice now, but Karl knew it was more than that.

For the first time ever, he was imagining a sexual liaison as more than a temporary thing. For the first time, he wanted more from a relationship with a man—more time, more confidences, more sexual encounters, and more sharing. A no-strings affair was not going to be enough. But given Karl's exalted position as *erbgraf* and Jonathan's mysterious British government employment, how could they find a way to be together beyond stolen moments?

"You're being unusually quiet," Jonathan said as they descended the stairs and headed for the kitchen. "Are you considering who might be conspiring against you?"

"No. Actually, I was thinking about how you've exploded into my life much like a bomb. I don't think I'm going to be able to let you go again." Years of practice in exchanging light banter gave a devil-may-care lilt to his pronouncement, but Karl wasn't joking at all. He slid a sideways glance at Jonathan to see how he took the words.

Inscrutable as always, the Englishman stared at the corridor ahead of him. "I'm afraid you'll have to. This cannot last, as you well know."

Karl wasn't interested in listening to this sort of talk. "Tell me, Jonathan. Why are you a spy?"

"I fell into it after the war, recruited by my commander. I was certainly not ready to return to civilian life or to the village I came from. I had to do something for a living, and apparently sneaking about and occasionally killing people is something I'm good at." He didn't smile, but his eyes gleamed. "Or I was until recently."

Karl felt a knot of excitement in his chest. He knew he'd disrupted the careful man's precise life. Turnabout was fair play—Jonathan had made him think of things he'd never particularly considered before.

"Ah, I have hurt your career, your reputation as a man who does not give a damn."

Now Jonathan gave him a real smile. Just a fleeting grin, but one filled with genuine amusement and affection.

Karl continued. "Therefore I owe you work, don't I? I could hire you. You could leave this shady employment of yours and become my personal bodyguard. Of course, you would have to be near me at all times, and no one would think anything of it." Brilliant! The solution to how they could maintain a secret relationship had simply popped into his brain.

Jonathan didn't answer as they walked through a door into the servants' world—the pantry, kitchen, scullery, servants' dining area, and more. It was still a few hours before morning, and not even the lowest kitchen maid was up from her bed, stirring the coals in the stove in preparation for breakfast. The rooms were still, the house silent with only the pair of them moving through the hushed night like ghosts.

"I'm quite serious." Karl grasped Jonathan's arm, stopping him. He stared into Jonathan's face, but the other man wouldn't quite meet his eyes, looking somewhere

just past Karl's ear. "I've never been this serious about anything in my entire life. Would you give up your job—whatever it is, exactly—and join my staff?"

For several long moments, Jonathan still didn't speak. It was so quiet there in the corridor that Karl could hear the patter of mouse feet scampering across the kitchen floor beyond. Then, at last, Jonathan spoke.

"You don't really know me."

"Thus the point of wanting you around, so I can get to know you better."

Jonathan drew a deep breath. "You ask too much. I can't indulge in that kind of...ongoing friendship with you."

Karl refused to let him off that easily. "Why not? Do you think I don't fear the danger too? Not the danger of being caught in flagrante, but the danger of caring too much?" Oh Lord, he sounded like a schoolgirl speaking of star-crossed romance. It was humiliating to bare himself so with no shield of sarcasm to protect him, but he plunged on.

"Jonathan, I've seen your bravery in battle and again last night. This would be a different kind of bravery, a much more personal kind. I'm not asking for an immediate answer, but I want you to at least consider my offer." There. Leave it at that, and give the man some time to stew.

Jonathan met his eyes at last and spoke in a clipped tone. "I don't believe I possess that kind of bravery, Your Excellency."

Karl felt a ridiculous stab at the rejection, as if someone had pierced his chest with a bayonet. He swallowed down the pain and smiled. "No need to discuss the matter anymore, then. Let us put such weighty musings aside and have a good meal, shall we?"

He turned away to hide any incriminating expression on his face as he headed toward the pantry door. He knew well where to find the room since he and his cousins used to raid the kitchen like little savages when Cook was looking the other way—or pretending to. Sometimes it had seemed she had left treats out on purpose for them to find.

He located a plate of meats and cheeses, another with dried fruit, such as figs and apricots. There was a crusty loaf of bread and a dish of butter, well covered to keep the mice at bay.

Jonathan joined him, helping to carry the bounty to the table in the servants' hall. They sat in straight-backed chairs at the head of the table.

"You seem to know your way around here."

Karl nodded and cut into the bread. "I spent many a summer with my cousins. I loved it here. For one thing, the cousins on my father's side were all distantly related and much older or younger than I, but also, there was always a sense of tension when members of the Neuschlosswold-Binder family gathered. Tempers held barely in check, knives and wits sharpened, claws barely sheathed. What a power-hungry lot they are."

Jonathan accepted the slice of bread Karl handed to him and began to butter it. "You don't get along well with your father." It was more a statement than a question.

Karl considered it for a moment, chewing and swallowing a hunk of well-aged cheese before telling the truth. "Not very well. My father has expectations. I do my part by not living up to them."

He toyed with a dried fig as he considered the rest. "I am his tool, or perhaps a weapon, an extension of his arm at any rate. It is supposed to be my job to further his goals whatever they might be at any given moment. And they do shift according to the winds of changing international policies. Currently I am to build bridges with our English allies, try to minimize the fact that we were on the opposite side during the Crimea. There are Russian concerns, you see."

"And you hate politics," Jonathan said.

"Not everything about it, just the duplicity and poisonous dealings of my father's methods. But I am good at negotiating, and I do want to do everything in my power to improve things in the duchies. I can't really escape my birthright, for I will be the ruling count someday, no matter how tedious I may find it." He laughed.

“Oh my, don’t I sound like a wretchedly spoiled snob, complaining about my lot in life?”

“It’s good to be able to admit to unhappiness sometimes.” Jonathan regarded the dark orange disk of an apricot before popping it into his mouth.

“Are you happy?” Karl asked. “What would you change about your life if you could?”

Jonathan shrugged and changed the subject. “Can you tell me who would stand to benefit the most from your death? Is there a relative who would assume your title? Or one whose political ambitions would move forward if you were not there to block the way?”

He shook his head in response to Jonathan’s question. “I have some vile relatives, but I don’t believe they’d try to kill me.”

The other man frowned. “Nevertheless, I’d like you to spend some time now telling me about each member of your family and every man in your entourage. Any little bit of information might prove pertinent.”

Karl could see he wasn’t going to be able to ignore Jonathan’s request and that their conversation was not going to drift back into the realm of talking about themselves. No more trying to pry Jonathan from that shell. With a sigh, he embarked on an hour-long description of every single person in the circumference of his life, from his father to his old *Tante* Gretchen, and then every member of his retinue.

The longer he talked, the more he realized how many people in his family despised him—and one another, for that matter—and that he considered none of his servants except Cohen truly trustworthy. How odd to realize that despite constantly being surrounded by people, he really was alone in the world.

“Who would benefit from your death?”

Benefit. He thought of his father, who often used such an odd word for horrible incidents.

“How might we benefit from this event?” he’d demand of Karl. Once, he’d asked the question as he surveyed fifty dead peasants on their lands, killed by an avalanche. Another time it had been after a cousin of a neighboring ruler went mad and killed several young children.

He grimaced at the memory of his father’s cool voice demanding that any situation, no matter how painful, must be viewed objectively.

“You look as if you have swallowed something bitter,” Jonathan said.

“I am attempting to follow my father’s directions. He claims my greatest failing is that I allow sentiment to muddle my intelligence.”

“So you’re stripping sentiment from your view of friends, family, and enemies? Good. Or at least, good for now.” Jonathan reached over and gave his arm an awkward pat.

“Alas, I shall revert to my usual self soon enough,” he said dolefully.

“Even better,” said Jonathan softly, and no doubt he would have grown embarrassed if he knew how his dark eyes shone.

Karl grinned at him. “Don’t look at me like that and expect me to remain as cold as my father.”

The corner of Jonathan’s mouth twitched. He looked down at his plate as if the half-eaten piece of bread was an object of fascination. “Go on,” he told the bread.

Karl concentrated on the question of who would benefit from his death.

If death or injury struck when Karl was among his relations—solid British citizens—London would be outraged, and that would stir the British public to favor the von und zu Neuschlosswold-Binder cause, a definite benefit for the count’s reputation in England. But actual profit or gain? Karl shook his head.

“There is my Uncle Hans-Friedrich,” he said. “My father’s younger brother would become the heir should I die.”

“Tell me about him.”

“There’s no need to look so avid, Jonathan. He would not murder me—or anyone else, for that matter. The man is lazy and has no interest in taking on the duties of the ruling count. My father despises him.”

“What about any other relations? Does he have children?”

“Yes, one boy. I admit my uncle’s son is a different story.” He bit his lip. He’d forgotten about eager young Gerhard, the one family member Karl and his father might agree was worthy of notice.

“Tell me about your cousin.”

Karl picked up a fig and ate it in one bite, enjoying the crunch of the seeds. Concentrating on the moment allowed him to ignore the surprising ache he felt when he thought of Gerhard. He missed the boy. “Another person you must strike from your list. He’s a decent lad. Quite young—only thirteen—and was a funny, bright thing when I last spent time in his company.”

“How long ago was that?”

“I have not talked to him for several years. My father does not wish our paths to cross.”

The last time he’d spent any time with Gerhard, Karl had been teaching him archery in a neglected back garden that bordered a fallow field. Karl had stood behind the boy and placed his hands over Gerhard’s to show him how to smoothly draw the bow into the proper position. Neither of them had heard the count’s approach over the grass.

“*Halt this immediately.*” Karl’s father had barked the command. Of course, both Karl and Gerhard had obeyed. The arrow had flown wild as they let go of the string.

Karl had turned abruptly to see his father regarding him with a look of loathing. “*Erbgraf, return to the castle at once.*”

Without another word, the count had turned on the heel of one of his well-polished boots and had walked away at a quick march pace. Far faster than his usual sedate stroll.

Karl had left Gerhard standing on the lawn, a shocked expression on his round young face. When he'd caught up with his father, Karl had grabbed his arm. "*What was the meaning of that?*"

His father had aimed a glacial blue stare at Karl's hand. Only after Karl let go of him and dropped the offending hand to his side did the count shift that hard gaze to Karl's face. "*You know well. I won't have you sully the one pure member of our family.*" He'd continued walking at a slower pace now, Karl walking at his side in silence, puzzling over the words.

Karl hadn't understood at first, and he'd almost staggered when he finally comprehended. For the first time, his father had alluded to the unspoken secret of Karl's alliances with men.

"*I would never think of a boy like Gerhard in any unseemly manner. I would never touch him.*" Karl hadn't raised his voice, but he'd felt his face go red with fury.

"*Ah, so I was mistaken.*" His father had regained his normal, slightly bored expression. He gave a single nod. "*But I think it best if you do not spend much time with your cousin.*"

And after that, he'd somehow arranged their lives so that Karl and Gerhard rarely met and were never alone together.

Karl wondered if Gerhard's personality was growing more like the feckless Hans-Friedrich or the ambitious count.

"What about one of your uncle's servants? Might one of them be hoping to help his master become heir to the count?" Jonathan's crisp voice interrupted his brooding.

"I doubt it. He is not the sort to inspire loyalty. And all servants of the von und zu Neuschlosswold-Binder family are beholden to my father. He holds absolute

power, and they are in his pay, after all. Say what you like about the count, he knows how to control men.”

“He’s taught you well, then.”

Karl laughed, genuinely astonished.

“I am serious.” Jonathan took a bite of the bread, chewed, and swallowed. In an almost grudging manner, he continued. “I have watched you with the men in your entourage. You are a natural leader. A good balance of stern and friendly.”

“Ah, but the friendly is very wrong for a man in my position. I am entirely too informal.”

“This is your father’s opinion?”

“Of course. Sadly, I don’t adjust my manner to suit his notions of strictest propriety.”

“Good.” Jonathan dropped the rest of his bread on a plate and gave a firm, single nod. Karl was reminded of the count’s decisive manner.

Karl hid his smile. He didn’t think Jonathan would appreciate the comparison.

He hated to bring up the subject, but the time for pleasant idleness was done. “What is your plan, Mr. Reese? You said you had one, and that was why I had to leave Uncle Merridew. How will you discover the culprit if we are here?”

“Your uncle and a friend of mine have found some gentlemen to keep an eye on some of the people we suspect.”

“My servants?”

“Among others. And they will also watch the Merridew house in London. They will see who returns to finish up the work. It’s that simple.”

“So you’re saying that my uncle lives in a house that might possibly be under attack again.” Karl rose to his feet. He’d suspected as much, but he’d allowed Merridew and Jonathan to force him to leave the city. To be honest, he’d loved the idea of showing Jonathan his uncle’s estate.

He stretched and rubbed his eyes. Alas, now it was time to abandon the bliss they shared for true responsibility.

He headed toward the front of the house. Jonathan followed as he pushed through the green baize door.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to sleep for a few hours and then leave. I don’t want my uncle to face the danger that belongs to me. I’ve spent my life being told what to do and when to do it, Jonathan. And I went along with this because, frankly, an attempt on my life left me rather shaken. But I cannot abide the idea that we’ve blithely run off to the country while my uncle stays in his town house possibly facing an attack.”

