

*A*  
RECKLESS  
SOUL  
ELIZABETH  
COLE

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*A Heartless Design*

*A Shameless Angel*

*The Lady Dauntless*

*Beneath Sleepless Stars*

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*Regency Rhapsody Novellas*

*A*  
RECKLESS  
SOUL  
ELIZABETH  
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SKYSPARK BOOKS

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A RECKLESS SOUL / Cole, Elizabeth. – Sample edition

# Chapter 1



*London, August 1806*

SOPHIE WONDERED IF SHE SHOULD just kill the man.

She stretched to full length under the sheets. Beside her, the man in question lay deeply asleep. She glanced at him to confirm that he was out cold, then rose from the bed in an easy, fluid motion.

Her body was like a dancer's, narrow-framed and sleek. Growing up, Sophie had often been mistaken for a boy. Though she was now five years past twenty, it seemed her hips had filled out only within the last few years. But she had a natural grace to her movements, bolstered by years of ballet and theatrical training. Despite her less than lush figure, she knew how to attract attention. The recent encounter proved as much. She'd seduced her mark with little more than a smile.

She gathered her clothes from where they lay on the floor and put them on without any particular hurry. Her dress was in a cut common for a lady's maid, but Sophie wasn't a lady's maid.

She was a spy.

Her job was to retrieve a false seal used by her mark, Garrett Mourne.

Her cover identity was Sara, a French-born servant for one of London's wealthy families. As Sara, she'd been close to Garrett for weeks—he was involved in the hostilities between France and England, passing information and rumors between players in exchange for cash. Managing his romantic advances was simply part of the game. The previous night had been typical. Garrett was a dull lover, which suited Sophie perfectly. She pretended a delight in his attentions, and was never in danger of actually feeling the passion she displayed.

She checked her appearance in the small mirror by his wardrobe, so she could adjust the blonde wig she wore—her own hair was quite dark, and unfashionably short. Thin, straight brows arched over her large eyes, which were a light brown that held flecks of hazel, and she knew how to catch and hold any audience with them. She grinned at herself as she turned from the mirror. With Garrett still dozing from the mild dose of opium she'd slipped into his drink, it was time to get to work.

Sophie slipped out of the bedroom and walked through the silent house. Garrett had been renting it for months, but hospitality wasn't a priority for him. Time and neglect took away most of the charm of the once-grand

place. Dust gathered everywhere, and only the most used areas were kept clean.

Sophie paused at the door of the parlor, which Garrett used as his work room. She waited to be sure she was undetected—the few servants he employed would be up and about soon. After a moment, she turned the knob. The door was unlocked, and she sighed in relief. One more thing she wouldn't have to disguise.

Early morning light had barely begun to filter into the room. It was outfitted with a large table and several chairs. Papers, stacked haphazardly in piles, covered the table. Stolen jewelry and coins lay on the floor. She ignored all those things, her eyes scanning the desk.

Shutting the door behind her, Sophie went into action. She walked over to Garrett's table, searching among the piles. Nothing on the top. Methodically, she lifted every stack and sorted through the papers. She riffled through the collection of pens and inkwells, hoping to find the object she sought. Still nothing.

Sophie turned to a set of cabinets and repeated the search. Cursing softly, she opened drawer after drawer. "Where is it?" she breathed.

A floorboard creaked in the hall. Sophie froze. She listened for more sounds, not even breathing. Another creak. She moved one hand outward toward a slim letter opener left on the desktop. As a weapon, it wasn't intimidating. But Sophie had won fights with no weapon at all before. And if she were seen, a fight would be inevitable.

Someone moved again outside, and then spoke. "I said

bring the wood in first, dolt, *then* sweep. What's the point of cleaning first?" The voice continued to scold the other servant, and footsteps faded down the hall.

Sophie breathed out. Just the household waking up. She had a little while, but she'd have to be twice as careful leaving the room.

Though she hoped Garrett would sleep for some time, there was no guarantee the opium would work as expected. If he found her pawing through his things, no amount of persuasion—verbal or physical—would appease him.

She continued her search. Finally she found a locked drawer. She made short work of the lock with a pin from her hair and the drawer rolled open soundlessly. It didn't take her long to find what she was looking for.

It was a seal. She examined the design on the bottom—a lion standing up on its hind legs, with claws ready to attack. Stars surrounded the creature. It looked authentic, but Sophie knew it was an excellent forgery. Garrett had been using it to send false messages across the Channel, confusing the recipients and therefore hindering the war effort. Garrett didn't care who won the war. He was merely interested in tilting little things his way to profit from the confusion.

Sophie, however, *did* care who won. She pulled an object from the pocket sewn into her shift. It was a seal that looked nearly identical to the one Garrett possessed, though his had a few wear marks she could only replicate when she had both in hand. She scratched similar markings in the new seal. She even smeared a bit of red sealing wax on the new one to complete the illusion. Then



she placed the new one back in the drawer.

Her work was nearly done. Smiling, Sophie tucked the first seal into the pocket of her dress.

She could have snuck out of the house at that point, but Sophie thought her act required an encore. She inched the door open and peeped out into the hallway. She waited until she could hear nothing, and slipped out of the work room. Gliding up the stairs in her slippered feet, she returned to the bedroom, breathing a thin sigh of relief.

She reached the bed and stared down at Garrett, her eyes cold. He was a thin, tough man. He'd worked his way up through the ranks of the London underworld, and it wasn't hard to imagine how he did it. He could not be called handsome, but there was something compelling about the man. Sophie knew what it was. Power. Garrett controlled several gangs in London, and he was shrewd.

In all honesty, she'd be doing her adopted country a favor if she killed him. He was indirectly responsible for the suffering of so many people: families and shopkeepers who paid protection to his gangs, the soldiers who fought in the wars he helped prolong. But if she eliminated him, another enemy would simply take his place.

*I suppose you have your uses,* she thought, *and who knows when you'll be useful again?* She removed her clothes and slid back into the bed. Sophie took a certain pride in seeing a job done properly, which in this case meant tricking her mark into believing nothing unusual had happened.

She let a sweeter expression settle on her face. "Garrett," she whispered, shaking him lightly. "Garrett."

He opened his eyes, blinking slowly. He was groggy,

but not too badly off. Sophie hated the idea of using more opium than necessary. It was risky. He might notice the unnaturalness of his sleep.

“Sara?” he muttered.

“We both slept late,” she said. “I have to go, or I’ll be thrown out.”

“You’re still here?” he asked, distracted. “What time is it?”

“Time for me to leave.”

“Oh, but you’re delicious, Sara. Stay here.” He ran his hands up and down her body, feeling the heat of her. He lingered over her breasts, and then moved to her hips and her bottom. He looked more alert than she expected at that hour.

“Garrett,” she said in warning. “I can’t stay, and you know it. My mistress hardly lets me out as it is.”

“Come back tonight.” Garrett leaned in and kissed her, his lips warm, but his breath sour from the aftereffects of the drug.

Still, Sophie returned the kiss, as if hungry for him. He wasn’t terribly skilled, but she’d experienced far worse. She opened her mouth and moaned a little, letting him think she enjoyed it. Then she broke it off. “I must go back now. Trust me, I’d stay if I didn’t have to work for that harridan.”

He laughed, and she did too. *The best trick is to make your victim fool himself.* She got out of bed once more and dressed, feeling to make sure the seal was safe in the tied pocket in her skirts.

Garrett looked at her appreciatively. “Come back as

soon as you can.”

*Don't wager on that*, she thought smugly. But she gave him a smile that would have to serve as the only farewell he'd ever get from her. Then Sophie ducked her head and hurried out of the room.

She left the house and emerged on the street. She ignored the carriages and conveyances for hire, walking tirelessly until she reached a new section of the city. Here, tidily dressed gentlemen hurried from place to place, looking important, although more than one pair of masculine eyes followed her progress down the street.

Eventually, she reached a large building of marble and brick. It was already busy, for several private firms had offices inside. Instead of entering through the imposing front doors, however, she sidled down an alley at the rear of the building. She found a small door that appeared to be a tradesman's entrance.

Sophie made her way through a warren of rooms and hallways, climbing several staircases to get where she was going. At one door, she knocked quietly. Another woman opened it. “Yes, miss?” she asked in a disinterested voice.

“I have a delivery,” said Sophie.

Glancing quickly up and down the corridor, the woman allowed her inside.

When the door closed, she turned to Sophie and nodded in recognition. Sophie had reached the headquarters of the Zodiac, the most secretive group in the already secret world of espionage.

“Hello, Miss Chattan,” Sophie said. She knew some things about the Zodiac, but they didn't include this

woman's Christian name. Though a fixture in the private headquarters, the woman was a mystery.

Chattan nodded back curtly. Her eternally messy ash blonde hair was barely bound, and her plain, practical gown sported several ink stains. She surveyed Sophie's wig and her outfit with a disdainful eye, then said, "He's been expecting you." The other woman gestured to an inner door, then returned to her own desk, dismissing Sophie from her mind.

"And a very good day to you as well, Chattan," Sophie remarked under her breath, just loud enough so the other woman heard it.

Sophie didn't wait for a response. She entered the inner office with a breezy greeting. "Morning, Aries. I got the little item you fancied." Though French-born, Sophie never lost a chance to sound as British as possible. She considered it her duty to master such things.

