

A Thin Line Excerpt

The crowd on the dance floor began jockeying for better positions to watch the fireworks that would begin at the unveiling, which happened at the strike of Midnight. The shuffling people aided Kala's escape from her party. She slipped off onto one of the side paths and ducked into an unoccupied gazebo, without knowing two pairs of eyes watched her movement.

She quickly removed her quiver and dug inside for the woolen pants. She pulled them on and tucked the ends of her dress into the waist. She made quick work of removing the coarse shirt and pulling it on over her outfit as well. She quickly exchanged masks, the leather one covered much more of her face and the eye holes were larger so her sight would not be impeded. Finally, she removed the last part of her ensemble, an old sailor's toboggan of her brother's. She pulled it low over her face, making sure the majority of her hair would be tucked under it. She took mental stock of herself and started to leave the gazebo when she looked down at her feet.

"Bloody hell," she whispered. She chewed herself out for forgetting shoes. Her pants were long enough to cover most of the sandals and would simply have to do. She dug into the quiver and grabbed the wilted white rose lying in the bottom. She pulled it out and threaded it through a hole in the shirt where it laced. The quiver she quickly stuffed beneath one of the benches before moving down the steps.

She sprinted farther down the path, moving almost silently. She came to a Y and took the left branch that would lead her to the assigned meeting place. She had only been here once before, but she remembered this path fairly well. It contained all the classical statues tucked into the hedges, almost like alcoves. The statue of Aphrodite came into view. Kala slowed to a walk in order to catch her breath. A large man joined her on the path, startling her a bit, as she came to stand beside the statue.

He wore a plain black mask like so many of the men did this evening. However, he wore a white rose that looked somewhat better than hers. After the attack earlier this year, her voice could easily be mistaken for a young man reaching maturity or a gruff old man, so she didn't bother to disguise it.

"I take it you are the one sent to meet me."

"I am. You do know that if the information you have is true, your very life could be in jeopardy if it fell into the wrong hands."

"Which is why I contacted the authorities." She tried to make note of his speech, but he spoke through a scarf wrapped around his face that muffled his words.

"Some authorities cannot always be trusted."

"Can you?"

"Explicitly."

"Then I see no problem, do you?"

"No."

"Good. I want to tell you the information, but I'm not sure I want to reveal the name."

"What good does that do me?"

"I really don't know. I'm having a few doubts."

"There are men and women trying to tear apart this country and kill our men. Do you want that on your conscience for the sake of saving one man?"

“Let’s take it a step at a time. I overheard a highly titled lord informing a very French woman about where our men would be landing at various places on the continent.”

“That is critical information.”

“I know.”

“How long ago did you hear this?”

“A fortnight.”

“A fortnight? Do you realize there could already be men dying because you failed to come forward earlier?”

“Yes, and believe me, I have lived with that guilt every day and night since,” she took a deep, fortifying breath before going on. “I recently heard another meeting. Same man, same woman, same type of information.”

“This man must be very special to you for you to wait so long.”

“Perhaps once, but no more.” Gabe squinted through his mask to try and get a better look at the informant. He found the person to be familiar in some way. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it. It was almost as if he would know this person in a different setting. He shook his head and brought himself back to the conversation.

“How did you overhear this information? Are you a servant?”

“Aye. In the wrong place at the right time.”

“Will you tell me the name of the man?”

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to see him hang, and I just realized he would indeed hang if found guilty.”

“Did you think he would be slapped on the wrist and told to be a good boy from now on?”

“I’m not sure what I thought.” That voice wound around him like it had so many times in the recent past. He felt his body tighten in reaction. Surely not. “I think deep down he is a good and honest person. For some reason he is just confused right now. Perhaps it is the lure of the woman,” she continued, pulling him out of his reverie.

A man wouldn’t have that trace of bitterness about a woman involved with a man. That only left two options. Neither one set well with him. He had to hear her talk again, just to be sure. Gabe felt almost positive Kala could be found under that mask, but who did she speak of? Southerby? Dewhurst? Perhaps even McKenzie? Her demeanor told him she cared deeply for the man. He had never known her to be that serious about anyone, let alone those three.

“Can you give me a description of the woman?” She did. She described Natalia perfectly, including the red dress she wore to Richard and Drucilla’s ball for Derek and Tessa. The red dress that had left little to the imagination. The dress that Mikala had seen when she peeked through the door after eavesdropping on them. “Dammit,” he bit out.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing, I need to think for a moment.”