Chapter Eleven

Karl started up the stairs, and Jonathan still came after him. “Lord Merridew is safe. The guards Gilley and I arranged are the very best.”

“Then I shall be safe too.” He stopped and faced Jonathan. “Tell me. In war, would you respect a leader who was content to stay at the back when his men faced battle? I believe you’d never fight for a captain you didn’t respect. I must act as captain in this situation.”

A look of pain crossed Jonathan’s features. He went pale. What had caused that response?

“Am I wrong?” Karl asked.

“No,” Jonathan said. “I knew my captain would face the same dangers I did.”

His mouth had gone tight, his eyes bleak, and Karl understood there was a story there. “This captain—”

But Jonathan interrupted, his voice cold. “Think, Karl. If you should march back there, your enemy would realize you were not injured after all. They’d realize you were on to them and there was some sort of counterplot.”

Karl walked back down the stairs. Jonathan was right, of course. “I should have insisted on staying with my uncle,” Karl said, bitter that he’d once again allowed other men to direct his life. “I’m a fair shot, and I know how to fight. Instead I left Lord Merridew, an older man, to take care of my problems. And for no good reason. Explain why this is necessary, but pray don’t make it lengthy. I might want to catch the early morning train back to the city.”

They walked into the sitting room near the bottom of the stairs. Karl stood, arms folded over his chest, waiting. Reese knew it was time to admit the truth. He wanted to reach for the other man but thought better of touching him. "If you'd stayed in London, I-I could not. They would have known I was there at your uncle's house, and that would not have been usual in the normal course of events. I'd have had to leave to stop the talk, and if I wasn't with you, I couldn't protect you."

Karl let his hands fall to his sides and drew in a long breath. "Ah. Indeed." And he gave a sudden, startling crack of laughter. "Protect me, is it?"

Reese walked away, mortified that he'd not understood his own reasons better.

"My first priority is to find the man who wants to kill you." Track and kill the killer with his bare hands, preferably.

"I applaud your sentiment. But I wonder why you won't look at me now and admit the entire truth. For such a brave man, you occasionally act the coward."

"What truth do you want?" Reese couldn't turn away from the window. He felt his face burn as he stared out over the lawn.

Karl came to him and gently laid his hand on Reese's shoulder. A formal gesture, but still entirely intimate.

"This is a guess on my part. A hopeful one. Perhaps your admission that part of the reason you wanted to be here instead of London is that you wished to be with me? You crave the pleasure you and I have together."

Reese wanted to protest, but knew he couldn't. He'd been selfish, indulging in his longing to have constant access to Karl in a spot where he wouldn't have to share him with anyone. Such a desire was new, utterly unlike his usual way. Perhaps for the first time in his life, selfish craving had trumped duty, and worse even, muddled clear thinking. No wonder he had been able to hide that particular truth from himself, no matter how obvious it might be now.

"All right. I admit it." He turned away from the window and met Karl's gaze. He successfully kept his voice light, as if he found the topic was amusing. "Is there any other weakness in me you want to expose?"

“When I spoke of your captain, I noticed you flinched. Ah, no, that is far too strong a description of your response. I noted the shadow of a grimace. I’m well trained to read people, Jonathan. Even hidden people like you.”

“Your Excellency, you are astute,” was all Jonathan could say. But then he swallowed and managed, “I trusted the wrong man. That is all.”

“This captain, he’s why you don’t easily trust people now?”

“I never have.” He didn’t know what else to do with himself. He couldn’t stay near Karl, so he walked to a chair and sat. “And I have no wish to dwell in the past.” *Especially that past.* Although the customary sorrow and emptiness he’d felt when he thought of the captain was gone. Now he only felt anger that he’d been taken in. Anger and embarrassment that he’d allowed emotion to blind him to the fact his beloved captain was a criminal in league with smugglers, using the information he gleaned from his position to alert the smugglers to the movements of the excisemen.

“Very well. If you’re uninterested in the past, let’s discuss the future.” Karl’s smile was more like a leer. He walked over to the sofa facing Reese and sat, back straight as always, but hands casually resting on his knees as he examined Reese. “I’ve already suggested a plan I believe would suit us both. Once we settle this nonsense, you will submit to that conversation, my friend. Submit to my will, for once.”

Gad, the man was relentless. Jonathan forced himself to ignore the smile. “Karl, I apologize for forcing you to flee London.”

The smile was so broad and bright now, it was impossible not to return it. “Apology accepted.”

“We must think of the more immediate future,” Reese continued. “Do you think Lord Merridew is right to guess that your father should arrive in two days to visit you?”

Karl sighed. “Yes, I think he’d like an excuse to come to London anyway. A gravely injured son would be perfect. Lord Merridew can keep the servants at bay,

but he can't very well bar the door against my own father. God knows I wish he could." Karl frowned. "All right, Mr. Reese, I will return my attention to the matter at hand, and I take your meaning. It would be best if the culprit was revealed before my father comes to England."

Reese nodded. "We're not entirely cut off out here in the country, you know. Gilley promised to send word about any sort of developments. The train makes London less than an hour away, and Lord Merridew ordered a horse be made available at the inn next to the train station. Gilley will send a messenger."

"Nevertheless, I think my hiding is unnecessary. I am much better now. Not a trace of a headache, thanks to your fine care. I've decided I must return to London this evening, under the cover of dark," Karl said.

Reese shook his head but didn't speak. He already knew Karl well enough to understand there was no point in arguing with him when he displayed that streak of autocratic decisiveness.

"I feel your disapproval, Mr. Reese. I'm not such a fool to go to my uncle's house, but I am fit enough to help. Don't worry; I shall also stay away from the hotel and my fellow countrymen." He raised his golden brows. "Perhaps you know of a good place a man might hide?"

Reese did know of a place—a small apartment over a warehouse. Three clean small rooms with unpolished wooden floors and no decoration to speak of. He heard himself saying, "Yes. My rooms. Not too many blocks from your uncle's home, although in a far less esteemed section of the city."

No one had ever seen where he lived, so perhaps it was a sort of fear that made Reese's heart speed up.

Every day that passed, every minute, he was letting Karl further into his life than anyone ever had gone. Much of that had to do with Karl's overwhelming, effervescent, magnetic character, but maybe some of it had to do with himself. He'd had enough of his solitary life. Maybe he'd simply been waiting for a man like Karl to shake up his world.

“You are welcome to stay,” Reese said quickly before he could change his mind about allowing Karl into his private sanctum. A moment of panic held him. He never invited anyone to the place he lived. He reminded himself that he had no attachment to those three rooms. He’d vanished before—more than once—and could become a ghost again if it proved necessary. If Karl proved to be an enemy after all.

Even as the thought came to him, he recognized how essentially ridiculous he was being. This was not how normal men outside of wartime lived. *You are not at war any longer.* The realization was hardly new, but as always, it seemed profound and almost...odd.

He was still fooling himself, but he couldn’t bear the thought of needing anyone. He needed nothing. God, he was too tired to face this idiocy now. That was the source of his muddled thinking. Exhaustion.

“Think about it.”

“I shall,” Karl said gravely. “Thank you.”

Reese walked to the staircase. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Karl didn’t protest. He only said, “It is already morning, isn’t it?”

Reese went upstairs to sleep alone in his own bed. He had to rest or he’d collapse. As he fell asleep, still fully dressed in someone else’s clothing, a vague sensation of loss filled him. Naturally they had to be clearheaded to face whatever danger lay in London. But these hours might have been his last chance to hold Karl, sleep with him in his arms. He’d never regretted the sensible course of action before, even the more difficult choices.

He woke just before dawn and went to Karl’s room. Karl lay on his back, awake and dressed. “Good morning,” he said cheerfully as he pushed himself up. “I missed holding you.”

Reese’s mouth went dry. “We needed the sleep.”

“And I imagine we wouldn’t have slept if we’d been in a bed together.” Karl’s smile was wide and wicked.

Reese cleared his throat. "Are you still determined to return to London?"

Karl nodded and rose, all easy grace.

Reese considered going to him, tasting a fast kiss, but he suspected he couldn't bear only a brief touch. He walked back to the door. "I'll go see if the servants are stirring."

"It's well past five. Naturally they are." Karl was serious, of course. In his world, all servants would be up long before dawn.

Reese pulled on his boots and went down the stairs. There was a sudden fierce banging on the door. He reached for his pistol, which usually sat in the holster under his jacket. Damn and blast it, he'd left it upstairs.

The banging started again, and he went to answer it.

Herr Doktor Smelter stood there, out of breath, pale, and unusually grim faced.

Smelter solemnly greeted Reese, then bowed low as Karl came in the entrance hall. "I'm delighted to see that you're well after all, Your Excellency. I arrived by a milk train. I'm here to tell you that you must come back to London. I fear for your life out here in such an isolated place. The men who would wish to kill you are fully aware of where you are hiding."

Reese interrupted, "How did you find us?"

"Lord Merridew let it slip yesterday. He's not the best coconspirator."

Interesting. Reese had thought that other than exhibiting some nervous eagerness, Merridew had seemed perfectly good at lies and deception. He'd remained surprisingly steadfast and convincing as he'd talked to the police and the count's men.

Smelter indicated the carriage and its yawning driver waiting on the gravel drive. "Come quickly, Erbgraf. We must leave by the next train."

"I'll fetch my coat." Karl hurried back upstairs.

“If you’re not ready to leave, Mr. Reese, I can make sure His Excellency is on the six-forty train, and you might take a later one. I will keep him safe.”

How had he learned Reese’s real name?

“No, I’ll be ready.”

Smelter beamed at him and looked like the jolly doctor again. “Very good, very good. I must say that reassures me. I’m not used to such goings-on. I’m grateful for the numbers.”

Reese lingered near the door, unwilling to leave Herr Smelter alone. He wondered if the man noticed he hadn’t invited him in. Where were the servants? It was past six now. He listened for sounds of the household stirring but heard nothing. It didn’t matter; he wouldn’t trust servants he didn’t know to keep an eye on the doctor anyway.

He turned his attention back to Smelter. “Where is Herr Cohen? Did he send you?” Reese asked. It made sense it would be Cohen. After all, he was the only one of the *erbgraf*’s entourage who’d made it clear he didn’t believe the story Reese and Lord Merridew had fed them of Karl’s injuries. He’d be the one to track them to this house.

But Smelter scowled. “That beast. He was behind that attack, I swear. Or at least knew of it. He is not to be trusted. I have no firm evidence yet, but I’m certain I can prove Cohen’s been up to no good.” He rubbed his snub little nose. “He was meeting with the most suspicious character, speaking Russian. I saw him at the hotel with the man. I believe they met several times.”

Reese remembered the man he couldn’t identify. He wondered how much more Smelter knew. “I’ve heard rumors that a Russian was involved in the bombing.”

“Exactly. That’s what I’ve heard as well.” Smelter nodded vigorously, looking pleased. “It travels quickly, this news.”

It occurred to Reese that this “news” might explain the reason whomever was behind this had picked Volkovsky as the scapegoat—to bring down Cohen, who was

far too canny to meet with conspirators in public. For the first time, Reese felt more inclined to trust Cohen.

Karl appeared. His hair was tousled and bright against the dark wool collar of his coat. Reese felt his heart constrict—desire so strong seized him, he had to lay his hand on Karl's back, just for a moment. A simple touch to reassure himself...of what? That Karl was real? Safe? His?

Karl stopped fidgeting and looked at him with knit brows, as if trying to discern Reese's reason for the touch.

He hadn't been trying to send a message, but he was glad Karl thought he gave one. Perhaps he'd interpret it as a warning to be cautious.

"One moment," Karl said brightly. "I forgot something."

"We hardly have time, Erbgraf," Smelter said, but Karl was already hurrying toward the back of the house.

He reappeared less than a minute later pulling on gloves. That had been what he'd fetched? Pity, Reese thought. He'd rather the man had gone to the gun room for a weapon. They'd fled London without collecting Karl's little pistol from Claridge's, an oversight Reese regretted now.

Karl showed that he was on his guard when he spoke to Reese in a low voice as they walked out of the house. "I recognize the carriage driver. He sells flowers next to the train station and offers travelers lifts."

The hack driver jumped down to grab Karl's bag of the clothes he'd collected from Lord Merridew's house.

"We must go quickly," Smelter insisted. "The train."

Reese didn't have time to go upstairs for his gun. He should have carried it with him day and night. How utterly stupid lust had made him. Even if he had the chance to hunt down a weapon, he didn't want to leave Karl alone with a "friendly soul" like Smelter and the village hack driver.

They climbed into the carriage and set off for the station. They didn't speak to one another during the short ride. Smelter sat with a glazed half smile on his face, as if he was thinking of pleasant though slightly embarrassing memories. Karl watched Smelter, a thoughtful expression on his handsome face. And Reese watched them both. He longed for his gun. Or for the blade he often carried. Or a good stout stick.

They pulled into the station as the train arrived.

"You pay, Herr Reese," Smelter ordered rather than requested. He grabbed Karl's arm. "We must hurry."

Reese had the coins out and thrown toward the driver almost before the words were out of Smelter's mouth. Was this an attempt to slow him down so he'd miss the train?

Reese easily caught up with the other two, and they ran toward the first class compartment.