The man who ran the office had been standing at a window, staring out at the streets below. Now he turned and looked Sophie over. Julian Neville, also known as Aries, was nominally Sophie's superior. To her, though, he was much more. Julian was the man who taught her how to be a spy. He was also the man who practically ran the elite espionage group known as the Zodiac. He reported to the Astronomer, who was truly the head of the group, as far as anyone knew. Sophie didn't even want to guess the true identity of *that* person. She was much safer not knowing.

Julian smiled. "Well, my Libra returns." Libra was Sophie's code name, and her most closely guarded secret.

Of the twelve agents who made up the Zodiac, she was the only woman. "Did you run into any problems?"

Sophie shook her head. "It went like clockwork. Garrett Mourne thinks he's a mastermind, but he's got the same weaknesses as any other man." She bunched up a bit of her skirt and held it out toward Julian, carelessly revealing slender legs nearly up to the top of her thin stockings. "Feel this. As if any real maid would wear a weave so fine! This dress wouldn't last a month in service. After weeks of sleeping with him fairly regularly, you'd think he'd notice."

Julian fingered the fabric, eyebrow raised. "I see. And it does allow your figure to be a bit more...prominent, doesn't it? Clever." He dropped the fabric.

"I thought so. I sewed it myself." Sophie had many skills, not all of them learned in her training as a spy. She'd practically grown up in a theater, and learned how to sew from the seamstresses there.

"Was it tolerable?" he asked, sounding concerned.

"Garrett Mourne, you mean?" Sophie asked. "Yes. Garrett's a thief and a turncoat. But he treated me well enough."

"Even in bed?"

"I've had worse and better." She shrugged. "What else is there to say?"

What else could they say? As a spy, he'd done the same things she had over the years. Sophie viewed her body as a tool. She had long ago learned to attach no emotion to physical intimacy. It was a means to an end. Some women used it to secure the attention of husbands or lovers.

Sophie used it to gather information.

“I worry about you sometimes.”

She shot him a look. “Julian, we’ve had this discussion before. I knew exactly what was required of me when I joined. The fact that I’m a woman should make no difference.”

“It shouldn’t,” he agreed. “But I have this lingering sense of chivalry.”

“Put it to rest,” Sophie said. She returned to practical matters. “I have what you’re looking for.”

She handed him the seal. He took it, not hiding his eagerness. He peered at the design for a long time, then put it down on the desk and let out a breath. “That’s a very good copy. No wonder everyone was fooled for so long.”

“No more. The replacement has one extra star around the lion’s head. Garrett won’t notice the alteration until his missives go unheeded a few times.”

“And now that we have the forger under lock and key, he can’t get another seal of that quality. Good work, Libra.”

Sophie straightened up at his mild praise, knowing that for Julian, it was the equivalent of a salute.

“I’m afraid,” he went on, “I have to send you on another assignment immediately.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Read this.” He handed her a letter.

Sophie read it over, her eyebrows slowly knitting together until she was scowling at the end. “From this, it appears someone within the government is selling...not secrets. But support, perhaps? To the French cause?”

“Very likely. It’s another breadcrumb on a trail I’ve been following. You recognized the sender, of course.”

She had. “Volange,” she said, her voice flat. A mysterious man named Arceneau was the most dangerous criminal in Europe, but his lieutenant Alain Volange was far more vicious.

“So you know how bad things might get,” Neville said, watching Sophie carefully.

She nodded. While Sophie was still living in Paris, she had worked as a petty criminal—mostly pickpocketing—and she had seen firsthand what Volange was capable of. The man was unforgiving and had an affection for pain. Sophie used to have nightmares about him. Years later, she got the opportunity to work against him, which suited her far better.

Sophie knew broadly what Arceneau’s interests were. He was a businessman, cold and calculating and willing to deal with virtually anyone with the funds to pay his asking prices for goods like gunpowder, ships, and war machines. He also dealt heavily in blackmail, trading secrets around the continent like cards around a gaming table. Arceneau was dangerous precisely because he had no interests other than money.

Julian took back the letter, and explained, “This confirms what we’ve heard in a few other quarters. Someone has been making secret alliances, or at least promising support. In short, there is a traitor in the British Cabinet.”

She inhaled. It was a serious accusation, and Julian would never even suggest such a thing unless he was

convinced of it. "Who?" she asked quietly.

"That's what you're to find out, Sophie."

"Excellent. Tell me what to do."

"I will tell you all about it tonight, when you meet me and my guest in the Oak Room at the Whitby Club."

"That club doesn't admit ladies inside," she noted. "So I gather I'm to find my own way in."

He smiled, and his implication was clear. *Impress me.*

"Who's your guest?" she asked, knowing he wouldn't tell her outright.

"Someone who will help you."

She raised her chin. "You trained me to always work alone."

"This time is different."

"Will he understand what I am?"

"I expect you'll make that quite clear yourself."

"So what is he, then?"

"Someone you'll need to know in order to complete this assignment. And that is all," Julian said, irritation making him curt. "Eleven o'clock tonight, Sophie."

She stood up. "Well, I do like to make an entrance. I'll see you then."



## *Chapter 2*



BRUCE ALLANDER, LORD FORESTER, WAS six feet three inches tall, and every inch of him was in pain. He winced as he removed his boots. He was too disgusted with his state to wait for his valet to get started.

It was mid-afternoon, but he felt as if it had been days since he sat down, not mere hours. He was sweating from the hot summer sun, and his bones ached from the day of physical labor. His skin, naturally prone to tanning, was nearly olive at this point in the summer.

“Good God, what was I thinking?” he asked, groaning.

It was a rhetorical question, but that had never stopped his longtime valet, Lawrence, from replying. “You were thinking, my lord, if the field wasn’t cleared by autumn, it would be another year before it could yield a successful crop.” The man, almost ascetically thin and a foot shorter than his master, did not look the least bit intimidated. He had no reason to be, having known Bruce from an infant.

“It seemed like such a good idea this morning,” Bruce

said. He leaned back in the chair for a moment, feeling his spine protest. He couldn't be getting old, he thought. Not yet. He was only thirty-three.

"As an idea, it was perfectly sound." Lawrence offered his employer a clean towel to wipe the worst of the sweat from his face. "But I don't understand why you had to clear it yourself, sir."

The last word was stressed lightly, a reminder that Bruce was indeed lord of the manor...specifically, a viscount. Such labor was beneath the dignity of his station. Bruce didn't care. He did plenty of things ostensibly beneath his station, and most of them were far more demeaning than working the land.

He wiped his face with the towel, inhaling the clean, slightly harsh smell of laundry soap. The move made a few strands of midnight black hair fall into his face. Lawrence would soon be hounding him to see it was cut. Bruce often avoided the task, never wishing to sit still longer than necessary.

He handed the towel back to his valet and said, "You know why I do it. I want to run this estate well. That means being out there, working with the tenants, seeing the problems. Not merely sitting around collecting all the rents."

"Yes, sir." Lawrence had the gift of agreeing with his master in a way such that his complete disagreement was clear. He was a perfect valet. "Oh, this arrived while you were grubbing stumps out of the dirt." He felt in his pocket and handed Bruce a folded, sealed letter. "Came about an hour ago. I would have sent one of the boys out

to find you, but I knew you wouldn't last much longer out there."

Bruce looked at the seal, a rough outline of a goat's head. *Aries*. He ripped the note open and read it over. "Well, there goes my evening of leisure. I'm going into London. Leaving within the hour if I'm to be there in time."

"I'll prepare your things." Lawrence sighed. "I do recommend you make use of the bath that's already been drawn. Unless you're heading to some dank part of London." Lawrence held the opinion that all of London was rather dank. The valet much preferred the bucolic world of Old Harrow, the Allander family's estate. He walked away to assemble what Bruce would need.

Bruce ripped up the note and silently cursed his decision to work in the fields that day. Even with a bath and a change of clothes, he'd be tired and barely presentable for his meeting with Aries. But then again, Julian had seen him look worse...much worse.

As promised, within the hour Bruce was in his coach, being driven to London. That was one thing about working for the Zodiac...it was never dull. Bruce tossed around potential ideas for the assignment Julian would give him. He liked to guess as many scenarios as possible, though he was still often surprised at the real assignments.

Some were strange, some required months of planning, and others only took the space of one evening. But none of them were trivial. That was all that mattered.

The coach made good time. He didn't have the opportunity to stop at his townhome, but he arrived at the

Whitby Club a little early. The club was housed in an understated, gracious building of red brick. Inside, he was directed immediately up to the top floor, where Julian awaited him in a small but richly furnished private room. The chamber was paneled in oak, and the upholstered leather chairs and rich appointments made it clear this was a haven for gentlemen only.

Julian nodded as Bruce entered. "Ah, you were able to make it after all," he said, as if they were merely wasting an evening in town.

With admirable timing, a man in butler's attire appeared in the doorway as soon as Bruce seated himself. Julian caught the man's eye. "Did you want something to drink, Forester?" he asked.

"Scotch." Bruce sat down in a leather chair opposite Julian, noticing another chair had been moved nearby. Someone else was joining them? That was unusual.

"Scotch for the gentleman." Julian gave the order and the butler nodded before closing the door.