If everything added up correctly, that meant she still considered him a traitor, even after told otherwise. He knew Natalia had fallen for the information, but he hadn’t realized anyone else had, or that anyone had heard the information being passed. If she heard, who else could possibly have heard?

“I believe I have seen that woman around before.”

“You have?”

“Indeed. Her name is Natalia and she is a French spy.” He knew he deliberately fed her information, but he had to gain her trust. Then he would reveal himself and try to explain the situation. In the end he would turn her over to Derek and insist he escort her as soon as possible back to her parents. He thought he had made it clear to Mr. Simmons how much danger she was placing herself in, but the older man must have ignored the urgency of the letter.

“So, I was right.” She sounded rather disappointed. She stared at the ground, but he could have sworn he saw the glimmer of tears on her dark, sable lashes. “Then you should know that I saw this man and another meet with the same woman the other evening at the Chatham ball.”

“Two men? Perhaps there is more than meets the eye. Trust me. Tell me who these men are and I will do my best to protect them.”

“There’s only one I’m truly worried about. I only saw the back of the other man, though the longer I have thought about it, his voice seemed familiar to me somehow.”

“Trust me to help you,” the anonymous man coaxed.

Kala halted, nibbling worriedly at her lower lip. Gabe found the action so sensual with Kala performing the gesture that he felt himself hardening as he watched. She almost looked like a scared rabbit, ready to bolt at the least little sound. He wanted to take her in his arms and protect her from the world that she believed to have turned against her and turn her over his knee at the same time. Why didn’t he feel this way with Clarissa? He forced his concentration back to the matter at hand. He had to find out what she knew about this second man.

At that exact moment, Kala noticed several things happened at once. She heard a hissing sound in the hedges behind her and turned to inspect it, ever the inquisitive one. A huge firework exploded over her head, lighting up the night sky in a brilliant white color before going dim once more. She heard the pounding of feet down the footpath as well as her name being called in a deep, familiar voice, directly behind her. The same spot where the government agent had stood moments earlier.

She turned back around as the hissing grew louder, and then her world exploded.

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She tried to throw her hands up to cover her eyes from the blinding light, but found them held to her side by powerful arms. The heat from the blast could be felt on the parts of her face that the mask did not cover. The statue of Aphrodite she had thought so beautiful disintegrated into hundreds of pieces, and she felt each one pummel her. She flew backwards only to land on top of something warm and solid, but not as hard as the ground. Someone moved and lowered her to the path, tiny pebbles digging into her back. “Don’t move, I’ll be back,” then footsteps rushed away from her. Dust from the fireworks and statue stung her eyes. Her hat must have come off because she felt tendrils of her hair lying on her face.

She lay back on the ground grinding her hands into her eyes in an attempt to remove the grit and ease the burn. Kala then attempted blinking the grit out of her eyes, but nothing seemed to help. The burning sensation had not eased in the least. Her eyes began to water compounding the irritation. She opened her eyes, but saw nothing but darkness. At that moment she heard the shelling of another firework as it exploded over her head. Blackness.

It must have been one of those odd ones that popped but did not sparkle. A dud, they called it. Again another loud pop sounded, but this time she heard the tell-tale crinkle that followed the colorful shimmers. Nothing. Her heart began to race. No, it simply couldn’t be. She heard another firework explode in the distance followed by the crinkling sound it made as it disappeared. No brightness, no

color, nothing.

She stumbled to a standing position and began moving blindly along the path, her hands stretched in front of her, reaching. Mikala felt the roughness of a tree trunk and knew she had strayed from the path somewhere. Should she continue or wait for someone? For the first time in her life she truly felt frightened. This had all turned into a horrible nightmare in a matter of seconds. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and opened them. Darkness. Bone-chilling darkness.

“No!” she yelled hoarsely into the night, trying to deny what had happened to her. Fate would not be so cruel as to deny her both a normal voice and her sight. She could not think of anything she did that did not include seeing. Reading and riding were two of her favorite pastimes. How in Hell would she exist if she couldn’t see? She gave a guttural cry and began beating the coarse trunk of the tree in front of her. She failed to hear the sound of feet crunching the gravel on the path.

“Kala!” She found herself so lost in her agony that she failed to hear the call of her name. “Kala, stop it!” She felt rough, strong hands clamp on her upper arms and pull her away from the tree. “What’s wrong?”

“No, please no!”