Smelter moved quickly for a man of his build—and for a man constantly peering around the platform. Fear, Reese thought. Smelter ripped open the door to an empty compartment and hurried Karl in, pelting in after him. He almost shut the door in Jonathan's face. But he beamed as Jonathan entered the train and slammed the door behind him.

"Gut, gut," Smelter gasped. "We made it." He collapsed against the velvet cushions across from Reese and Karl and gave a little sigh of contentment. "I only hope that driver managed to get your bag to the proper place, Your Excellency."

The train's whistle shrieked and lurched into motion. They'd been underway for a couple of miles when the conductor entered and collected the fare from Smelter, who hurriedly pushed the money at him.

"Now we can relax at last," Smelter said and smiled at them both. But Reese had no intention of doing anything of the sort. He looked around the compartment, searching for anything that might work as a weapon. The heavy brass lantern on

the wall, he decided. He moved so that he could feel the heat of Karl's body next to him, as ready as he could be for whatever they'd find in London. Or on this train.

Karl watched Jonathan, wondering if Smelter could sense the tension in the man's stillness. The good doctor seemed to lapse back into his normal chatty self as the train swayed toward London. He beamed at Karl, then at Jonathan, who only stared back, unblinking.

"This train is quite good," Smelter said. "It travels at speeds of nearly forty miles an hour, did you know? We shall reach London in less than an hour."

He reached for the curtains and covered the windows to the corridor.

"Ah, that is good." He sighed. He dipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out a silver flask. A familiar sight to Karl, who'd frequently taken a few swigs of the excellent brandy Smelter carried. It was a joke in their retinue: Smelter and his restorative flask was the first line of defense against cold evenings and boring events.

"Your Excellency? Herr Reese?" Smelter held out the flask, smiling broadly.

As always, he offered it to Karl first. Karl took it absently.

"No," said Jonathan, plucking it calmly from his hands. He aimed an absolutely humorless smile at Smelter and watched the doctor as he said, "We need to stay completely sober, Your Excellency."

"Of course," Karl said.

Jonathan held out the flask to the doctor. "But go ahead, Doctor. If your nerves are overset, you should probably take some. A medicinal dose, I think you'd call it?" His voice was quiet.

The doctor shook his head vigorously. "Oh, no, no. You are quite right, Herr Reese." He eagerly reached for the flask. But Jonathan didn't let go of it.

"You still seem quite worried, Herr Doctor," Jonathan said. "I think it would be best if you drink some of this. Don't you, Your Excellency?"

Karl noticed that Smelter had gone pale. "I need to keep my wits about me," the doctor said, sounding angry now. "I was wrong to turn to drink for comfort."

The anger was more like fear, Karl realized, his heart sinking. "Smelter. I order you to drink some. Now," he commanded.

Smelter snatched the silver object from Jonathan and uncorked it. But Karl, watching closely, saw he didn't open his lips as he put the thing to his mouth. Bloody hell, as his uncle would say. Karl reached deep into his coat pocket.

But as he pretended to drink, Smelter reached into his own jacket pocket. A moment later, he tossed the flask away. It bounced, and the contents splashed on the seat, filling the compartment with the heavy scent of brandy. In his shaking hand, he held a pistol pointed at Karl.

Old instincts kicked in, and Karl twisted sideways and down as he lunged across the divide between the seats, the kitchen knife he'd drawn from his pocket in his hand. Next to him Jonathan kicked out. There was a heavy thud, and Smelter shouted in pain.

Jonathan was absolutely silent as he slammed his fist into the doctor's back, toppling him to the floor. Smelter lay on his stomach. The gun slid into the corner near the window, and Karl scooped it up. He searched around for the knife and saw the handle lying on the floor. It had snapped off. A shoddily made thing, he reflected as he yanked the blade from the wooden seat beneath the cushion. No way to hold it now, so he shoved it under the seat.

He sucked in a deep breath and forgot the knife as he watched Jonathan deal with the doctor.

Smelter howled as Jonathan, still without a word, his face expressionless, rolled him over and pinned him. He gripped the doctor's fat throat and slammed the back of his head against the floor. "Who hired you?"

Smelter cried out. "I can't... I don't know."

Jonathan lifted his head by the hair and smashed it on the floor with an audible *thump* that made Karl wince. "Who?"

"I've never seen his face," Smelter gasped.

Again his head cracked against the floor. Karl opened his mouth to protest, but held his breath. This was the side of Jonathan he'd seen on the battlefield—grim, determined, deadly, but effective.

"Talk, or I'll throw you off this train at the next bridge."

The doctor began to sob, tears streaming down his cheeks and into his ears. "I'm telling you the truth. The man who hired me communicates with me by notes."

"Left where?"

"Delivered by courier or sometimes by my contact."

"Who is your contact? What does he look like?"

"I don't know his name, I swear," Smelter wailed as Jonathan lifted his head again. "I can describe him."

"Then do so." He hauled the shaking fat man up by his collar and threw him back onto the opposite seat.

"Tall. Blond, er, thin. With a scar on his forehead." From his hesitation, Smelter was clearly inventing these details.

While Karl held the gun on the doctor, Jonathan searched the man for more weapons. Then, barely out of breath, he sat down next to Karl. "Talk," he ordered.

"How long have you been working against me?" The hand Karl held the gun with may have been steady, but his voice shook. He straightened his back and tried again. "Answer me, Smelter."

"I did not wish to. I did not! They came to me." He fell silent.

Jonathan asked, "When were you first approached?"

The doctor blubbered and gasped for breath, wiping his streaming eyes and nose with the cuff of his shirtsleeve. When Jonathan leaned menacingly toward him, he gulped and began to speak in German, his English apparently deserting him under stress.

“A little over a month ago, before we left Prague. I was in a certain club, enjoying a fine young lady’s company, as it were, when I was snatched from the bed, blindfolded, and taken I know not where. My captors never took the blindfold off as several men questioned me, then told me the part I must play in the conspiracy against the erbgraf’s life.”

“And you went along with this, why?” Karl still trembled, his blood raging through his veins at the betrayal.

“They threatened my family. I had no choice.”

“He’s lying,” Jonathan remarked almost conversationally, also in German.

“No, no. I swear it’s the truth,” Smelter wailed. “I was told the erbgraf must be eliminated, and it would happen while we were in London. More information would be forthcoming and I should wait for a missive. They let me go in front of my house.”

“You could have told my father and me the truth. We would have protected your family.”

Smelter shook his head. “I know how these kinds of things work. I could not take that chance with my children’s lives.”

“Describe the man you met with here in England,” Jonathan said.

Smelter’s complexion began to fade from bright red to merely pink as he began to calm down. “I only saw a little of him in the dark. I’d received a note to meet him near Lord Merridew’s house. He told me where the...device would be and how to set it on the night of the party.”

“Would you recognize him if you saw him again?”

“He was of medium height and build. Completely nondescript. I don’t know if I could pick him out of a crowd.” He looked at Jonathan. “I might have described a man like you, eh?”

“Then you are quite useless to us.” Jonathan shifted in his seat, and Smelter cringed. “Your Excellency, is there any reason I should not kill this man?”

Karl understood intimidation was Jonathan's tool and felt chilled although he backed his move. "Perhaps later, Mr. Reese, but right now I think we must keep him alive. He could yet prove useful."

"Then I must at the very least tie him up so he can't scamper away. Have you a pocket handkerchief I might borrow?" Jonathan rose and bound Smelter's wrists with one kerchief rolled into a tight coil. He used another pair and the doctor's tie to bind his ankles together. Then Jonathan looked at Karl and nodded at the door.

The men left their prisoner trussed in the traveling compartment and stood in the corridor of the swaying train car to discuss the situation. Karl kept a hand on the door. If the train slowed at all, he'd have to make certain the doctor didn't try to escape by the outside door.

"He's lying," Jonathan said again. "But not about everything. When I heard him outside your uncle's house that night, arranging payment, I thought he was in charge. But now I believe he's a pawn. He knows who hired him, and he fears the man."

"I know," Karl agreed. "Smelter is not such a good liar. I should have recognized something was wrong with him before. He's been quite twitchy for some time now. Poisoning me... I wonder how fast acting the stuff was?" He shook his head. The thought of how close he came to drinking from the flask made him swallow back a surge of nausea. "And if it was obvious he'd drugged me, how would he deal with you, I wonder?"

Jonathan must have noticed his moment of queasy fear. He touched Karl's arm. "Never mind him." Jonathan's dark brows drew together. "The question is not only who stands to benefit from you and Lord Merridew's death, but who is powerful enough to frighten Smelter more than the threat of death?"

Another prickle of fear touched Karl's neck. No, he wouldn't let himself even consider panic. "We'll ply him with more questions," Karl said. "But this time, let me do the talking."

Jonathan smiled. "You're saying I lack finesse?"

Karl reached out and gave his hand a quick squeeze, reassuring himself of Jonathan's presence. God, he'd like to pull him into his arms and hold him for a moment, but this wasn't the time or place for such a demonstration. "A little honey to sweeten a bitter brew is all I'm saying."

Jonathan sobered at Karl's choice of words. "He would have killed you just now. Don't forget that. The fat bastard is dangerous."

They returned to the compartment and closed the door behind them, then once more took their seats across from Smelter. The plump man's face was shiny with sweat, and he stared at them like a mouse facing a pair of cats.

"I didn't wish to become involved in such a horrible plot, Your Excellency. You must believe me. It is not poison. Just a-a way to make you sleep." He looked at them pleadingly. Jonathan shook his head, just once, and Karl understood and silently agreed. Smelter lied about what was in the flask.

Jonathan would be the one to threaten Smelter. He'd cajole. "Yes, Herr Smelter, I know," he said soothingly. "You've always been loyal to me and my family—until now. Do you have any idea who might be behind this? Perhaps there is a clue in your memory, a voice, a phrase, some indication of who stands to gain from my demise. Or why they'd target my uncle's house."

Smelter shook his head, his jowls wobbling. "I do remember one voice, very deep, and he spoke in Russian, as they all did. He said something about striking a blow against two countries in one dramatic gesture, leaving a calling card, so to speak. He ranted about a glorious cause and other anarchic babble."

"I see."

Smelter warmed to his story. "The man said, 'Who stands to benefit from this situation? Every workingman who has ever railed against the tyranny of an empire and longed for the freedom to call his land his own.'"

Karl froze and swallowed. Something about those words, that particular phrasing, sparked a memory in him, but he couldn't quite place it.

The compartment was silent for a moment except for the clattering of the wheels on the track. Karl felt Jonathan's gaze on him, curious, questioning. He returned the look and gave another small shake of his head, letting Jonathan know his silence meant nothing. He'd just had a momentary experience of hearing an echo in Smelter's words, but he wasn't certain of what. It meant nothing.

"What shall we do with him when we reach the station?" Jonathan leaned close to whisper, and his warm breath on Karl's cheek sent a flush of desire through him, even under these dire circumstances. "We can't hand him over to the police until his usefulness is played out."

"We'll take him to my uncle's house with us," Karl muttered back, not particularly caring if Smelter overheard him.

"Your Excellency, I know I have betrayed you in the worst way possible. I don't deserve your forgiveness. I should be hanged for such treasonous behavior, but I beg of you, show mercy," Smelter whined. "My family. You understand the devotion of a father to his children, his wife. Their well-being comes first in his mind, supplanting all reason. My honor has been compromised by my blind love for my dearly beloved family."

"I do understand," Karl assured him. "Family comes first. I will take that into account if you continue to share everything you know about this conspiracy and its perpetrators."

"Yes, Your Excellency. Absolutely. I am your man." Smelter spoke with his usual obsequious lilt, as if he believed Karl was completely won over by his abject pleading.

"Tell me truthfully, now. Are any of the others involved? Sechsman, Greber, Villiards?" Karl paused, then added, "Cohen?"

"No, Your Excellency. None of them to my knowledge."

And somehow that bit had the ring of truth to it. Although he could be covering for others, it seemed more likely Smelter would want to point blame toward anyone in the entourage besides himself. Karl nodded.

“What was to be the contingency plan if the bombing failed?” Jonathan abruptly spoke up. “Has your contact spoken to you since the bombing? Were you told to follow the erbgraf to the country and get him to drink from your poisoned flask? Somehow I don’t believe that’s the only alternative solution that was planned.”

“I did not see the man. I only received a note wrapped around a vial.” Smelter squirmed. “If they have other plans, I don’t know of them. I’m merely a cog in this machine.”

There was no more time for questions as the train pulled into the station, and they had to prepare to leave the train. Jonathan untied Smelter’s ankles, grasped him by the arm, and roughly pulled him from the seat.

He clapped Smelter’s hat on his head, then picked up his own, which had got slightly dented in the fray.

“Let me carry the pistol.” Jonathan held out his hand to Karl, demanding, not asking for the weapon. “You keep your eyes open, and stay close behind me. We’re not out of danger yet.”

As Jonathan led Smelter from the compartment, Karl saw the back of the man’s hair was matted with blood from his head wound. Jonathan gripped him by the arm and held the gun in his other hand. Karl felt like some damsel in distress bringing up the rear. He’d wanted to keep the pistol but hadn’t wanted to challenge Jonathan in front of their prisoner.

Their prisoner. Smelter, a man who’d been part of his life for years, would have killed him today. The bomb attempt had been bad enough, but there was something much more personal about offering poison. Karl shuddered at the cold-bloodedness of it.