"Sorry about the short notice," Julian said then. "Did I drag you away from anything?"

"Only a farm field."

"What were you doing there?"

"Mostly clearing out boulders and tree stumps," Bruce said, his muscles still hurting. "I suppose I should thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. You don't know what I'm going to ask you."

"Ask away."

Julian shook his head. "I prefer not to repeat myself.

We're awaiting one more person...who I hope will arrive soon."

At that moment, the door opened again, and Julian waved a hand for silence. A young man in servant's clothes entered, bearing a tray holding a decanter of fine scotch and a few glasses. He poured one and silently handed it to Bruce.

He tossed half of it back, and the warm liquor instantly banished some of the ache from his body. "Ah, that's better."

Julian was looking hard at the waiter, who had not yet left the room. Instead, he was pouring another glass, despite the fact that both men had their drinks. Bruce frowned. The *Whitby Club should supply a better class of servant*, he thought. Then the young man turned around, smiling lazily.

"How do you like my entrance, Julian?" The voice was feminine and suggestive. Bruce was at a complete loss. The waiter was no boy at all. It was a woman.

Julian just laughed, his face losing years of tension at the woman's question. "*Very* good," he said approvingly. "Even I had to look twice." He held out his glass. "Actually, even though it's not your real job, would you mind?" The woman refilled it without taking her eyes off Bruce.

His own eyes narrowed as he examined her from head to foot. It was undoubtedly a woman. A beautiful woman, at least from what he could see. The men's clothes fit her well. She was tall, perhaps only a half foot shy of his own considerable height, which aided her deception. She was

on the slender side, but the fine shape of her legs was now obvious through the fabric of the breeches, and he could see the outline of her calves under the thin stockings. Her jacket and ruffled shirt were cut just a bit large, presumably to conceal feminine curves. Above the collar, her slender neck rose up to a face that was lovely, now that he was looking properly. He wondered how he'd missed it when she first arrived. High cheekbones. Patrician nose. Lips far too full for a boy. But her hair...

Short, dark hair was cut close around her head, nearly as short as a man's, but still oddly feminine. Was that her real hair? Had she actually chopped it off to impersonate a young man as a prank? What sort of woman did that?

He looked into her large, light brown eyes and found his answer. There was a challenge there. A dare. Bruce was intrigued.

Julian was actively enjoying his discomfort, or the woman's attitude, or both. "Scorpio, meet Libra."

Bruce couldn't hide his surprise. "She's a sign of the Zodiac?" *That* changed things.

"I am," Libra replied. "And it is perfectly acceptable to speak to me directly."

"Sophie, be kind. You do astound, after all."

Astounding was a good word for her. Bruce had no idea what to say. He began, "I never thought the Zodiac would hire a woman as an agent..."

"No one ever does," Sophie said. She tilted her head up proudly. "Which is why I'm so effective."

Bruce didn't doubt that.

Julian explained, "You can see, Forester. Libra will be a

valuable asset in this assignment, where the element of surprise will be the most vital weapon you have.”

“It’s been very useful to me so far,” Sophie said. She frowned at their superior. “So why are you bringing him into our confidence?”

Julian said with the formality of introduction, “Bruce Allander, Viscount Forester, is the fifth person in the world to know your code name. I chose him for a reason, and not without due consideration.”

“Hmm.” Sophie walked over to the other empty chair in the room and sat down, letting the servant’s deference slide from her bones though without regaining the customary mannerisms of a lady. Bruce could still see the outlines of her body. It was damned distracting, and highly improper for any woman.

Her next words, however, brought him back to reality. “I know what I’m capable of. So what...assets will his lordship bring to the cause?” she asked, disdain and contempt dancing in her tone. There was the tiniest hint of a foreign accent in her voice. He wondered where she came from, and why the Zodiac would hire someone from abroad. Or was it a distraction as well?

Julian explained his plan. “Forester has been in the field for over a decade as a Zodiac agent, and has done extremely well. You seize opportunity, he plans down to the minute. You have a gift for improvisation, and his gift is experience. Further, he never forgets a thing.”

“True,” Bruce added quietly, looking down at his drink. And he planned to remember everything about this woman.

Julian went on, "His skills complement your own. Without his knowledge and expertise, you cannot hope to succeed in this next assignment."

She snorted delicately, but said nothing more.

Bruce said, "What is this, Julian? You'd better explain why we're both here."

"You're both going on an assignment. Together."

Bruce recoiled. "We don't do that. I always work alone."

"I seem to remember a time in Calais, not that long ago, when you and Sagittarius worked together," Julian retorted.

Sophie's eyes flickered at that statement, with what Bruce presumed was curiosity.

"I was doing a favor for a friend," he said dismissively. "An unusual situation."

Julian would not be dissuaded. "So is this one."

"But why do I need a penny stage actress to tag along?"

"Penny stage actress?!" Sophie sat up straight in her chair and glared at him. All pretense of laziness was gone. That had gotten a rise out of her. It must be true, Bruce thought.

Julian held up his hands and stopped them both before blood could be drawn. "For the love of God, listen to me. Sophie, I told you how urgent this is. Now let me fill Bruce in on the details."

He turned to Bruce and told him about the rogue cabinet member.

Bruce was troubled. "How could such a thing happen? Surely all the cabinet members are trustworthy."



“Sophie said much the same thing. And yet, someone has promised to support the Emperor in exchange for money...and presumably protection. We need to know who it is. I’m convinced the answer lies in the house where you’ll be going in order to complete the assignment. A name, a document. As quiet as all this has been kept, there is proof somewhere. Countries don’t change allies on a handshake. Someone has kept records, made some payments, or carried out promises. I want proof.”

“I’ll find it,” Bruce assured him.

“It gets worse,” Sophie added.

Julian mentioned the specter of Arceneau meddling in politics.

Bruce knew the name. “If he’s involved, we have to assume he’ll kill to get what he wants.”

“Oh, he has people who kill for pleasure,” Sophie said quietly.

“You know of him?”

“More than you do,” she returned, her expression lofty.

“Enough,” Julian said. “There’s going to be a gathering hosted by a man named Thomas Theriot at a place called Carterhaugh Manor.”

“Never heard of it.”

“That’s because it’s in the middle of nowhere in the north. A vast estate that once rivaled the palaces of Europe, but it’s been long past its glory.”

“What sort of gathering?” Sophie asked.

“A number of wealthy and socially influential people—a few British-born citizens, but largely French expatriates who have since claimed to be loyal to Britain. They have

been invited for a month-long house party. You'll join them."

"And do what, exactly?"

"Your task is two-fold. Find out whether the guests intend to join any sort of plot or conspiracy run by Theriot. And get your hands on whatever documents Theriot has identifying the cabinet member."

"That sounds like quite a lot of information to gather," Bruce noted.

"Precisely why you're going to be there, Scorpio. I know you're the best man for this sort of work."

Sophie glanced at Bruce again, more inquisitively. "And while he's playing clerk, I'm to distract Theriot?"

"You're both responsible for every aspect of the assignment. Retrieving proof of the traitor is the first priority. Work together."

She leaned forward. "I agree it's important to find the proof, but I don't understand why it must be *two* agents. I could easily get in on my own."

Julian held up one hand. "Doubtless, except the guest list is very exclusive. So you'll both be replacing someone already on that list. Sophie, you'll impersonate the woman: Madame Marianne Cassou. I have her description, as well as her wardrobe. You'll be able to mimic her very well with a proper wig and clothing. Bruce has the right height and look to pass himself off as the other guest. And you both speak French fluently. That's vital. With the sort of people who are expected to attend, you'll likely have to conduct yourselves entirely in French at least some of the time."

"Not an issue for me," she said, confirming Bruce's

guess that she actually *was* French.

“And you both must be very careful. Arceneau is smarter than the average man. His proxy will be intelligent as well, and the number of guests means you can never let down your guard.”

Julian pulled something out of his pocket. He presented each agent with a small object. “Take these.”

Sophie looked at the gold ring with an expression of revulsion. Bruce was no more pleased at the ring in his hand, clearly the match of the one she’d been given.

“Exactly what are these for?” he asked.

“What do you think? You’ll be masquerading as a married couple.”

“You can’t be serious,” Sophie said, eyeing Bruce.

“I agree,” he said. “What man in his right mind would marry *that*?”

Sophie’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Forester, you’ll be acting as Theodore Cassou. The Cassou couple were the only potential guests the Zodiac could make use of. And together, it’s far less likely either of you will be thought a spy.”

Bruce was annoyed to discover his ring fit perfectly.

Sophie slid her ring on as well. “It’s a bit loose,” she said to Julian, shaking her hand experimentally.

“That’s because you still don’t eat enough, Sophie.” His offhand comment needled Bruce for some reason. Why would Julian even know how much Sophie ate?

From the look that flitted across her face, the comment flustered her. She must be sensitive about her size. And her stage actress past. Bruce filed those items away to think

about later.

Julian described his plan in detail. Bruce saw a significant flaw in it, namely that he'd have to work with Sophie to accomplish the goals.

"As I say, you're going to impersonate a couple with links to the conspiracy. Madame Cassou seems to have maintained some correspondence with Theriot, thus securing the invitation. We need to know what he thinks she'll provide him."