He shook off his mood and paid close attention as they exited the train to the teeming platform. Even this early in the day the station was busy. An attack could come at any moment if Smelter had warned his confederate to be waiting at the station for them.

The crowd was full of men of medium height and build and nondescript appearance, any one of whom could be a coconspirator in Karl's assassination. Karl had adopted an air of nonchalance about his life being in danger for Jonathan's benefit, but in truth, he was unsettled and wary. His gaze whipped from right to left, searching for any suspicious activity. Meanwhile Jonathan walked close beside Smelter, his pistol hidden near his side.

They were nearly out the terminal, the crowd dispersing in various directions as people reached the street, when Karl heard the sharp crack of a weapon being discharged. He dropped to a crouch, expecting the sharp sting of a bullet to tear through his flesh but felt nothing. And then Jonathan barreled into him, tackling him the rest of the way to the ground. For the second time in as many days, Karl lay sprawled beneath Jonathan's protective body.

Karl lifted his head, taking in the scene around him. Many people, oblivious to the gunshot, casually went about their business, while others cried out and whirled around, searching for the source of the noise, or hurried away. Someone screamed for the police.

Herr Smelter lay facedown on the ground. It took Karl a moment to realize this wasn't a self-preserving action. The man had been hit. The sniper had missed his intended target—Karl.

"Get off," Karl mumbled as he struggled to rise, pushing his valiant protector off his back.

Jonathan leaped up and searched for the shooter while Karl crawled over to Smelter and felt for a pulse in the man's neck. Although his flesh was still warm, Karl detected no heartbeat or sign of breathing.

"He's dead." Karl climbed to his feet and stared down at the corpse of his doctor.

Someone shouted, "There they are!" Karl swung around, hoping to see the shooter, but the person shouting pointed at him. Two coppers ran in their direction, truncheons out.

Karl tensed, ready to run. He nearly jumped out of his skin when Jonathan grabbed his arm and whispered, "Melt in."

"What?"

"We'll back away, slowly. And then we'll walk off. No running. Come on, keep that horrified expression on your face. Good, but back up. We don't need to be found with weapons."

The policemen were shouting for witnesses—did anyone see anything? And could the ladies and gentlemen please back up? Everyone in the station was pressing forward to look at the dead body of Smelter, including the policemen. Jonathan and Karl simply allowed everyone else to push past them.

In less than a minute, they'd reached the back of the cluster of people.

Reese looked around as if searching for a familiar face as they made their way through the crowd. No one watched them. No one followed. The shooter was gone.

They sped up as they walked through the terminal and out into the weak sunshine of a London morning.

"Did you spot the killer?"

"No. I'm sorry," Reese said. He felt a low thrum of rage at Smelter, at himself for not finding the other assassin.

At Karl for mattering too damn much.

"Too busy saving my life again? Really, Jonathan. This is getting to be a bad habit."

Reese had to smile.

He strode to the waiting hackneys and gave Gilley's address. "We can't go to your uncle's, but Gilley should know what's going on."

They were soon bowling along the street fast enough that no one would be able to easily wrench open the door and get at Karl. Reese relaxed for the first time since he'd opened the door to Smelter that morning.

* * *

A surprised manservant greeted them at the door. "Mr. Gilley is not available."

"He's preparing for work, I know," Reese said. "Please inform him that Mr. Reese needs to speak to him. Immediately." He pushed past the servant and into the hall. Karl made apologetic sounds at the servant as Reese opened a door off the front hall.

A parlor. The next door was a small study. That was better. Closer to the back of the house in case they needed to flee. They wouldn't, but...

"We'll wait."

The servant made a faint protest.

"Don't worry, we won't steal anything, and we'll wait here," Reese said. "Please fetch Mr. Gilley."

Karl looked around the small room with interest and nodded at the bookshelf. "He speaks several languages, your Mr. Gilley."

"He's not mine."

Karl walked to a sofa and sat, looking perfectly at ease as usual, though his face was still pale and he seemed lost in thought. He took up a great deal of space in the rather cramped room. He stretched out his long legs. Reese noticed that the carpet under Karl's boots was threadbare. Interesting that Gilley didn't seem to be wealthy. That meant he was far more honest than Reese had suspected—and perhaps an easy target for bribe-bearing villains.

"I wonder," Karl said and paused. "Do you know what I think, Jonathan?"

Reese had stopped near the desk, where he considered opening the drawers. He looked into those blue eyes and smiled. "No, but I know you'll tell me what you're thinking."

"You don't appear annoyed by my tendency to share my thoughts."

"No." Reese took in a slow breath. "No, I like it."

Karl grinned. "That is good to know." For a long moment they held each other's gazes, and Jonathan felt one sort of tension ebb while another, far more intriguing tension, built. Karl's eyes held power over him. Another one of those maudlin, sentimental thoughts, but he wouldn't mock himself. He was too tired, too heartily glad that Smelter and his cohort hadn't succeeded in killing Karl.

"Go on," he finally said. "What were you thinking?"

"Ah. Grim reality again. I was thinking of Smelter, who took the bullet meant for me."

"Smelter?" Reese didn't shout, but he came close. "He deserved to die. He would have killed you."

"But the man has three small children. Some arrangement will have to be made. Cohen will take care of this."

"If he isn't the one behind the attempts to kill you."

"The idea of Cohen as a conspirator to commit murder is ridiculous. The man grumbles and sighs, but he is absolutely loyal to me, as I've told you before."

"Oh?"

"Yes, to the point that he's obviously been torn about his real duty, which is to my father."

Reese narrowed his eyes. "Are you that sure he's your friend?"

"I do not think this is merely a matter of fondness. Murdering me wouldn't make sense for other reasons."

Impatiently, Reese waved a hand. "Go on."

"I know my father considers Cohen an able man but has never given him preferential treatment."

"And you do?"

"Yes. I count on him, and he knows it. If I were to die, then Cohen would be back with the count's retinue, no longer valued and rarely consulted—simply

ordered about. The count wouldn't allow anyone of Cohen's lineage to hold real power."

"A Jew?" Reese asked.

Karl nodded.

The door opened, and Gilley rushed into the room, buttoning his waistcoat. "Gentlemen. What is going on? I just received a report that Mr. Smelter boarded the milk train for Buckinghamshire early this morning, and then you show up. Did Smelter find you? Oh. Wait. Good Lord! He must have, or you wouldn't be here. My blessedly stupid agent didn't follow him."

"Calm yourself, Gilley."

"Of course, of course." Gilley adjusted his sleeves and gestured to the door to the study. "Shall we sit at the table, Your Excellency? May I give you breakfast? I'm sorry I don't have better fare to offer."

"I shall be delighted," Karl said firmly.

Gilley led the way down the hall, snatching his jacket from a waiting servant and ordering two settings be added to the table for guests.

Reese burned to shout at Gilley and Karl to get moving. He longed to rush out the door and somehow track down the killer at once. But he'd entered a new world the day he'd revealed himself to Karl. A world where men sat down to a well-prepared breakfast of eggs, bacon, kippered herring, and toast instead of slinking off to business at once.

He angrily speared a piece of scrambled egg and looked around Gilley's dining room, which was larger and better furnished than his study. He took a bite of the eggs and decided Gilley must not have stinted on paying a reasonable cook.

Karl was staring moodily at his plate. Reese wondered if he could drag him off to another room and get him to disclose his thoughts.

Gilley cleared his throat. "Please, Erbgraf, Your Excellency. Mr. Reese, tell me why you've returned to London." Karl didn't answer, so Reese related the bare details of their adventures to Gilley, who didn't interrupt for once.

When he was done, Gilley pulled out his monocle, polished it, then put it away. He reached for a piece of toast. "Smelter? I must say I'm not surprised. He's been acting as nervous as a cat surrounded by birds."

"Cats eat birds," Reese said.

"Ever seen birds persecute a cat?" It relieved Reese that Gilley reverted to the slightly sarcastic, nervous air he usually adopted in Jonathan's presence. The whole world hadn't shifted—only Reese had faced a sea change. And he still wasn't sure he could think about it. Not yet.

Gilley crunched down his toast and continued talking. "There is a clamor of rooks that dives after the cat next door. The cat might pretend all is well, but she never leaves the house without looking around, and she wears her ears flat against her head."

God, he'd had enough of chitchat. "If Smelter's behavior was so suspicious, I wonder why you didn't send word."

"I didn't have anything firm to report. I was going to speak to the count when he arrived."

Karl rubbed between his brows with two fingers, and Reese wondered if he had a headache. He had eaten very little. "Mr. Gilley, do you know if Smelter is the only traitor in my company? Did you see any other suspicious activity?"

"I haven't heard of anything, Your Excellency. Of course, I didn't know of the men of your retinue before the incident at Lord Merridew's house, so I don't know if any of their patterns have changed. The Cohen man meets with a Russian, a gentleman we know, of course, though he's not on any of our lists of suspicious characters. I believe they meet to argue and play chess. I get the impression that they are old friends."

"Anything else?"

“No, Your Excellency, but do recall that the attack only occurred a couple of days ago.”

It felt as if it had been weeks.

“Did you talk to Toole?”

Gilley’s gaze darted to Karl, and he frowned. Understandable why the man looked astonished. Reese was talking about this in front of a man who didn’t work for the government. Hell, Karl was a foreigner, and Reese usually never spoke any of his contacts’ names. He rarely admitted that he worked for them. This was the captain’s training.

He smiled at Gilley’s blank surprise, but really, Reese had had enough of secrets. In fact, he’d had enough of that work—nosing around and gathering information for men he’d never met and whom he didn’t entirely trust.

“I spoke to someone,” Gilley said at last. “He wasn’t pleased with you. You were to report to them, you know.”

“I shall when I have something more to say.” Reese drained his teacup and started in on the ham. “Smelter knew we were in Buckinghamshire, so you might have a leak, Gilley. Or Smelter was listening at closed doors.”

Gilley’s fair face turned red. Embarrassment, not anger, and Reese suspected he’d recalled an incident when he’d probably spoken too loudly without thinking who might be listening. His friend was behind a desk for a reason. His *friend*? Yes. That thought was even more astonishing than the realization that he was tired of secrets. He tried the phrase out again. Gilley was a friend.

“Your voice does carry,” Reese added.

Gilley ignored Reese and directed a weak smile at Karl. “I’m grateful you have had time to recover without the disturbances present at your uncle’s house, Your Excellency. It was a very busy place, crawling with police and members of your entourage. And now the count is due to arrive.”

Karl sat up straighter, as if someone had reprimanded him on his posture. “Do you know what time my father will be in London?”

Gilley flipped through some papers that lay on the table next to his plate. “Lord Merridew received a telegram that says the count will arrive this morning. Apparently he wished to come earlier, but he was at the bedside of your uncle.”

Reese had a moment of confusion, then recalled Karl’s other uncle, the feckless younger brother of the count.

“My Uncle Hans-Friedrich?” Karl leaned forward, frowning. “What is the matter with him?”

“An illness, Your Excellency.” Gilley adjusted his monocle and looked down at the papers. “I believe he ate some bad fish. It’s not certain he’ll survive.”

“And Gerhard?” Karl’s voice cracked. His young cousin, Reese remembered.

Karl looked so stricken, Reese quickly asked, “Was anyone else harmed?”

“Your uncle dined with his mistress that night, and she’s nearly as ill as he is.”

Karl looked at Reese, bleakness in every line in his face. “My uncle was poisoned,” he whispered. “Of course it wouldn’t do to have it appear to be murder. Not in Neuschlosswold.”

Reese wanted to go to Karl, pull him close, say something reassuring, promise to do whatever he must to erase whatever was causing pain.

Karl shook his head and rubbed his brow again. “We must go at once to my Uncle Merridew’s house.” He rose to his feet and strode from the dining room without looking back.

Reese sprang to his feet to follow him, leaving their host sitting alone over his half-finished breakfast. “Thank you, Gilley,” he muttered before he hurried out. Karl was already at the front door, his hat in his hand.

They went on foot, walking quickly. Only a half dozen streets away they entered an entirely different neighborhood from Gilley’s neat but somewhat shabby street. The pristine white faces of the houses here gleamed in the morning sunlight.

Servants scrubbed the steps or swept the walkways in front of these elegant domiciles, sprucing them up for the new day.

Reese and Karl raced up the steps to Lord Merridew's door. Reese had waited for Karl to speak during the walk, but the man barely seemed to notice his presence next to him. Now he stood, jaw set, staring straight ahead at the dark red door.

Reese couldn't stand it. "What is wrong, Karl? Tell me what you suspect."

But then Lord Merridew's footman was answering the door, and there was no more time for discussion.

The butler stepped forward to greet the guests, and his eyes widened for a moment—after all, Karl was supposed to be injured and in an upstairs bedroom, but Lord Merridew's butler would never question the activities of his superiors. He bowed. "Your Excellency, good morning. Lord Merridew had an early meeting. He should return any minute. In the meantime, your father is in the library."

"So early," Karl said. "He must not have spent much time by Hans-Friedrich's bed after all." He sounded angry.

As they followed the butler down the passageway, Reese found he was anxious about meeting the man who figured so prominently in Karl's life, the man who made Karl doubt himself, the father who manipulated and used his own son for political gain. What would he think if he knew Karl and Reese had bonded beyond a temporary liaison? Such a man would make certain an inconvenient lover like Reese disappeared from his son's life, never to surface again.