Sophie's eyes were intent. "And is her husband a willing partner in this endeavor?"

"We're not sure," Julian admitted.

"Oh, that's grand," Sophie muttered. "So we don't even know which of us is supposed to be the traitor?"

Julian shot her a dark look, but said, "We got the best information we could, dear Sophie."

Bruce broke in, "Speaking of Cassou, where is he? The real one, I mean?"

"Abroad—quite safe and out of the way. I called in a favor to delay the couple with some bureaucratic nonsense in Austria. They won't be able to travel for at least three weeks. That's your opportunity to finish the assignment."

"I still don't see the need for two of us. Let me go alone," Sophie told Julian. "Scorpio can stay home...and out of my way."

"No," Julian said flatly.

"Better yet, send the lady back to the stage and let me get to work," Bruce said, keeping his voice low. "I'm using the term *lady* as a courtesy, of course."

Sophie got up, glaring at him.

“I’m done here,” she snapped. She walked to the door, then turned back. “This is a bad idea, Julian.”

With those words, she glided out of the room, leaving a faint scent of perfume and scotch in her wake.

## Chapter 3



AFTER SOPHIE SHUT THE DOOR, Bruce said to Julian, “She doesn’t appear to like your plan.”

“I’d say she doesn’t appear to like *you*,” Julian noted. “I thought you’d both get on better than that.”

Bruce shifted uncomfortably. “Surprise, maybe. She’ll get used to the idea by the time we leave.” He hoped. Sophie as an antagonist would be hell on a man.

“I hope so. Sophie’s a practical girl. One of the reasons I like her so well is because she has no illusions.”

“So she won’t be confused by the roles we’ll be playing?” The last thing Bruce needed was a woman playing at marriage and misunderstanding the reality.

“Sophie? God, no.”

“Then why not send her alone, if she’s so skilled? It could be explained away if her husband didn’t join her. Not that I’m begging off the assignment,” he added.

“Sophie has always been remarkably independent, even more so than other agents,” Julian said. “It’s a point of pride for her. But for a few reasons, I’d feel better this time

if someone else had eyes on her—and vice versa.”

“I see,” Bruce said evenly. “Well, I have two days. I’ll get to work now.”

He left the briefing fuming inwardly. Libra would be a problem. Julian’s plan, as it was outlined, did require them to act together. But Bruce would see another path once he scouted out the situation. One that would work on his terms. He could send the woman back with instructions to go play at being a spy somewhere else, where the stakes were not quite so high.

A fine mist was falling from the sky when he hit the streets. Bruce was so lost in thought that he almost walked past his own house in town. He turned in abruptly at the gate, and stalked through the front gardens. He decided to go round back and let himself in with his own key. No need to rouse the house’s servants when he was perfectly capable of tending to his own needs.

He had just reached the glass door to the conservatory when he heard a small, out-of-place sound. Every danger sense he had clamored at him. He whirled around, ready to strike at whoever was there.

It was Sophie, though she looked nothing like before. Now she looked rather like a ghost in a pale gown and long, dark tresses just visible beneath a very ladylike hat. Struck by her unexpectedly feminine appearance, Bruce just stopped himself from delivering a blow—though she probably deserved it, stalking up behind him like that. She should know how fast a trained agent could be.

For her part, Sophie stepped back, but looked smug. “I see you noticed me at last.”

“How long have you been following me?”

“Since you left the Whitby Club, of course. I changed, and then watched for you to leave. Of course, there was no guarantee you would head directly home.”

“What are you doing here?”

“We need to talk,” she said calmly.

“So talk.”

“Perhaps you would be so kind as to invite me inside?”

She had a point. He hadn’t a care for the light rain while walking home, but now he felt it beginning to cling. “Very well.” He turned the key in the lock and opened the door, ushering Sophie through first.

The conservatory was a haven of luscious smells and quiet, damp earthiness. “This is much better,” she said, looking around the darkened area. He took note of her socially acceptable garb: a light cotton gown and little soft leather slippers. Ladies would not walk the distance he just covered. Yet Sophie had. She took off her hat and held it delicately in gloved hands, looking for a place to put it down. Everything about her now suggested a well-bred woman.

“How did you...change so quickly?” he asked, curious despite himself. Sophie had been dressed as a footman, and now there was no trace of her former persona. The hair had to be a wig, yet he would have sworn it was real.

“It’s not such a trick.” Her voice held a slight accent, hinting again at her French heritage. “It’s second nature to me now.”

He wondered what her first nature was. What lady willingly went into his Majesty’s service, leaving all normal



life behind? Forester found himself searching for her eyes in the darkness. "Take my arm. I wouldn't want you to trip. There's a bench over at the end of the row. We can talk there. So...I can't call you Sophie. What's your family name?"

"Bertrand," she replied. "But you *can* call me Sophie. It's not as if I'm a lady." Her tone was both amused and a little bitter.

"Miss Bertrand," he said firmly. Just as if they were at a society event, he led her to the iron bench, cushioned comfortably for anyone who wished to sit and admire the plants. The conservatory had been a pet project of his late mother's, and Bruce kept it up as a sort of memorial to her. He rarely set foot in it himself.

Sophie let her eyes adjust to the dim light and sank to the bench, laying the hat to one side.

"You wanted to talk," Bruce said coolly. "I'm all ears." With nowhere else to go, he sat beside her on the bench, closer than social convention would dictate.

"You resent me," she started. "I feel the same way."

He said nothing, but he immediately tensed up. How dare she tell him what he was thinking?

Sophie went on, "Let's begin again. Aries has a flair for the dramatic. He was the one who suggested I make a surprising entrance. But I see now that's not the way to deal with you. We're both used to working alone. I'm still not sure this assignment requires us to act together, but Aries planned it that way, and he has never steered me wrong before."

"Nor me," Bruce admitted. "If he wants us to work

together, I'll trust him. For now."

"Good. Now, to cut line. You don't trust me."

He pulled back, offended. "What did I just say? If Aries..."

"I mean, you don't trust me because I'm a woman." She held up a slim, gloved hand. "My methods are different. You don't know how to treat me because in your world, either among the gentry or in the military, there are no women in a position quite like mine. True?"

There were always female informants and the like, but a long-term, professional spy in a group like the Zodiac? He doubted it. "I suppose you're correct."

"Good," she said. "Now, I'll tell you this once. I am a sign of the Zodiac. Think of me like any other agent. Not as a woman. Not as some vaporish lady. There's nothing you can do that I can't, understand?"

Bruce was conscious of a heat rising from her agitated body, of a pleasant scent—half liquor, half perfume—floating on her skin. In the dark, he couldn't see her eyes well, but he could feel her gaze on him.

He caught her hand in the middle of an empathetic gesture. "I'll admit, I have difficulty thinking of you as just another agent."

"What are you doing?" She struggled to free herself from his hold. Bruce felt the veneer of civilization slide away, replaced by something far more primitive set off by her intoxicating scent. "You say there's nothing I can do you can't? Prove it to me."

"How?" Sophie asked, a bit breathlessly.

"If you are an agent, and you are captured," he said as

he tightened his grip on her hands, “how will you get free, for instance...if I kissed you?” He found her mouth in the dark, and claimed it.

She didn’t recoil. Instead she leaned into him, seeking more of him. Her lips parted. His hands shifted to catch her waist, pulling her closer. She wrapped her now freed arms about his neck, not breaking the kiss.

Bruce forgot his challenge. Sophie was a dream come to life. He grasped her slender waist, lifted her so she sat on his lap. She met him willingly, even eagerly, twining her arms around him, giving him her mouth, letting him taste her sweetness. Her weight settled comfortably across his thighs, and he felt the warmth of her body through the flimsy gown. He hardened at the thought of her beautiful legs wrapped around him. It would be so easy, here in the dark, damp warmth of the conservatory.

She took her arms away from his neck for a moment. He felt her stroke down the length of him, questing, feeling the muscles ripple under her quick, light fingers. A teasing, almost hesitant touch, even through the heavy woolen fabric, made him groan. He blinked and saw her eyes glittering in the dimness. Then he felt a cold blade against his throat.

“I’ll get free by using your weaknesses to my advantage,” Sophie hissed, holding a knife expertly against his skin. *His* knife. The witch had pulled it from his boot.

She didn’t move the blade, even as she climbed off him, shaking her skirts free with one hand. “Well, I am disappointed. You’re so proud to be a sign of the Zodiac, but you’re no different from the rest. French, German,

English...just men after all.”

She stepped back, still holding the knife at the ready. “Here’s my proposition.” She drawled out the double entendre. “We have the target of the assignment. We have the same information. We’re on the same side. Are we not on perfectly equal ground?”

“I’ll show you ground,” Bruce growled, yet not moving toward her.

“I propose a race. Whoever brings the information back to Aries first wins the prize.”

“What’s the prize?”

“Why, the honor to continue in his Majesty’s service,” she said. “The loser will resign, and everyone who matters will know why. Agreed?”

“You’re digging your own grave,” he warned her.

Sophie’s lips curved into a strange smile. “I’ve already done that, my lord.” She stepped back again. “May the best spy win!” She dropped the dagger at his feet, and was gone.