They were ushered into the library and Reese studied the man he couldn't help but think of as an adversary.

The count was a supremely handsome man—tall, thin, with all of Karl's good looks, but in a more refined mode and with none of Karl's warmth. He was dressed in a spotless uniform, an even more elaborately braided jacket than Karl had worn the night of the party. He shifted slightly, and the light gleamed on his high-polished, tasseled boots. He should have appeared ridiculous in such peacock splendor, but he was purely awe inspiring.

In silence the count studied Karl and then Reese, and Reese suddenly became aware of their unshaven faces, the rumpled clothing they'd borrowed from Lord Merridew's estate and slept in, the dented hat he held in his ungloved hand. The count's glacial eyes spoke of disdain, as if he'd caught Jonathan and Karl in a compromising moment. And Reese, who never explained himself, who rarely spoke unless it was necessary, wanted to protest, explain that they'd spent a very rough hour on a train.

Reese waited for Karl to introduce him, but Karl remained silent.

At last the count spoke, in German, to Karl. "And this man is...one of your many friends?"

Karl gave a laugh that sounded genuine, but his back was too straight, his arms too stiff at his sides. "This is Mr. Reese." He added in German, "One of the many."

Reese shifted so he could look into Karl's face. Karl wouldn't look at him, yet he could feel fury rolling off Karl like heat from a fire. Was the anger directed at his father or at Reese for casting Karl in a bad light in front of his father?

This wintry creature wasn't a Karl he knew, and Reese understood he'd been an idiot for believing he knew the man so well. "You may go," Karl said airily to Jonathan.

"Your Excellency." Reese gave a stiff nod, turned, and left the room, but lingered in the hall. He was a spy, after all. He had no trouble listening at doors.

The count spoke, his voice low and precise. "That man, Mr. Reese—"

Karl's baritone cut in. "He is utterly unimportant."

"I have heard he is a spy."

There was silence. "From whom did you hear this?"

"Never mind that."

"All right, yes, I knew that about Mr. Reese." It was Karl, amused and light as always. "It is not news to me."

“And why are you in the company of a low creature like that? Such an association does not speak well of how you’ve spent your time in London. You must not embarrass your name and—”

“Reflect, Father. Why wouldn’t I want to cultivate one of the men following me? I knew I was in danger, but I needed to find out from whom. And once I ascertained Mr. Reese was safe, he became an asset. A man like that is trained to fight. He could do our dirty work should I be attacked. And as you can see from Lord Merridew’s ruined dining room, I *have* been attacked.”

“You have guards.”

“Ah, but they are not English.”

“All right, I agree. Here in England it would be better if an Englishman rather than one of our own acts defensively. There would be less trouble cleaning up the resulting mess.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Very well, but for a moment just now, when he looked at you, I could see that he cared what you thought.”

“Did he?” Karl sounded unconcerned. “I didn’t see it, but I believe Mr. Reese is clever at hiding his feelings. But not from you, of course.”

“Naturally not from me.” For the first time, the count’s voice was complacent, almost warm. “You believe he is true to you?”

“I’m good at promoting loyalty, aren’t I?”

“In an English spy?” The count sounded disbelieving. “You are that good, eh?”

“Yes, I am, and I use loyalty as I see fit.” Then Karl said, “*Ich benutze ihn.*”

I use him.

Reese’s throat closed tight as he swallowed a groan. Talking about a person, Karl would have used the word *nützen*, but no. He had used the word *benutze*, as if he considered Jonathan a thing, a tool. Karl seemed to spit out that word.

“Nevertheless, you understand that I don’t want him around.”

“Yes, of course. No matter. I’m finished with Reese. The benefit of his presence is outweighed by the awkwardness of his existence.” Karl sounded amused again. “And I guarantee he is no threat to you, Father. Now, please, enough of Mr. Reese. I tire of him. I beg of you, tell me what happened to my Uncle Hans-Friedrich?”

Reese moved away from the door. He’d heard enough. He began to rub his eyes when he recalled Karl doing exactly that, so he let his hands drop to his sides. The middle of his body, just where his heart beat, had been hollowed out. And really, that numb sensation was tolerable. He’d felt it several times in his life, and it was almost a relief.

He’d been a fool. Again. A naive idiot.

He wanted to walk away, go to his three rooms, and howl like a child. But no, no. He’d been hired to watch Karl.

And no matter that the man was as shallow as any plotting politician, luring Reese for his pleasure, using silly ploys that would make him beg... Games. All games.

At least the captain’s lies had been of omission. He’d simply forgotten to tell Reese he was a thief and scoundrel. He’d never used seduction. He hadn’t needed to—not with the groping young idiot Reese had been. Apparently still was.

He remembered what Gilley had said about Karl. No real depth to this man who had no heart.

But why had Karl played such an elaborate seduction? Was he like the captain, who entertained himself with games of the mind?

Forget that. Forget what they’d done together. Forget it all. But he couldn’t, not entirely. Reese owed himself the joy of finding who’d tried to kill Karl—no, the erbgraf. He might be ready to leave behind his work, but he hated to fail at it, and that was why he needed to find the people who plotted to kill the erbgraf, who was not Karl to him, not anymore.

Reese walked to the front of the house. The strange numbness left him, and the returning sensation was a terrible ache that threatened to overcome him. No

wonder he'd fled from emotion. It was a dreadful fucking nuisance, and it hurt worse than being stabbed with a bayonet, something he could personally attest to.

Never again. Never again would he be so stupid as to allow himself to care. And to think he'd succumbed to caresses and loving words and intense gazes. It was all a lie, and he had once again been proven a fool.

Chapter Twelve

When they'd entered the room, the count had looked Jonathan up and down, and his expression of burning cold hatred sent fear coursing through Karl. He had to distract the count from directing that dangerous mind at Jonathan, confirm his fears, and then at long last, take some sort of action against his father, although he had no idea yet what that might be.

"I heard Hans-Friedrich and his mistress were felled by food poisoning." Karl pushed for a little more information about his uncle. "Is that truly the case, or do you suspect foul play? Heaven knows the man has enemies."

The count shrugged and walked over to the fireplace, then leaned against the mantel and stared at the cold, empty grate. "It appears to be merely spoiled food. His mistress is already recovering, but Hans is an obese man who has indulged his vices for far too long. It is doubtful he has the strength to recover from this bout of illness."

"My cousin Gerhard and the rest of the family?" Karl asked.

"Will be well taken care of. I shall make certain of that. With his father's death, young Gerhard becomes a more important part of our family than ever."

In his mind, the count already had his brother dead and buried. The lump of lead in Karl's stomach grew larger and heavier as his suspicions grew ever stronger, but he still couldn't know for certain his father's plan extended as far as eliminating the present erbgraf. Karl scoured his mind for a way to subtly extract the truth from him. The man who habitually kept his most mundane plans a secret, even from his own staff, was not about to admit outright to such a diabolical intrigue as filicide.

Abruptly the count turned away from the fireplace to face him. "We shall leave for home now. England has proven too dangerous for you. I will summon a carriage to take us to the train station, and we will begin the journey this very morning."

"Run away? Is that the von und zu Neuschlosswold-Binder way?"

"It is when there are assassins on our heels and we need to discover why and how." Father offered a thin smile, and for just that second, Karl felt that all his wild suspicions were just that. His father was a calculating and sometimes cruel man, but he was not so cold-blooded as to order his own son's death.

"First the bombing, and now an attack at the train station. It is definitely time for you to quit this country and come home with me."

At that moment, the hard, leaden weight spread beyond his gut to fill every particle of Karl's body. His father, one of the cleverest men he knew, had made a huge error. He'd forgotten Karl had not yet informed him of the shooting at the station.

Karl had had years of practice schooling his face into emotions he didn't feel: polite interest when listening to a dull diplomat, enthusiastic energy when speaking to a newspaper reporter. It was possible now to conceal his horror and politely return his father's smile.

He had to get his father out of Lord Merridew's house. The count had tried to have Karl killed there once before, after all.

"I believe you are right, Father. Let us leave immediately. After suffering such traumatic experiences, I find I'm quite homesick."

The count tugged on the bellpull to summon the butler. He ordered hacks—no need to disturb Lord Merridew's groom—to carry him and all his entourage, who were also here in Merridew's home.

"You and I will leave first, I think," he told Karl.

Karl felt like he was feeling his way through thick fog as he tried to puzzle out what to do next. He must extract his father from Lord Merridew's house before he put his uncle in any more danger.

He watched his father speak to the butler, and his ears rang. Karl still felt an unnatural calm, as if he watched from another corner of the room, and he wondered how long it would be until he'd feel a physical response to the truth finally confirmed. His father—dear God, his own father!—planning to kill him.

Despite the odd sensation of shock—or maybe because of it—he could still think clearly, and his mind raced. He wondered if Father was temporarily shelving his plan to eliminate him, or if he'd have his assassins attempt it again during the train journey. Going into the situation with no blinders on, Karl could perhaps not only foil any plot, but expose his father's part in it as well.

He wondered if Jonathan still waited nearby. Dear God. Karl needed his help if he was to make this work without bloodshed. No doubt the man listened at the door. For a second, his heavy sorrow lifted at the thought of his shadow, his spy silently watching over him.

The things Karl had said to the count about Jonathan were dreadful, yet surely Jonathan would realize he had been acting for his father's benefit. A pragmatic, logical man, Jonathan would have understood the subterfuge and not have taken those cutting words to heart...wouldn't he?

The butler had scarcely left to carry out the count's orders, informing his entourage, who would likely not be pleased at facing another long train journey, when Cohen erupted through the drawing room door.

"Your Excellency, you've returned!" He hurried across the room as near to excited as Karl had ever seen the laconic man. "Why did you leave Buckinghamshire?"

"And how did you know where I was?"

Cohen gave him a disgusted look. "I am good at my work, Your Excellency."

Karl hoped so. "Did you tell anyone?" Like Smelter.

Now Cohen looked sorrowful. “Did I not just say I was good at my work, Your Excellency? Naturally, no.” He shot a glance at the count, who seemed uninterested in the conversation, before he asked Karl, “May I be so bold as to wonder why you ask? Has something happened to bring you back to London?”

“Not at all. I did not relish hiding like a rabbit in the country. I was shaken up and not thinking clearly when I allowed my uncle to send me away. But I’m here now, and it has all worked out for the best. My father and I are about to depart for home. If you would kindly send a message to the hotel to have the rest of the men meet us at the station, I would greatly appreciate it.”

“Pardon,” the count spoke from his spot at the fireplace. “It’s a good idea to have Cohen return to the hotel rather than send a messenger. We don’t want to alarm anyone unnecessarily.”

Karl stared into Cohen’s shadowed, lugubrious eyes and willed him to listen. “Yes, all right, Father. And thank you, Cohen. Send word. I need those I can trust around me now more than ever. And there was that man—he called himself Baker—at the hotel.” *Please, Cohen, recall the name Jonathan had registered under.* “I was to meet him later. I hope he is still there. Please inform him I deeply regret missing him.”

A flicker of something passed over Cohen’s dark eyes, and he inclined his head. “Very good, sir. I shall inform them at once.”

Karl released his pent-up breath as Cohen exited the room. He felt as if he were walking a tightrope that swayed over a fathomless gorge. One wrong step, and he would plunge into the abyss.

He strolled to the door and looked out as if he watched after Cohen. No sign of Jonathan in the hall.

Get the message, Jonathan. I need you.

His father said, “I hope you’ll be ready to go. Perhaps you should wash up before we leave. You are a mess.” The count sounded so much like usual, Karl

squeezed the kid gloves he held tight. He had to drive off the doubt. He must take action.

* * *

Reese was almost two streets from the Merridew house before he stopped fleeing like a soldier in retreat. Blood raged through his veins and pounded in his temples so that he could barely focus on the pavement before him. Yet the calm inner voice that had guided him through so many life-or-death situations in the past whispered softly in his head, trying to reach through the black haze of anger.

Think. Think. Stop feeling for a few bloody minutes. Cease the useless emotion.

Think.

And when he did, he suddenly saw the pieces were not right. The way Karl had stood in that room, so tense, practically shaking. And then there'd been the stories he'd told of how his father treated him. What had Gilley said about their relationship? Oil and water. Their manner with each other had been polite, but...

Reese drew in a shaky breath that might have been a sob. Emotion had come flooding back, but not all of it was pain.

"Mr. Reed!" Running footsteps and a voice shouting one of his invented names brought Jonathan whirling around.

Karl's man, Cohen, was jogging toward him down the pavement, drawing curious glances from passersby. Children with their nanny, a maid with a shopping basket on her arm, a gentleman climbing into his carriage, all stared at the tall, dark-garbed man galloping along like an undertaker run amok.

He arrived in front of Reese, breathless. "Mr. Reed, I believe the erbgraf requires your help. I'm not certain exactly what is wrong, but he and the count are leaving immediately for Neuschlosswold, and His Excellency may yet be in danger. He said something about Mr. Baker, and I know that he meant you. It would be good if you can return to the house. I must go to the hotel, though I am not happy with this order."

It was the most Cohen had spoken to him since they'd met. His suspicious, narrow-eyed regard was gone, and he seemed to accept Reese as a confederate, another man loyal to Karl von Binder.

Karl was in danger. And... "It's his father, the count." The words were out of Reese's mouth before he knew he was going to say them, and it was only as he spoke that he saw the truth with crystal clarity.

"What? What is this rubbish?" Cohen asked, but then he simply stood and looked at Reese. "Tell me what you think," Cohen ordered.

"All right. But I've got to go back." They began to walk to Lord Merridew's house. Reese wanted to run, but that might attract attention. And surely the count wouldn't pull out a knife and—

"Herr Reed? You were saying?"

"I believe the erbgraf suspects his father of concocting the plot to kill both him and Merridew. And now his German uncle too, apparently. You've heard about the food poisoning? The erbgraf believed it was intentional."

Cohen nodded. "I thought it odd, but such things do happen." He stared at the lamppost ahead of them as if it held important secrets. Reese could almost see the cogs turning in his head as he assimilated the fact that his employer, the count, might be a killer.

"Herr Cohen, we must keep closer to Karl than ever and prevent this from happening."

Cohen glanced at him. "Then where were you going?"

"I...I misunderstood the situation."

They walked faster. Jonathan ticked through his possible courses of action with the ease of long experience. This was his job. It was what he did best. Calculate possible scenarios and figure out ways to prevent—or instigate—a situation.

“I will continue to observe from a distance,” Reese said. “You stay close to him. Don’t leave him alone with anyone for a moment.”

“I’ve been told to gather the rest of the erbgraf’s entourage for the return journey to Neuschlosswold, but I’ll send a messenger boy to do it.”

“Dr. Smelter was one of the conspirators,” Reese informed him, and in a few brief words told him what had happened on the train back from Buckinghamshire and in the station.

“Ach, it is der Graf. The count. His own son. How many do you think are part of this plot? It would help to know what we are up against.” Cohen’s German accent grew stronger, the only indicator of any nervousness he might feel. Jonathan appreciated that he didn’t question the story. Evidently now that he’d decided to trust Karl’s faith in Jonathan, Cohen was embracing him completely.

“Perhaps only Smelter and one other confederate, but maybe more. Have you a firearm?”

“Several,” Cohen answered with the glimmer of a smile on his wide, thin lips. “And yes, I know how to use them.”

Chapter Thirteen

Karl needed a weapon. He wished he hadn't surrendered Smelter's pistol to Jonathan. He could use it now.

Since Karl had no bags to pack, as all his things were still at the hotel, he had nothing to do but wait for everyone else to be ready to leave—and to brood over the fact that his father wanted him dead.

And to try to guess what form the next attack might take. Another blatant attempt on his life would be ridiculous now. But the world was full of casual accidents waiting to happen. He might take deathly ill with food poisoning or clumsily fall from a fast-moving train as it crossed a bridge. There were many ways he could be eliminated, sooner or later if that was the course his father had set.

Karl knew from experience that once the count put his mind to something, it was as good as accomplished.

Lord Merridew's voice boomed from the next room, and Karl wanted to curse. His uncle had returned home too early. If Karl had to take action against his father, or if his father moved against him, he'd rather there were no witnesses.

His father's shoulders went back, and his chin lifted. Karl knew the sign of impatience and suspected the count also wished Lord Merridew had stayed away from home longer.

The door opened, and Uncle Arthur, all enthusiastic smiles, entered the room. "My dear count."

Karl long suspected his uncle took a perverse pleasure in annoying his father. The count despised an overenthusiastic manner. It didn't make him outwardly uncomfortable—nothing did—but anyone who knew him well could see that his

customary stiffness turned rigid when faced with an outpouring of affection. From boyhood up, Karl had done his best to quench his widest smiles in his father's presence. Uncle Arthur, on the other hand, seemed to save his most rapturous effusions for the count.

The count bowed and clicked his heels. "Lord Merridew," he said.

"I'm delighted you cared enough about dear Karl to come to London after the bombing, but do you think it wise? Both of you here, the villain might try again."

"That's precisely why we shall return to Neuschlosswold immediately. I apologize for the whole dreadful thing, Lord Merridew. Naturally I shall cover all expenses of rebuilding and redecorating."

Lord Merridew said there was no need for that, but the count only smiled and gave the tiniest of headshakes. Of course he'd pay. He pulled the elaborate gold and platinum watch from his waistcoat. "I wonder if we should go to the station and meet the others there," he said to Karl. "You and I will take a carriage alone."

Karl wondered why the count would choose to be alone with him, but he was pleased. With only his father in the carriage, Karl wouldn't be outnumbered.

"I protest. This is nonsense," Lord Merridew cried. "You're trying to leave, Your Excellency? No, no. You must stay here. It would look exceptionally shabby if you turned and fled London, as if we English couldn't keep you safe."

"You couldn't," the count said drily. "My son was nearly killed."

"Near-death experiences occur in every country," Karl said. "For example, I hear my Uncle Hans-Friedrich might not recover from an attack of poisoning."

The count laughed. "You can't compare some bad fish to a bomb."

"Can't you?" Karl asked softly. "Murder is murder no matter what the method."

"Murder?" His father's face went blank, and Karl wished he believed that look of amazement.

“You are serious, Karl? Someone attempted to kill Hans-Friedrich?” Uncle Arthur made a few tutting sounds of dismay. “Dreadful business. Do you know who made the attempt on his life?”

The count cut in. “Nonsense. It was not murder. It was an unfortunate incident. Fish can be dangerous, and the man’s a glutton.” He fingered his watch. “We should depart, Karl, as soon as you’re ready. After all, we wouldn’t want another bombing. Lord Merridew’s life might be at stake, and we don’t want to visit more destruction here.”

Karl felt a jolt of fear. Had his father just threatened Uncle Arthur? When Karl had impulsively pushed, he’d hoped to get the whole ugly truth out in the open for once. He should have waited until he and his father were alone.

“Yes, of course, Father.” He went to his uncle and put his hands on the older man’s shoulders. “Thank you for everything, Uncle Arthur. You’ve been marvelous to me as always. If something should happen to me—”

“Erbgraf,” his father interrupted. “This is ridiculous. You are saying your farewells like an emotional woman.”

“I disagree. I speak like an emotional man,” Karl said mildly. He pulled his uncle into an embrace and whispered. “My father is behind it all. Don’t trust him, ever.”

He felt the start of surprise in his uncle’s body, but thank goodness the man didn’t speak. Karl held him for another few seconds.

“Come.” The count went to the door, opened it, and gestured imperiously. “We will hurry. I’m sure the hack is waiting for us out front.”

Karl walked past the desk and, feeling absurd, slipped a heavy glass paperweight into this pocket.

“I think perhaps I will drive with you to the station,” said Lord Merridew.

“No,” said the count. “But thank you.” He strode to the front of the house.

Karl shook his head. In a low voice he said, "I expect I'll be fine. But if I'm wrong, you must be careful. Perhaps you could get some help from Mr. Reese's friend, Mr. Gilley."

"Yes, he has been the greatest assistance the past few days," said Lord Merridew. "And some of his friends are in the area. I might send them along."

The count heard the last few words. "Along? Who would you send where?"

Lord Merridew waved a pudgy hand airily. "It's nothing at all, my dear count. I'm just prattling. Like m'sister used to do."

Despite the fear pressing Karl, he felt a rush of warmth. His mother had indeed liked to talk. He was surprised to see a rare smile on his father's face. "Yes, she was a rare prattler, my wife." Could that possibly be affection in the count's smile? Karl wished he saw scorn on his father's face, but rather feared his father *was* capable of love. Let no harm come to any more of us today, he prayed, but knew it was likely in vain.

They walked down the stairs to the carriage, and his father climbed in first. He leaned out the window to issue orders to one of the men who'd come with him from Neuschlosswold.

Odd that the count said he didn't want the entourage to follow too closely behind, and even stranger that the count made the effort to explain himself. "We needn't make a parade through the streets," his father said. "We have no wish to draw attention to ourselves."

Karl settled next to him. The glass paperweight lay heavy in his pocket, a ridiculous weapon, but the only one he had.

The hack started up, and Karl's father stared straight ahead as he always did when in a closed carriage.

Karl supposed he might as well have the sort of conversations he'd longed to over the years. There was no point in circumspection now. "You loved my mother, didn't you?"

His father glanced at him, then returned his gaze to the usual spot.

"I'm sorry I was a disappointment to you, Father," he said. "But at least she never was. Except for her long absences here in England. I expect you didn't appreciate them."

The count might not have heard, except for the small twitch at the corner of his mouth.

The carriage halted at a cross street, then turned a corner.

Karl sighed and went on. "Do you think she would approve of your trying to kill your brother and then me?"

The count's back went straighter, and his chin jutted. "You are full of nonsense, Karl. I beg of you to be silent."

"No, I don't think I will. I know you're the one who has done it all, arranged the deaths, Father. Sputtering and denying won't change the truth, and I won't hold my tongue any longer."

"You are *absurd*."

Karl ran his fingers over the cold, smooth surface of the paperweight. He wouldn't attack. But he guessed it wouldn't take much more prodding to get his father to physically attack him, and he wanted to be ready.

"I think you can forgive the rest. The way I am perhaps too loud or do not always remain as solemn as I should. And there was the period of time after the war when I drank too much. You didn't like that lack of self-discipline."

"No. I didn't. Nor do I care for these ludicrous accusations. You're being overemotional and melodramatic." The count still managed to maintain his composure, but his left leg jiggled madly.

"But those character flaws wouldn't be enough to make you wish to kill me. No, there's a simple reason for that, I think. It's because I enjoy fucking men, isn't it?" Oh, how Karl enjoyed throwing the coarse, blunt word at his father like a

punch. Acknowledging the truth aloud to his father was the most liberating experience he'd ever felt.

"Shut up."

"Cousin Gerhard wouldn't do such a thing, and he's the best to inherit from you. That's why you killed his father, isn't it? Bypass your weak brother and mold his son into the exact likeness of you.

"I don't understand why you'd try to kill Uncle Arthur, but it would be something to do with politics, I imagine. Nothing personal concerning him."

The count's hands were clenched tight. So were his lips, which had a rim of pale white around them. Did the count hold back angry words, or was he ready to slam out with his fists?

He was ready to go even further. He snapped "shut up" again and drew a pistol from his jacket pocket, pointed at Karl's heart.

"Attack me with something other than your foul words," his father said in a low voice. "Come on. We'll get this done now."

"So I am to attack you, and you shoot me in self-defense," Karl said.

"You are not a stupid man, I'll grant you that. And this is not easy for me." The count swallowed. "Doing what is best, what is right, is rarely easy. I must think of Neuschlosswold-Binder."

"Poor Father." And Karl realized his words weren't entirely sarcastic.

His father didn't appear to notice Karl had spoken. "It does not benefit anyone to have you thought a murderer. I think it will be an assassin, so I shall be injured in the fight. That would be for the best." The count's hand and voice were steady.

Karl stared into those cold eyes. Would his father be able to kill him like this, face-to-face, instead of using confederates as assassins? Yes, Karl suspected the man was capable of anything.

At that moment, the carriage drew to an abrupt halt. There was shouting, the door swung open, and someone catapulted inside. An arm flailed across Karl's face,

knocking him backward. The count's pistol went off, the loud report deafening in the enclosed space. Karl's ears rang. He struggled to sit up, but a body lay half on top of him.

Jonathan again.

For a moment there was a confused blur of limbs tangled together, bodies grappling, men grunting, and knuckles punching against flesh. Karl tried to extricate himself in order to help. He hefted the paperweight in his hand. Glimpsing the top of his father's nearly bald head over Jonathan's shoulder, the count's hat having fallen off in the scuffle, Karl threw the paperweight at it.

A second shot cracked through the air. The acrid smell of burned gunpowder filled Karl's nose. Abruptly the combatants went still, with Jonathan sprawled on top.

Karl hauled Jonathan off the count. A scarlet rosette bloomed squarely in the center of Father's white shirtfront, slowly spreading out and seeping into his embroidered jacket. His eyes were open and staring at Karl, but he wasn't seeing him. Karl had encountered many dead men in his years as a soldier and knew what it looked like when the spark had gone out of a man.

There was nothing he could do for his father. Karl didn't know whether he felt rage, sorrow, or grief, but he didn't have time to figure that out, as the man in his arms groaned.

"You've been hit!" He pushed Jonathan back onto the seat across from the one where his father's dead body lay, and crouched before him. He examined the red stain oozing down Jonathan's cheek. Christ, the bullet had grazed his cheek. Another few inches, and it would've hit his eye socket and torn into his brain.

"I've had much worse." Jonathan stared at the body and then directed his intense gaze on Karl. "But your father. Karl. Your father. I-I'm sorry."

Karl dipped his head in acknowledgment. He wasn't ready to think about his father—everything he'd said, what he'd been prepared to do, or his dead body sprawled in one corner of the hack.

“He would have killed you,” Reese whispered.

Karl nodded. He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. He held it against the wound and cupped his other hand around Jonathan’s jaw. He felt the warmth and the pulse beating there, comforting him with the knowledge that Jonathan was alive. Only then did Karl realize the carriage had stopped and the door was still hanging wide open. Suddenly another figure filled the door frame, also with a drawn weapon. “Hochgeboren, are you all right?” Cohen asked.

“How the bloody hell did you get here?” Karl demanded.