## Chapter 4



SOPHIE FLED THE GREENHOUSE, EMERGING into the near-darkness of the city night. Her heart was racing, only partly due to the fear that Forester would follow her outside and respond to the more violent part of her challenge. She shouldn't have threatened him with the dagger. But she'd been so...angry.

*"Enfer et damnation!"* she muttered. She had hoped this man would be different. From the way Julian talked about him, he was remarkable. And at first, when she examined Bruce, she liked what she saw. His thick hair was jet black, meant to be short but in need of a trim. The sharp planes of his face were compelling, and without really being handsome, he still rated a second look. Then she saw his eyes. Hard and dark, they were the eyes of a man who did things his own way. Like her. She thought she might have found an ally.

Then he opened his mouth.

Obviously, the initial meeting hadn't gone well. Sophie

was irritated by Lord Forester's...well, lordliness. He called her a penny stage actress! He might as well have called her a prostitute, for all the contempt in his voice. True, she *was* a lowly actress's daughter, and an actress herself sometimes. But he didn't have to insult her about it. He seemed not to have any respect for Sophie's abilities.

Still, she knew she was partly at fault, considering her flamboyant entrance. People didn't like to be made fools of, and she'd forced the issue with her too-clever disguise.

The thought of their private encounter brought her back to the kiss. He knew what he was doing in that respect, at least. Feeling him kiss her, hold her, Sophie was initially transfixed. She felt her body respond to his kiss even while her mind struggled to find an answer to his challenge. How would she get free? Did she *want* to get free? She had kissed many men before, but not like this. He was different.

Then, of course, the answer came to her. He wasn't any different. She regained her equilibrium even as she continued to respond to him. He didn't even notice when the seduction shifted to her control. He probably thought he was winning right up until she put the blade to his throat.

She walked on. The rain drizzled down in a fine, light mist. The sheen of water turned London into a dark, glistening onyx carving of a city. Most streets weren't lit, but those that were gleamed in the night, the puddles mirroring the lights and adding to the glow. Some carriages were equipped with lanterns, and those lights floated by like fairies in the dark. She wasn't in a mood to appreciate

it.

Sophie kept her head down, returning to familiar streets. So disappointing! Yet why had she really thought he'd be different? She'd felt him looking at her when he realized who and what she was. She knew he wanted her.

"*Enfer et damnation,*" she repeated. This time she'd really made life difficult. Was it smart to antagonize him as she had? Especially when the world was so uncertain? No. The war would get worse, not better, over the next few years. The Emperor would never rest until he conquered everything Caesar had before him—or until he could be stopped. Arceneau and other criminals like him would always look to take advantage of the chaos. And Sophie, who had lived through the Terror and seen the worst of what could happen as regimes changed, knew she had to do everything she could to prevent such a thing from happening again.

The rain stopped by the time she got home. Her rooms were on the third floor of a boarding house quite close to the Pavilion Theatre, where she sometimes worked. Most of the boarders were actors and actresses. Sophie was the longest-running tenant. Because she always paid promptly (thanks to the Zodiac's support) and because she never invited men over, she was a favorite of the landlady. Mrs Duckett always saw to it that Sophie had a bit of cold supper—no matter what strange hours she kept—and that none of the other boarders ever bothered her or invaded her rooms.

Sophie sometimes felt sorry for the landlady, who didn't even know Sophie's real name—only her stage name

of Sarah Finn. But she did want to be as invisible as possible.

Her rooms looked more like a storage closet than a place where someone actually lived. Wooden crates and leather-bound trunks were stacked upon each other, and hatboxes competed for space with carved wooden forms of heads, each topped with a wig. The wigs alone cost more than her annual rent, for they were elaborate works of craftsmanship. Most featured thick brown hair in varying shades, but there were a couple of blonde heads as well, and even one ginger. Sophie smiled at them, remembering each assignment she'd used them on.

The cascading chestnut curls bound up with a gold circlet...she'd worn that one when she had gatecrashed a debutante's ball and snuck into the study of the young lady's father, who had been embezzling funds from the Navy. She left out the window, but with the evidence she needed.

The wavy blonde locks she'd once worn with a liberty gown...that time she'd charmed a portly minister who blabbed to the wrong people. She soon learned all his secrets, and she never laid a finger on him.

And the auburn curls. Sophie only wore that wig for one assignment, when she spent a full week working her way into the confidence of a shrewd lady who nevertheless had a weakness...for redheads. Sophie learned a *lot* on that assignment, only some of it related to the state secrets the woman held. And as usual, she came away with the information the Zodiac asked her to get.

There was no assignment Sophie couldn't complete in



one way or another.

However, impersonation, theft, and seduction were far from her only talents. She had a public life as well, in part to distract people from her real calling. As Sarah Finn, she appeared quite regularly on some of the less prestigious London stages. She was known for her ability to play both breeches parts and comic roles, as well as for her skills in costuming. Most of the people in the boarding house knew Sophie as either an actress or a seamstress making costumes for theaters.

Certainly, the wigs and the many outfits and odd props in her rooms bolstered that impression. The rare times Sophie was available to eat at the common table, she regaled the others with tales of her theatrical exploits both in Paris and in England. Most of those stories were absolutely true.

Sophie had grown up in theaters, among the actors and playwrights and characters who populated that world. They accepted young Sophie into the loose family of the theater. She played many child roles on stage, even when the play didn't actually list such a part. Sophie was clever at making even non-speaking roles compelling, just by the way she stood or moved on the stage.

Her mother had been an excellent actress herself, playing aristocrats and beauties on the stage in Paris. She had admirers, rich men who supported her with gifts. Sophie knew full well what happened when her mother left her night after night to join a gentleman for supper and then in his private rooms. *I'm doing this for you, my love*, her mother would say, giving Sophie a new jewel or a bit of

money to keep safe. *When we've saved enough, we'll leave and travel wherever we want. We'll dress like princesses and everyone will call you Lady Sophia, you'll see.*

But then the king was killed, and his queen. Young Sophie watched as revolutionary fervor took over the city of Paris. As a child, she didn't understand why so many were deemed enemies of the state. But she knew things had become dangerous.

Even so, nothing prepared her for the day when her own mother was taken. Sophie watched in horror as her mother was declared an infiltrator, a royalist sympathizer... even one of the hated aristocrats herself. "No!" her mother had screamed. "You don't understand. I'm an actress! They are roles I play! Please, let me go!"

They did not let her go.

And young Sophie was soon left to fend for herself, living on the streets and in the theaters of Paris. She survived by her looks and her wits.

Until she met *him*.

Sophie sat lost in thought, remembering the most important evening of her young life. The man had seen through her act and invited her to London. Sophie closed her eyes, recalling the evening as if in a dream...

She was startled by a knock on the door. She sat up, finding that she'd actually fallen asleep fully clothed. It was already early morning, to judge by the light in her room. "Hello?" Sophie said.

"Miss Finn?" the landlady called. "There's a delivery for you downstairs."

Despite the early hour, Mrs Duckett smiled at her

favorite when Sophie opened the door. “A number of trunks were brought up to the door. Starting a new show, are you?”

“Yes, I am,” Sophie said, thinking quickly. “The northern circuit, so I’ll be gone for a few weeks. Let me see the delivery.”

Sophie shook off her grogginess and accompanied the landlady downstairs, to find someone she didn’t expect. It was Chattan. “Hello, Miss Finn,” she said, speaking to Sophie as if she were a stranger. “I have the items you’ll need for your next production.”

Sophie nodded back. “How many trunks?” she asked.

“Three. Mostly costumes and a few props. You can be assured of their authenticity, as they came from the source.”

Sophie raised an eyebrow. Did Chattan mean someone had actually stolen some of Madame Cassou’s clothing? “I hope there was no trouble acquiring the items,” she said.

“None at all.” The other woman handed Sophie a thick packet. “The script and such. You’re to look that over.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Sophie said. She was constantly annoyed by Chattan’s insinuations that she was not up to snuff—the woman had never warmed to her. But Sophie knew how to study for a role, and she would dutifully read up on everything Madame Cassou was known to do: appearance, habits of dress, even food preferences. “I’ll be prepared by the time I need to leave.” As if this was her first assignment! She’d been doing this for years now.

“Remember, you will not be traveling alone,” Chattan

said then, her expression smug.

“I can take care of myself.”

“It’s not you I’m concerned about.” With those words, Chattan turned around and left. Sophie watched her, wondering what she meant. If she wasn’t concerned about Sophie, who did she care about? Forester?

Sophie surveyed the massive trunks. She had less than two days to become someone else and begin an assignment that might end a war. And she had to drag a lord along with her. Unfortunately, the strapping Viscount Forester did not look like he’d be easy to drag anywhere.

## *Chapter 5*



AFTER THE DAMNABLE SOPHIE DASHED off into the night, Bruce remained in the conservatory. He was furious, both at her mockery and his own behavior. He'd meant to prove a point, and instead got completely distracted.

Bruce eventually retired, but his night was restless. He didn't dream of Sophie. But he had far too many questions about her and the assignment to sleep well.

The brilliant summer dawn in no way improved Bruce's attitude toward the assignment or the woman he was supposed to work with. He couldn't keep all his thoughts to himself.

He went into the city to search out one of his most trusted friends. Sebastien Thorne was a peer like himself, as well as a member of the Zodiac. A second son with few expectations, Sebastien had indulged his vices for years, gambling and relying on his wits to get him through life. But a few events had forced him to grow up quickly, and now he was as reliable as he'd once been scandalous. Not

that Sebastien would be particularly pleased to be told so. He still affected the airs of a careless rake, using his good looks (considerably better than Bruce's own looks, he could candidly admit) to get what he wanted.

Bruce, on the other hand, relied far more on preparation beforehand, and at the last ditch, on his physicality. He was taller and broader than nearly all his friends, and he knew he could affect people's dispositions merely by standing up. And if that didn't work, he knew how to fight. Though he was not violent by nature, he understood violence as a tool. It was one of the first lessons he'd learned in life.

But violence was the furthest thing from his mind when he saw his friend in the small room at the club where they were both members. The other man looked up at Bruce's greeting and a smile spread across his face. "Forester! I thought you were out of town."

"I'm about to be, actually. I paid a call to the Quince Street house and they told me you were here." He paused. "Shouldn't you be up in Cheshire?"

Thorne's smile grew beatific at the thought of his estate, where his wife no doubt waited. "I would like to be, but some business intervened." He looked carefully at Bruce. "Is, ah...business why you're here?"

After verifying that no one would hear the two talk, Bruce nodded. "I got a new assignment. I can't tell you much—"

His friend waved a hand to indicate he understood.

"But it's unusual, and I'm not sure why Julian's doing it this way."

Sebastien arched an eyebrow curiously. "How so?"

"This isn't a solo assignment. It's me and another agent."

"I'm listening."

"I know you left the field after we went to Calais this spring." Bruce had actually joined Sebastien for the last part of the job, when they retrieved a vital asset of British intelligence—a captivating woman who became Thorne's wife shortly thereafter.

Sebastien nodded. "I was of two minds about it, but it's for the best. I'm going to train new agents. We're a bit short of men at the moment."

"We are?"

"Did you know Capricorn is dead?" Sebastien said the words calmly, but his hands were clenched.

"When?"

"Last week, in Paris. And Pisces nearly lost his life a few months ago. *And* our newest recruit isn't ready for the field yet. We can't stand to lose more men," he said. "Aries is worried about what's happened. If you're to work as a pair, it's for protection."

Sebastien's use of the word *men* made Bruce ask, "You don't know with whom I'm assigned to work?"

"There's no reason for me to know the tasks for active agents." He gave an eloquent shrug.

"That doesn't bother you at all?"

"The secrecy? Sometimes. I wonder how much is necessary, and how much is tradition. But I'm not in charge. My job is to find new men to bring in as potential agents and train them. Thank God I know you're out there

working. I can trust you to be careful.”

Bruce nodded, slightly reassured. Of course, even if *he* were trusted, that still left the French-born Sophie, who might very well have conflicting loyalties.

The discussion with his friend left Bruce with even more questions. He returned to his townhome, knowing he had plenty of work to do before actually traveling toward Carterhaugh Manor for the assignment, with Sophie in tow.

Fortunately, Bruce didn’t need to return to Old Harrow before embarking on the assignment. In truth, he was nearly always ready to leave the place, even though he’d grown up there and loved the land dearly.

It had become disquieting, his time at the estate. Since the death of his mother, he was the only Allander left in the house. After a painful scandal, his brother vowed he’d never set foot on the property again, and Bruce never ran into him in London. Unlike Sebastien, who had a loving family and now a new wife, Bruce had no one to think about other than himself.

Old Harrow was home, but it no longer felt like home. The people were always welcoming. Many of the servants he’d known from childhood, and they’d lived on the same land as long as his own family had. But it wasn’t the same. Bruce strived to make it a stronger, more profitable estate. He wasn’t sure why, though. He had no heirs to pass it on to. His younger brother Ashley hadn’t married...and honestly, no proper lady would have him. So the honor of the family name remained for Bruce to hold. He’d make Old Harrow a model of modern agriculture, and when he



eventually left the Zodiac, surely there would still be time to start a family. It was, after all, his duty. He'd fulfill that duty some day, but not until he was done with his current work.

His house in town was modest. Bruce never entertained, so he didn't require much space. His servants were very few, although he did maintain his own equipage and horses in town, thus requiring the additional services of a hostler and a stable boy. But other than that, he made do with very few trappings of wealth. Only his work as an agent, as well as his impatience with the idea of always hiring a ride, kept the house in town looking active at all.

He was greeted at the front door by the housekeeper, a woman of deceptively severe appearance. "Welcome back, my lord," she said, after closing the door.

He nodded briefly, preoccupied. "I plan to work in my study for a while. I'll ring for supper later."

Satisfied that his household would run as smoothly as ever, he went upstairs.

As was his practice, he shut himself up in his study. It was a small, square room on the upper floor. The room was specially designed to reflect the perfect symmetry of classical architecture. The fireplace occupied the precise center third of the wall, flanked by equally wide bookshelves on either side. A window opposite was the same width as the fireplace, and two landscapes of the same dimensions hung on either side. A desk sat directly in front of the window, facing out to catch the light. On the other end, exactly one chair faced the fireplace, with a square side table at each arm. Nothing was out of place,

and everything was in balance. Bruce liked it that way.

Bruce went to the desk and spread out all the papers he had relating to the assignment. He began reading methodically, committing fact after fact to memory, even those that seemed—at first glance—to be totally irrelevant. His household knew nothing of his work with the Zodiac, but everyone knew better than to disturb him when he closed the door to the study, even if hours elapsed before he came out.

As he read, he put a hand in his pocket and found the gold ring. He slipped it on. The metal was cool at first, the edges of the ring catching on his skin. He twisted it around his finger, trying to get used to the feeling. The raised pattern of stylized stars was unremarkable, but it brought his thoughts back to the Zodiac. Would Sophie find her own ring as strange as he did? Could he really pretend such an odd, recalcitrant woman was his wife? And could she possibly be such a talented actress that she could pass herself off as a titled lady?

True, she had looked ladylike in the conservatory, at least at first. But it hadn't taken long to show her true colors as a duplicitous woman...who wasn't the least bit seduced by him.

Bruce refused to admit his dislike of her might have something to do with that. He wasn't that petty. Or egotistical. Was he?

He shook his head. Sophie's seductiveness had worked only because she was so unexpected. He knew about her now and wouldn't have the same reaction again. Besides, she wasn't that attractive. Too skinny, too tall. Too

disdainful.

He abruptly yanked the ring off his finger, concealing it in his pocket again. Yes, convincing anyone he'd married a woman who looked like Sophie was going to be the most challenging part of the assignment by far. Everything else would be simple.

## Chapter 6

### Ω

ON THE DAY SHE WAS to leave for Carterhaugh Manor, Sophie dressed in an elegant traveling costume from her new collection. The weave of the gown was mercifully light, appropriate for hot summer days, and it was dyed a rather pretty sky blue, which contrasted with her brown eyes and the light brown hair of the wig she now wore. Her hat was stylish, bleached white straw covered with fine cotton and a hint of lace that shielded the top half of her face. It softened her appearance and gave her anonymity, which she preferred. Sophie was always happier when most of her was concealed in some way.

Her shoes were her own, but the white leather matched perfectly. She kept the diamond necklace she would wear as Madame Cassou safe in her reticule. It was expensive, and Sophie didn't see the point in provoking any possible theft. She would wear the necklace when she arrived at Carterhaugh Manor.

The last thing she packed was an ornately carved

wooden box, which she slipped into the small case she would keep in the carriage next to her. She smiled, remembering the day she met the person who gave it to her.

Young Sophie knew the elderly man who brought the big trunks to the theater was different. He was not an actor. He was not a playwright. He was not a dancer or a lecturer. He was a magician.

She hid on one of the catwalks above the stage and watched in awe as the man ran through magic tricks in the otherwise empty theater. Seeing the work behind the magic in no way lessened her astonishment.

At one point, the magician tossed a live bird into the air and it flew up, up into the rafters. The wings beat so near Sophie's face she could not suppress a yelp of surprise.

"It won't hurt you, dear," the man called from below. "But if you come down, my little dove will not stay up in the rafters when I have work to do."

Young Sophie asked indignantly, "You knew I was here the whole time?"

"A magician must always be aware of his audience, my dear...even when his audience is one hidden little girl." The old man laughed delightedly.

"Is all your magic just tricks?" Sophie asked, even as she began to climb down the ladder to the stage.

When she stood before him, the old man looked her up and down. "Not tricks. *Illusion!* It's an art." He made a sound like a kiss then, and the bird fluttered down onto his arm.

"Will the bird fly to me?" she asked.

He said, "Perhaps. Would you like to learn a bit of magic? I've been working on a piece, but I need a little person to hide onstage for a long while to make it work. You've shown you can do that."

"Oh, yes! I can hide forever!"

"Ah, my child, no one can hide forever. But I wager you'll be a fine assistant with practice. My stage name is Barharam the Magnificent, but you can call me Abraham."

"I'm Sophie," the young girl said.

"Sophie?" He shook his head. "Sweet, but too simple for a magician's assistant! You will be...Serefina the Brave! Do you like that, little dove?"