“I came with the Englishman, Baker. Reed. Reese. Whatever his name might be. What happened?”

Karl nodded toward the count, trying not to look at the body or think of it as his father. He must remain detached and cold right now. There would be time for mourning later.

“As you see. My father tried to shoot me. Reese shot him. But Father had one thing right. We must say there was an anonymous assassin who got away. The count’s men and the police will accept that story given the bombing.”

“The London police will believe what you tell them,” Jonathan said heavily. “They’ll be much more likely to accept the idea of zealous anarchists than a murderous count.”

He pushed Karl’s hands away from his head and started to rise. “We’ve got to go now, Cohen and I, before the police come.”

“What about the driver?” Karl asked.

“He’s unconscious.” Cohen glanced up at the hack’s perch. “We caught up with you on horseback. I convinced the driver to pull over, and Reese jumped onto the box beside him and cracked him over the head. When the man wakes, he can honestly say the hack was overtaken by thieves.”

The chill inside Karl increased. “By God, we can’t just leave an innocent bystander. He could be seriously injured.”

Cohen sighed deeply. "It is necessary. I'll gather the others at the hotel and go to the station as the count told me to do. No one will suspect my part in it."

"I'll go to Gilley's," Jonathan said. He touched his injured cheek, and Karl wondered what story he'd tell Mr. Gilley. Knowing Jonathan, he'd simply stare the man into silence should Gilley ask. The fleeting image warmed Karl, but only for a moment—the core-deep cold remained. His father was dead and a villain. Which was worse? He hardly cared. He only knew he couldn't be anything like the graf and carelessly toss aside other humans' lives.

Karl climbed from the carriage, unwilling to look back at the too-still shape that had been his father.

The carriage had stopped on a deserted side street. Warehouses towered over the smelly spot. They must have been near the harbor at low tide. It flashed across Karl's mind that this was an odd neighborhood for the hack driver to be passing through on his way to the train station.

The horses Jonathan and Cohen had used lingered nearby. Cohen grabbed the trailing reins of one animal, mounted, and rode off. Jonathan had to capture his skittish mare, who led him a merry dance.

Ignoring his dizziness, Karl grabbed the handle to swing himself up onto the driver's seat, where the slumped figure of the driver sprawled. Blood matted the hair at his temple. Karl felt for the man's pulse at the base of his throat. A steady rhythm. Thank goodness. The driver would wake with a headache and probably nothing worse.

Karl frowned. Surely the jacket collar under the shabby cloak was finely made and his dark hair was too fashionably cut for his profession.

Even as he noticed these details, the driver stirred, opened his eyes, which were gray, and looked straight up at Karl. "You," he said. "You are dead." He spoke German. And then he reached into his coat pocket, drew a pistol, and aimed it at Karl.

Karl didn't think. A fierce rage seized him. So much pointless death, and he was heartily tired of weapons. He grabbed the gun, wrenched it from the astonished man's hand, and threw the weapon far away. It clattered across the cobblestones of the quiet street. Then he shoved the man back against the seat. "Enough!"

The man bent double and came up with a knife drawn from his boot. He jabbed at Karl's stomach, slicing through his shirt. A line of fire burned his belly. Karl jerked back, nearly tumbling off the high box.

Just then Jonathan vaulted onto the other side of the driver's perch. The driver whirled toward this new attacker and lunged at Jonathan, slicing toward his face.

In the moment the man's attention was distracted, Karl grabbed and hauled him back against his body, one arm wrapped around his throat. The man twisted and fought his grasp, stabbing at Karl's arm.

Karl gripped his wrist, grunting and straining to hold the struggling man while wresting away the blade. Their hands were locked together, swaying first one way then the other. Suddenly the balance shifted, and the blade arched almost gracefully into the driver's throat. It pierced his gullet as easily as gutting a fish. Karl listened to the familiar hideous gurgle he'd heard too many times on the battlefield as blood pumped from the wound in the man's throat and gushed over Karl's coat sleeve.

He dropped the body onto the seat and stared at Jonathan across the twitching corpse.

Jonathan gave him a single affirming nod. And then Karl felt his stomach heave. He hurriedly clambered down and stumbled away from the carriage. He lurched over to a wall, leaned his palm against it, and vomited on the rubbish-covered ground. He bent double, retching as he cleared the contents of his stomach. The end of the battle, he thought, and recalled other times he'd had such a graceless response to death once the time for killing was done. A friend in arms once said that he suspected it had something to do with how much Karl loved life and hated to see

it wasted, even when he was the one wielding the saber—especially then. “*Your body has an adverse response to this job of ours, Erbgraf,*” the man had said.

Karl smiled grimly. He was no longer the erbgraf. His father was dead. The graf pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his mouth.

When he straightened and looked back, he saw that Jonathan was climbing off the carriage. The horses must have disliked the scent of so much blood; they whickered and shuffled forward. The carriage shuddered. Fear gripped Karl again until Jonathan jumped clear of the wheel.

That was what mattered. Jonathan was safe and striding toward him. Alive, well, with only a smear of blood on his face.

Jonathan wasn’t even out of breath. “It was the man who’d watched you. The nondescript spy and assassin who might have passed for me.” He reached for Karl’s bloodstained sleeve. “Did he cut you?”

Karl shook his head. “All his blood. And this”—he pulled the rip in his shirt apart to reveal a thin line of red across his stomach—“minor.”

“Good. You handled yourself well.”

“I was a soldier,” Karl reminded him. “You don’t always have to protect me, although I thank you for doing so.”

Jonathan’s frown eased. “I think you saved me from being him.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder and looked into Karl’s eyes. The odd way he phrased it, Karl suspected Jonathan meant more than “thank you” for saving him from the other man’s knife. Perhaps he’d seen himself dead and unmourned in some dirty back alley.

“I would be greatly upset if you had been killed.” Karl managed a light tone, but he wanted to seize Jonathan, hold him tight, weep with pain and relief. He longed to apologize to the man who’d left murder behind only to be forced to kill again because of Karl.

Jonathan gave him one of those rare, beautiful smiles. It was enough for now. He put his hand on Karl's shoulder and gave an almost painful squeeze. For a moment, an utterly inappropriate bubble of joy filled Karl.

"I should go. Someone could arrive on the scene any moment." Jonathan released him and headed for the horse. He unwrapped the reins he'd looped on a broken iron fence rail.

The inappropriate giddiness still bubbled through Karl. "I promise that should murder ever be necessary again, Herr Reese, I will pull the trigger. Your days of having to kill are behind you."

Jonathan made a sound that could have been laughter. "You will have soldiers to protect you, Your Highness." The proper address for a ruling count.

God. The world had changed entirely, and he grabbed at the only important thing: keeping Jonathan near. "But I should like to hire you. As a secretary, perhaps? I had thought bodyguard, but you and I have had enough of violence. I know you are tired of your life, Jonathan. Become a part of mine." Karl spoke quickly, babbling the words because he suddenly knew he couldn't lose Jonathan. Not now. "I will need a trusted friend to help me steer through the shark-infested waters of politics." *Don't abandon me.*

"I'll consider your offer, *Erlaucht*." This was the first time Jonathan had called him this. Another reminder of Karl's new rank, gained by death.

They weren't given a choice, Karl reminded himself.

Jonathan mounted the horse with the grace of a hussar. "I will see you soon, Karl," he said, and he rode away.

For a few minutes, Karl leaned against the brick wall of the warehouse, stared at the carriage filled with death, and considered leaving everything behind. All but Jonathan. Reluctantly he let go of fantasy. Reality lay in the carriage.

Karl forced himself to walk around the scene, and he made lists of the dead. The count, Smelter, the nameless spy on the carriage perch, his Uncle Hans-Friedrich. All men who'd died for nothing more than a game of power. And his

father would have killed even more innocents—Uncle Arthur, members of Karl's retinue, the guests at the dinner party.

Jonathan.

And for what? Nothing. The count's sins of hubris were meaningless. Karl had to learn something from this silent and bloody scene. He turned a tight circle on one heel and forced himself to observe. No more turning his back on the unpleasant side of his world.

God, how he looked forward to embracing love and laughter again. But now he had to learn. It was a simple lesson, really. He could never, ever allow misplaced ideals to seduce him. He would not employ death as a tool.

When he decided that enough time had passed, he ran from the backstreet to a busier thoroughfare and began shouting for help. By the time the police arrived, Karl had succeeded in forcing himself to weep—and most of his tears were of sorrow.

Chapter Fourteen

Count von und zu Neuschlosswold-Binder leaned back into the plush cushions of his favorite armchair with his legs stretched out before him and his feet resting on an ottoman. He closed his eyes and sighed. It was good to be home at last, relaxing in his private sitting room rather than drifting from one hotel room to another. He shifted, finding the perfect position to support his aching shoulder. The fire crackling on the hearth warmed his stockinged feet, and the steady tick of the mantel clock in the silence soothed his senses. He could also hear the scribbling—like mouse claws over a wooden floor—of a quill moving over paper.

Karl opened his eyes and gazed across the room at his newly hired secretary and bodyguard. The man insisted on the second job. *“I shan’t be insulted if you hire other men as well, but I might as well use all my training,”* he’d said. *“Do you think I’d sit back and watch someone else protect you?”*

His face was turned to the page on the desk, so all Karl could see was the top of his head. Jonathan’s brown hair had grown longer over the past months and tumbled in delightful disarray over his forehead. Karl had liked his appearance with close-cropped hair, as it added a certain severity to his features, but he liked the new style even better.

Jonathan appeared more casual this way, younger, relaxed, and at ease with himself and the world. The permanent tension he’d worn like an overcoat he refused to take off when Karl had met him in London was never completely gone. Jonathan Reese would always be a cautious, wary man. But it was apparent to anyone with eyes to see that he was content now.

Karl intended to make him more so any minute, as soon as he could rouse his lazy body from the fireside.

“What pressing business are you attending to over there?” he asked.

Jonathan glanced up. He didn’t smile, but his frown of concentration disappeared, and his face relaxed as he met Karl’s gaze. “Affairs of state. I work for a very important man. One who shunts most of his dull papers over to me.”

Karl waved a dismissive hand. “That’s what you were hired for. A man in my position doesn’t have time to examine every document that crosses his desk. That’s why he hires men he can trust. If the work’s too much for you, I’m sure Cohen would find you an assistant. And don’t forget, I can always find you different tasks to do. There are other positions you can take for me.” He gave a suggestive leer to make his meaning clear.

Jonathan’s lips twitched. “Soon. But I must finish these.”

“Then you should be in your office. Having you work so near me is simply begging for trouble. How can I not interrupt you?”

He rose and stretched, then sauntered over to the desk. “How does it feel to be in a desk job after all these years? Is it too boring for you?” He rested a hand on Jonathan’s shoulder.

The other man looked up at him. “Not for one moment.” His warm brown eyes expressed all the words he’d never said to Karl.

“I’m glad. But in all seriousness, if you need to hire more staff to take on some of the minor work, you’re more than welcome to. I don’t want you to feel...stifled.” He rubbed both of Jonathan’s shoulders, kneading the tension out of them.

Jonathan gave up and put down his pen. He leaned back into Karl’s caressing hands. “It’s not too much. I like having something to do. I should be restless if all I had to do was lounge around.”

“Like me,” Karl supplied.

“Nonsense. You do the hard work—speechmaking, ribbon-cutting. I’m content to work behind the scenes as I always have.”

“We make a good team.” Karl slipped his hands over Jonathan’s shoulders, down his chest to his stomach, and back up again. Then he began unbuttoning.

“Here?” Jonathan shifted uncomfortably. “Perhaps we should wait until tonight and the privacy of your bedchamber.”

“Perhaps not. I don’t want to wait. I want you right here and now on the floor in front of the fire.” Karl went to lock the door of the sitting room. Cohen was in France for a month, the servant bearing tea had only just left, and it wasn’t likely they’d be interrupted, but better to be safe.

Even in his home there were precautions to take, and privacy was a precious commodity. He had a loyal staff, but even so, he and Jonathan must always be careful. It wasn’t worth being melancholy about. It was simply a fact of their life together.

Karl turned back to Jonathan, who’d picked up the pen to dash off a few more lines. He crooked a finger at him. “Come,” he commanded. “I told you to leave off that. I want you by the fire. Now.”

Jonathan grinned at his tone and cast down the pen again. He rose from his chair and walked over to the rug in front of the hearth, then glanced at Karl over his shoulder. “How do you want me?” Seduction dripped from his voice like honey from a comb.

Karl’s cock thundered to attention. Oh how he liked these games and Jonathan’s new, playful attitude. It had taken some time to break down his habitual reserve, but now Jonathan was as likely to instigate such a scenario as Karl was.

“Clothes off first, but slowly. Then on your knees with your hands behind your back.” Karl’s voice was a husky growl as lust overwhelmed him. He returned to his armchair and sank down onto it to enjoy the show.

Piece by piece, Jonathan methodically removed every article of clothing, folded them, and laid them in a neat pile. He was toying with Karl, making him wait while he took his time, as directed. Waistcoat buttons pushed through their holes with excruciating slowness. Shirt sliding down his arms in increments. Underclothes removed with deliberate care.