She liked it very much. Soon, she began to assist the magician onstage for his evening acts, and the brave, charming Serefina became a draw at the theater. With her cut of the receipts, Sophie was able to buy an extra hot meal every day of the week. And the dove flew to her every time she called.

The grown woman now sighed. If only things had remained so simple. But fate had other plans for Sophie. Recalling her current task, she looked around her rooms, checking that everything was in order. Who knew when she'd get back here again?

By arrangement, a carriage came to the boarding house to pick her up. The driver's eyes flickered over her as he helped Sophie into the coach before loading the few trunks. There was no sign of Scorpio inside. She allowed herself to hope that Julian had ordered him off the assignment after all.

"We should be off in a few moments, ma'am," the

coachman said. “My name’s Jem, by the way. Call out if you need anything.”

She settled into her seat, waiting to be off. A few minutes later, Sophie heard the coachman talking to another person outside, though she could hear no distinct words or voices.

But when Bruce suddenly opened the door of the carriage, she wasn’t terribly surprised. “Good day, my lord,” she said, using her poshest accent.

“*Bon jour, madame,*” he replied, just as easily. “It appears we have the same goal.”

“The same destination,” she corrected coolly.

Sophie hoped she appeared at ease. The proximity of the man seated across from her made her skin tingle. She had forgotten how big he was, filling the carriage with his height and bulk.

She had hoped to rest a bit on the journey. Now, she wouldn’t sleep a wink. She pursed her lips. Really, he was most inconvenient. She said, “When I entered this coach, it looked like I’d be alone.”

“I just needed to stretch my legs.” Bruce was unfazed by her cool reception. “Jem must have neglected to tell you I’d be joining you.”

“I wonder how he could have forgotten that,” she said dryly.

“Well, he’s employed by the Zodiac—indirectly—so that might have something to do with it.”

Sophie leaned back. She was annoyed by his hint that he knew more about the workings of the assignment than she did. “We’ll see. The only thing I’m sure of now is that

I'm stuck with you for several hours."

He gave her an unrepentant grin. "True. Any wagers on who will jump out of the carriage first?"

She shot back, "You will, of course. And I'll lay any stakes you suggest."

"Your real name," he said. "And if I lose, which I won't, I'll pay you fifty pounds."

"Done." Sophie smiled at the ridiculous sum. An easy wager, since he already knew her real name. What sort of secrets did he think she was keeping?

The coach finally jolted into motion, advancing through the crowded city streets. Sophie watched out the window, determined to ignore Bruce for as long as possible.

After several minutes, he broke the silence. "You're not going to even speak to me?"

"What would be the point?" She looked him over. "I already know what sort of man you are."

"Based on what?"

"Our first meeting. And our second. Nothing I saw persuaded me that you'd be of assistance in my work. So you'd best stay out of my way," she warned him.

"What if I don't?"

"I'll remove you myself," she said.

"Are you threatening me?"

"Yes," Sophie said, catching his gaze and holding it. "I am. If you can't help me with the assignment, I'll make sure you don't hinder me."

His eyes hardened. "Likewise."

With that exchange, both spies fell silent again, each



gathering their strength for the next fight, which appeared inevitable. This would be an impossible assignment.

\* \* \* \*

It was a long way to travel by coach—at least two nights on the road—and while hiring a private vehicle made it far more comfortable, they still had to stop frequently to rest the horses. At the first stop, Bruce exited the carriage and then offered a hand to help Sophie down. She took it, and smiled dazzlingly at him. “Thank you, my lord.” As she stepped onto solid earth, she turned back and said, “Oh, you owe me fifty pounds.”

He blinked. “What?”

“You jumped out of the carriage first,” she explained sweetly.

His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t blow up as she expected he would. “So I did,” he said quietly. “You won’t win the next wager so easily, though.”

“We’ll see,” she retorted. He was more tolerable when he owed her something.

They continued on the road, the novelty of private travel quickly wearing off for Sophie. She studied Bruce from under her lashes. He read from a stack of papers for a time, then watched out the window. He didn’t say a word to her, and Sophie knew that they were both behaving ridiculously.

“Can we talk?” she asked, finally.

He looked at her. “I thought you didn’t want to speak to me.”

"I meant is it safe to talk," she clarified.

"Oh. Well, our driver is known to me. Odd boy, but trustworthy. Even if he could hear us, which I don't think he can. Why?"

"We should discuss our approaches. If we're to do this together, we should know how we tend to work."

"Yes, we should."

"Don't you trust me?" she asked, her annoyance returning.

He laughed a little. "I'll be honest, Sophie. I don't trust you any further than I could throw you."

"How far would that be, as a practical matter?"

He paused, as if truly considering the question. "About ten feet."

"How do you figure that?"

"I'm, what, half a foot taller than you...and close to twice your weight."

Sophie conceded with a nod.

"And I'm used to physical work," he went on.

Of that she had no doubt. His broad back and the solidity of his frame allowed no other possibility...unless he was actually made of stone.

"So you think you could toss me about ten feet," she said slowly.

"Possibly more, if you weren't struggling."

"Don't count on that," she warned him. "I don't see myself blithely allowing you to toss me anywhere." She allowed him to think what he liked about the double entendre.

"Yes, Aries said that. *Sophie has always been remarkably*

*independent. It's a point of pride for her,"* Bruce said, his voice coming out completely different from his previous tone.

Sophie blinked in surprise. "That's astonishing."

"He said it only two days ago. I'm not senile."

"Not the words," she said impatiently. "How you just repeated them. You sounded *exactly* like Julian."

Bruce shrugged. "I've always been able to do that. I just remember where I was and what I was thinking when I heard it."

His gift for mimicry was enviable. She knew professionals who spent years perfecting the art, and Bruce seemed to be able to do it without a second thought. Was that one of the skills that would be so useful on this assignment, according to Julian? Who would Bruce need to mimic?

"What is it?" Bruce asked, looking at her curiously.

"Nothing. I was just wondering what other talents you have."

He grinned. "Many, sweetheart. Hope you don't get to see all of them."

"I'm sure I wouldn't want to," she said tartly.

So much for getting along.

Sophie's mind drifted off, back to her childhood. She tried thinking of her mother. Picturing her face was becoming more and more difficult in recent years, which worried Sophie quite a lot. She had hazel eyes, that Sophie was sure of. And lighter hair than Sophie's now, almost blonde. Or was she remembering her mother in a wig? Maybe she was darker. And did she have a wide smile? Or was she a little sad? Perhaps Sophie wanted to remember

her as happy. Maybe she was making it all up. How could Sophie's memories be slipping away?

Her hand drifted up to her chest. Absently, she touched the spot where her mother's locket would have hung.

"Sophie?" Bruce's voice startled her back into the present.

She whipped her head back to focus on him. "What?"

He shadowed her move. "Did you lose a necklace?"

She was startled he knew what she was thinking. "Um, yes." She pulled her hand away and laid it carefully in her lap. She didn't like the notion that she could be so transparent to a stranger.

"What does it look like?" His gaze dropped to the floor of the carriage, looking for a telltale glint of metal.

Despite herself, she laughed softly. "Don't bother. I lost it a long time ago." The necklace she lost could never be recovered.

"I see." He sat back again. Perhaps he did see, but he was also the last person on earth Sophie wanted to confide in. He first ignored her talents, then tried to seduce her, and then attempted to outmaneuver her for the assignment. Scorpio was nothing to her.

## Chapter 7



THEY STOPPED AT AN INN called the Plough & Stars. The coach arrived while there was still plenty of light in the sky, but Sophie was glad enough to be out of the vehicle. Even the best coaches were bumpy, and the road had steadily worsened as they drove further and further away from London.

The inn itself was well kept. It was built in a horseshoe shape surrounding a mostly enclosed courtyard. The stables were easily identified by the smell, just as the main public room was obvious by the noise coming from the open doors and windows. The other parts the building were all guestrooms.

Jem said, “This inn has a suite on the upper floor. Likely empty now, but quite well done, they say. I’ve heard even some members of the royal family have stayed here once or twice.”

“Well, it should do for us,” Bruce drawled.

Sophie almost snapped at him before she realized he was joking. His humor would take some getting used to.

“My lady?” he asked, apparently deciding to play his role to the hilt.

She took his arm, and he escorted Sophie inside. Even if the well-appointed coach hadn’t alerted the innkeeper of well-paying customers, their clothes certainly did.

Bruce demanded the best room—the suite if available, as well as a private dining room. Sophie admired the way he did it, until she reminded herself that, for Bruce, this was no pretense. He was a lord.

The innkeeper said, “We do have a suite, sir. But I’m afraid all the private dining rooms are spoken for this evening.”

Sophie scanned the perfectly pleasant main room, but sniffed like she had smelled something appalling. “I will not dine in a common room like some farmer’s wife,” she said to Bruce. “We must press on.” He wanted a real lady? Then he’d get one.

Bruce in turn leveled a dark look at the innkeeper. “Are you *quite* sure all the private dining rooms are taken?”

The innkeeper heard his tone and quailed. “Ah, let me check.” He disappeared for a moment, and reappeared just as quickly. “A mistake on my part, sir. Forgive me! There is indeed a private dining room available. The best one, as it turns out.”

“Show us to the suite then,” Bruce returned, carelessly adjusting his cuff. “My wife is fatigued.”