By the time his torso was bare and Jonathan was untying the string on his drawers, Karl quivered with excitement. His cock pressed hard against his fly, begging to be set free. He considered whether to strip too, but there was a certain power in remaining clothed while one's partner was naked and vulnerable. And there was erotic joy in forcing oneself to wait for even the slightest bit of relief, so he kept his trousers fastened and did not slide his hand down inside them. His cock throbbed and ached, and he waited.

At long last, Jonathan stood completely nude before him. Karl admired his compact build and well-maintained muscles. Jonathan never overindulged, not in food or drink, and only recently did he in sexual intimacies. This monkish life had resulted in a lean body that, although somewhat battle scarred, appeared much younger than most men his age.

Jonathan stared at Karl with his solemn eyes, the light of the fire gilding his skin, and then he slowly sank to his knees on the rug. He clasped his hands behind him at the small of his back. His cock jutted before him, thick and solid, demanding attention.

Karl rose from his chair and moved in front of him. He ruffled his hand through Jonathan's hair and caressed his cheek. Finally he freed his own cock and offered it to Jonathan to suck. He admired the sweep of Jonathan's lashes against his cheeks and his lips puckering around the tip of Karl's cock.

Karl groaned as heat and wetness surrounded him. No matter how many times Jonathan performed this act for him, it was a thrill. Karl never felt the need for that elusive "something new" he used to search for back when he'd changed lovers like socks. He discovered something new every time he was with Jonathan—

a new facet of pleasure, a deeper shade of feeling. All he could ever want was contained in one man.

And that was rather frightening, because he had so much more to lose now than he ever had before.

Karl pushed such deep thoughts from his mind and concentrated on the delight Jonathan was giving him right now as he opened his mouth and took Karl's cock deep into his throat. His hands were still clasped behind his back so he couldn't fondle or rub. Karl cupped Jonathan's head between his palms and used his mouth, careful not to drive too deeply and choke him.

With every slippery stroke, the tension inside him grew. His partner's submissive posture only increased his excitement. To have Jonathan on his knees—open, willing, offering everything, his eyes shining as he looked up at Karl—was enough to drive him to the brink. The friction of a few last thrusts took him over the edge. His balls drew up tight, and he spilled like a fountain into a waiting vessel.

"Ah, God," he groaned, eyes falling closed as he released. When he was finished, his legs were trembling, and he wanted nothing more than to collapse in bed with Jonathan and lie there for several hours.

But the bedroom was far away, and Jonathan had performed so patiently and so well, it was time to return the favor.

Karl pulled out of his lover's mouth, stroked his hands through his hair, and then took hold of his arms to help him to his feet. "That was beautiful. You're beautiful."

He loved to compliment Jonathan because he knew how uncomfortable loving words made him even as they secretly pleased him. Karl embraced and kissed him, tasting his own spending on the other man's tongue. Then he walked him backward to the edge of the armchair and gave a push to his chest.

Jonathan dropped down onto the seat, and Karl knelt before him. "Now, my handsome man, I will pleasure you as well."

He grasped his hips and pulled him closer to the edge of the chair. Snug between Jonathan's legs, Karl caressed his cock with hard tugs of his fist.

"Like it rough?" he asked, knowing the answer.

"Yes," Jonathan groaned, leaning his head against the back of the chair and gazing at Karl through narrowed eyes.

"And do you like when I touch just the tip of my tongue to your tip, like so?"

Jonathan didn't answer but lifted toward Karl's tongue, asking for more.

"But it's not enough. You want me to take you in deep, so deep my lips hit your balls." Karl grinned. He knew his dirty talk—like his endearments—both embarrassed and thrilled silent Jonathan. That was why he did it.

"This much?" He sucked just the flushed head into his mouth and waited for a response.

"More," Jonathan said.

Karl sucked another few inches of his lover's thick shaft into his mouth and paused with his eyebrows raised. He would force Jonathan to speak.

"More."

Karl words were muffled around a mouth full of cock. "More what?"

"More, *please*," Jonathan said gruffly.

Another bit of his cock disappeared into Karl's mouth. Karl still clasped the base, and he stroked his tongue over the length, waiting for the request to go farther.

Jonathan moaned and tried to thrust the rest of himself inside, but Karl controlled him with his fist. He demanded the words.

"More, please, Count von und zu Neuschlosswold-Binder." A glint of humor flashed in Jonathan's heavy-lidded eyes.

Karl finished swallowing until he reached the root, and his lips nearly did meet Jonathan's balls. He sucked hard for a moment, and Jonathan gasped. Then

Karl drew slowly off, releasing every hard-won inch until Jonathan's cock was exposed again.

"Again?" he asked conversationally.

"Good Christ, stop teasing. More, sir. Please give me more," Jonathan begged.

And then as Karl complied, bobbing his head up and down and rubbing briskly with his hand, Jonathan continued to beg. "More, please, more. Christ, yes."

The words turned into strangled groans. His hips lifted off the chair with every stroke as he tried to drive himself into Karl's mouth. His head rolled against the chair back, eyes squeezed shut as he neared climax.

Karl stroked and sucked, devouring him, and at last Jonathan's release burst through him. He groaned once more, long and low, and then he spilled. Karl tasted musky warmth before he swallowed.

When he'd received every last drop, he drew his mouth off Jonathan and laid his depleted cock gently against his heaving belly. He stroked his hairy groin and patted it before sitting back on his heels.

"So, Herr Reese, are you satisfied? Are you settling comfortably into your new home? Do you find the accommodations suitable?"

Jonathan leaned forward, rested his forearms on his knees, and gazed into Karl's face.

"Do you approve of the service?"

Jonathan reached out and cuffed the side of his head. "You, sir, talk entirely too much."

"So it's been said," Karl agreed. Then he stopped talking and slid a hand around the back of Jonathan's neck to draw him in for a deep, exploring kiss. Light banter was too difficult to sustain when one's heart was bubbling over with emotion.

When at last Jonathan pulled away, Karl sighed and gazed at him. "I know I torment you with so many questions, but be patient with more, Herr Reese. Tell me, do you miss England? Are you at all homesick?"

Jonathan smiled at the idea. "To be homesick, a man must think of a place as home. I haven't had one for years. No, I do not miss anything about my old life."

It wasn't precisely true, but it was what Karl needed to hear. Jonathan had lived a solitary, isolated life for so long that sometimes he did miss the quiet rental rooms and long spells he could go without speaking to anyone much at all. Interacting with Karl and the staff every day was indeed a huge adjustment for him, but he wouldn't trade it for anything.

"What about you, Erlaucht?" He touched Karl's cheek. "It can't have been easy for you to suddenly have the job of reigning count pushed upon you. Or to have lost your father." This was a topic Karl had staunchly refused to discuss, but Jonathan thought perhaps it was time.

"My father was an odious man," Karl said drily. He rose to his feet, tucked his cock away, and fastened his fly. "There's nothing more to be said about it. How could I miss him?"

Jonathan shrugged and leaned back into the chair. "He *was* your father."

Karl grabbed a poker from the rack and jabbed at the log on the dying fire. "Even before he tried to have me killed, I rarely saw the man, and when I did, he made it clear I disappointed him in every way." Sparks shot up the chimney as the log cracked in two under a particularly vicious stab. "I'm not sorry he's dead."

"You don't have to be. It's all right." Jonathan was not one who cared to acknowledge emotions, let alone discuss them, but he knew Karl was grieving despite what he might say. He rose, went over to stand beside him, and rested a hand on his back. "You can love him and hate him at the same time."

That was all the wisdom he could manage. He patted Karl on the back, then went to put on his clothes.

“You’re very perceptive for a secretary,” Karl said lightly as he hung the poker back on the rack. “I’m rather glad I hired you.”

“I’m rather glad I took the post. I had no idea there would be so many perks.” Oh, he was becoming wittier every day with all the practice he had with Karl.

Karl dusted off his fingers and strode over to Jonathan. Knocking his hands away from the shirt buttons he was trying to fasten, Karl slid both hands around Jonathan’s waist and pulled him close. He kissed him lightly, then rested his forehead against Jonathan’s and murmured, “There is a perk I would like to demonstrate right now if you’ll come up to my bedchamber.”

“You’re not satisfied yet?” Jonathan felt his own cock weakly twitch again at the idea of a long sprawl in bed, even though he truly couldn’t afford the time.

“Not quite. Finish up your work here, because I can see you’re desperate to get back to it, and then come to me.”

“*Come to me.*” How he loved the sound of those words. They played over and over in his mind as Jonathan rushed through the rest of the documents he had earmarked for today.

He walked through the marble corridors and ornate rooms of the palatial estate that had awed him at first, but which was rapidly becoming home. As he ascended the stairs and rapped on Karl’s bedroom door, his heart beat faster in anticipation. He was hungry again, as if they hadn’t just sucked each other off.

“Come in,” came the drawling tone that made him warm all over.

Jonathan entered formally in case one or two of the many servants were in the room. “Erlaucht.”

“It’s all right. We’re alone now. Lock the door behind you.”

In the middle of the day? Were they playing a dangerous game? Was it just a matter of time before someone figured out why they spent so many hours together behind locked doors? Nevertheless, Jonathan did as he was bid, then followed Karl’s voice to the other room.

The black marble room contained a large tin tub in which a man might lie almost full length and submerged to the neck. The ancient castle had a new, rudimentary indoor plumbing system, but the water was still heated downstairs. It took many trips with hot water from the kitchen for the servants to mix with the cold tap in order to fill such an extravagant bath. Right now it was nearly full of steaming water. The scent of sandalwood oil suffused the air as Jonathan entered the room.

Karl capped a brown bottle from which he'd added the oil to the water. He wore a long robe belted at the waist and nothing else. "For you," he said. "Strip and get in. Let me wash you."

Jonathan obeyed, as he did every command Karl gave him. It grew easier all the time, and he was surprised by how much he enjoyed surrendering his will to the other man. Now that he'd decided to trust Karl, he'd given himself over to him, body and soul.

He took off the clothes he'd so recently put on and lifted a foot off the cool floor to test the water. Heat enveloped his foot, his leg, and then his other leg as he stepped into the tub. He sank into the depths, and the water rose higher, covering him halfway up his chest. His skin flushed from the rising steam. He inhaled, and the exotic sandalwood scent filled his senses.

With a contented exhalation, he leaned against the curved back. The hard metal supported his spine and pressed against the back of his neck. And then large hands were behind him, cradling his head and slipping a soft cloth beneath it to cushion his neck. The hands reached over his shoulders and plunged into the water with another bit of flannel. Karl soaped it, then rubbed the lather over Jonathan's chest.

A small part of him—the old, self-sufficient, self-contained Jonathan—was a little embarrassed as Karl performed this service for him. The rest of him—the larger part now—loved it.

He sank deeper into the water and enjoyed the warmth, the sound of Karl's even breathing, and the drip of the water from the cloth Karl held.

The large hand on his chest stopped its gentle circling. Karl laughed softly. "Jonathan, I can't believe my ears, man. You are humming."

"I am?"

"Perhaps next you'll be whistling as you walk about the place."

"Stranger things have happened." Jonathan yawned and closed his eyes.

"No, I don't believe I've witnessed anything stranger, and I have seen a great many things in my life. That fierce, bloodied warrior, come to this? It's rather like a miracle."

Jonathan grunted. He loved the soft nonsense of Karl's voice washing over him.

There was a gentle swish of water as Karl continued to wash him with real water too, dabbing the warm, sweetly scented cloth across his neck. "You're so entirely relaxed, I'm not certain I know you." Karl sounded bemused.

The warm water and the hands of his lover cradled him, and Jonathan knew he slipped close to the edge of sleep. "Mmm. Not certain I know me either."

"Ah, that's good, then. The two of us will discover this new Jonathan Reese together, shall we?"

"Hope we like him," Jonathan murmured.

"I expect we'll love him," Karl whispered and kissed the side of Jonathan's damp face. "I already do."

 THE END 

Loose Id Titles by Bonnie Dee & Sumer Devon

Seducing Stephen
The Gentleman and the Rogue
The Nobleman and the Spy

About the Authors

Bonnie Dee

I began telling stories as a child. Whenever there was a sleepover, I was the designated ghost tale teller. I still have a story printed on yellow legal paper in second grade about a ghost, a witch and a talking cat.

Writing childish stories for my own pleasure led to majoring in English at college. Like most English majors, I dreamed of writing a novel, but at that time in my life didn't have the necessary focus and follow through. Then life happened. A husband and children occupied the next twenty years. It was only in 2000 that I began writing again. Fanfiction helped me reawaken that creative facet of my life. Having an already created world and characters to play with, makes it easy for a writer to work at the other aspects of the craft.

I was content with my fanfic writing for a couple of years before deciding it was time to create my own worlds. My friend, Lauren Baker and I wrote *Finding Home*, and then I worked on getting an agent or publisher. Meanwhile, I kept writing short stories, articles, and novellas. Since discovering the world of e-publishing and getting my start at Liquid Silver Books, I never stopped writing. I now have the confidence to say, "I am a writer," and the published works to prove it.

Summer Devon

Summer Devon is the alter ego of Kate Rothwell. Kate invented Summer's name in the middle of a nasty blizzard. At the time she was talking to her sister, who longed to visit some friends in Devon, England—so the name Summer Devon is all about desire. Kate/Summer lives in Connecticut, USA, and also writes books, usually gaslight historicals, as Kate.