They were taken to the suite, which boasted a large sitting room and not one but two bedrooms with dressing rooms. Sophie was pleased. She’d have a bit of privacy while she adjusted to playing Marianne Cassou.

“Give me a moment before we go down to eat,” she said to Bruce. She took time to unpack a few items from her trunk, which had been brought up almost instantly. She made sure her wig was in good form.

She also changed into an evening gown. Even on the road, the prejudices of the upper class had to be observed. A lady would never dine in the same gown she traveled in.

Sophie adjusted the bodice of her gown, then opened the door to find Bruce standing there as if he were about to knock. Startled, he stepped back. “That was quick.”

“I don’t waste time,” she said shortly, ducking around him.

“That’s clear enough,” he muttered. In a louder voice he said, “Shall we go to the dining room?”

“Our private dining room that you no doubt snapped away from someone else? Certainly. I’m famished.”

He led her there, and seated her as if she were his wife. He kept looking her over from the top of her head to her waist, where the table blocked further perusal.

“What is it?” she asked at last. “Why do you keep looking at me as if I’m a mare?”

“Am I?” His eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

“Are you looking for some flaw?”

“You said you wouldn’t dine like a farmer’s wife,” Bruce said in a low tone.

Sophie’s lip quirked. “I’ve nothing against farmers or their wives. The word *peasant* would have been laying it on a bit thick, don’t you think? But I wanted to establish myself as a useless toff. Did I fool you?”

Bruce leaned back, appeased. "I think you might look into dining like a farmer's wife, at least occasionally. You ought to put some meat on your bones."

"What does it matter to you how I look?" Sophie asked.

"I wouldn't like anyone to think I'm starving my wife."

"I've always been skinny."

When the serving girl entered with more dishes, they both stopped talking, since the conversation wasn't exactly typical of a married couple.

The serving girl did her job well enough, but Sophie didn't like the way she told Bruce to let her know if he should need anything later on. But she also didn't care to get involved. If Bruce wanted the attentions of some slattern, he was welcome.

If he noticed Sophie's annoyance, he said nothing. Instead, Bruce started to discuss politics. Sophie responded with her own opinions, knowing he was testing her to see how much she knew.

He mentioned a recent pamphlet, lauding the author, who recommended a stronger stance against both France and the young American nation that seemed far more sympathetic to France than her old master.

"Well, are you surprised?" Sophie asked. "Why should the States rush to reconcile with Britain? Their war for independence nearly ripped the colonies apart, and France's aid was vital."

"Vital, you say. You admire that?"

She wondered what was he driving at. "I don't have an opinion. It wasn't my war."



“So you think they’ll come to the aid of France this time?”

“They’re far more likely to if Britain stirs up another conflict on the seas. I think we should leave the States well alone. President Jefferson *hated* Ambassador Merry, by all accounts. Fox was smart to recall him. But unless the new ambassador has a better relationship with the man, we have little expectation that America will be anything but an enemy. You know Jefferson is thinking of echoing Napoleon’s idea to embargo British goods.”

“That will hurt America far more than it hurts Britain,” Bruce said.

“Perhaps.” Sophie shrugged. “But it sends a message, too. How many places can British ships be turned away before we find ourselves fighting over trade once again?”

“You’re well informed.”

“I read the newspapers,” she said. “Plays and politics are all I read.”

They held off discussing anything regarding their own assignment until they reached the privacy of the suite. Once inside, Sophie declared that she had to immediately change into her dressing gown, again testing out the mannerisms of a lady. She drifted into the bedroom she claimed as her own, and shut the door firmly behind her.

She changed into a loose-fitting dressing gown. Though it covered her fully, it was still far more intimate in style. After a moment of indecision, she removed the wig. In general, she didn’t like for people to see her real hair, short and unfeminine as it was. But it was unlikely she would be able to maintain that practice at Carterhaugh,

where Bruce and she would definitely have to work closely together. She may as well get him used to the look. Her shorn hair was tousled, but it drew attention to her face and made her large eyes look even bigger.

She stepped out into the main room, and watched him take in her new appearance.

“Interesting,” Bruce said.

“You saw it when I was in the Oak Room.”

“That was different. You were still in costume then. But now you’re not.”

“It’s Madame Cassou you see, not me.”

“The outfit perhaps, but not the person underneath. Anyway, it’s interesting.”

“You’re attracted to short-haired, lanky, boyish types?” she asked archly. “Not that I’m judging.”

“Stop it,” he growled. “I thought I made it clear you’re not in any danger from me, no matter what your hair looks like.”

“That wasn’t the impression I got in your conservatory.”

“I was just proving a point.”

“You got quite impassioned in proving your point.”

“A mistake I’ll certainly never make again,” he said. “I know you better now.”

Sophie frowned, but dropped the subject.

Bruce was happy to change it. “We have this evening to discuss our roles as the Cassou couple. I want to lay out a plan for what to do at Carterhaugh, with contingencies for anything that might go wrong,” he said.

“Contingencies? Is that even possible? We won’t know

much until we get there. We don't know anything about the surroundings or the specifics of what we're expected to do."

"We have a general idea. Planning never hurt anyone. And we do need to understand our roles, so neither of us is sleeping until I'm satisfied we understand each other. Did you look at the materials Aries gave you?"

Sophie was offended. She studied for all her roles, and she devoted the most attention to her roles for the Zodiac. "Of course," she returned coldly.

"Then tell me about your cover identity, please." Bruce sat back on the chair near the fireplace. Even in summer, the nights were sometimes cool, and a small fire had been lit that evening.

She took a breath, sitting down opposite him. "Madame Cassou was born Marianne Laforge, though she hails from Burgundy—I'm Parisian. She's actually thirty, so five years older, but I don't think that will matter too much. She emigrated to England about a decade ago. She married Lord Cassou about three years ago, and they live in London most of the year. It seems one of them doesn't care for England very much."

"Or one of them needs money badly," Bruce added. "Sometimes greed is the only motivator a person needs."

"Perhaps. Either way, Marianne Cassou is known to be a snob, always hinting she has royal blood and she's better than everyone else. I can play her easily," Sophie said.

"Because you think you're better than everyone else?"

"I'm a better agent, certainly."

"We'll see, Madame Cassou," he said.

“Very well, tell me all about you, my *dear* husband.”

Bruce looked up as if reading invisible words on the ceiling, then he spoke, and his voice shifted subtly, becoming a little more lazy. “Born in France, near Paris. Came to England when the Revolution abolished his family’s title. Established himself in the social circles of London to a slight degree. That’s where he met his now-wife. They married and immediately went on a tour of Europe, and in fact they travel frequently.

“Cassou excelled at fencing while at school, as well as riding. He professes a great love for the English hunt—I have my doubts. And he banks at Child’s, though his main account is not very large. So he either keeps some money elsewhere, or he’s borrowing heavily.”

Sophie raised her eyebrow. Bruce did do his reconnaissance. “Do you think they’re in on it together... whatever it is that’s bringing them to Carterhaugh?”

Bruce nodded slowly. “I think they are in each other’s confidence, at least to a point. My information said he is described as being extremely attentive to his wife...very French, that. He must know what she’s up to. If your spouse didn’t know you were working as a spy, why drag her along on journey after journey?”

“Is that what you would do?”

“If I were Lord Cassou?”

“No, you. Would you leave a wife at home on an assignment like this?” Sophie asked. “Do you *have* a wife? You never said.”

Bruce shook his head. “No. I can’t imagine marrying any woman while I’m part of the Zodiac. I know at least

one agent who did, but it was difficult for him to balance his obligations.”

Sophie said, “Like acting, but you can never step out of the role.”

“You *are* an actress, Sophie, is that right? It’s your profession?”

“Occasionally,” she answered, warily. “It provides a useful cover. No one wonders when I leave town for weeks or months on end. I say I’m acting on another circuit and all is explained away.”

“Useful,” he echoed. “And I assume you are not married either.”

“Certainly not.” Sophie laughed. Who could she ever marry? “I am happy on my own.”

“Are you?” he asked.

“Why shouldn’t I be? I can support myself, and I have meaningful work where so many others do not. I answer to no one.”

“Except the Zodiac.”

“Of course. I thought you were referring to my personal life.”

“You don’t seem to have a personal life.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you don’t speak of family or friends. Do you have any?”

Sophie stood up abruptly. “We’re wandering quite far from the subject.”

“I think it important to know who I’m dealing with,” he said.

“You’re dealing with Libra. What else do you need to

know?”

“Much.” He shifted on the chair, and she was again aware of his sheer size. If he wanted to, he could subdue her, no matter how much warning she had.

She said, “Let’s get back to the Cassou couple. How will they act toward each other?”

“With more sympathy than we do, I hope.”

Sophie ignored the jibe. “As you say, Cassou dotes on his wife. She must behave in a manner to maintain that devotion.”

“All the more reason to feign affection then,” said Bruce. “Whether she returns his feelings or not, she keeps him interested.”

Sophie smiled slyly. “Is that what you think?”

“It’s a possibility,” he said, his eyes narrowing.

“And how do you think she interests him?” Sophie stretched luxuriously. The thin fabric of her dressing gown tightened across her chest. She had his attention. She knew it.

“Don’t,” he warned.

She ignored him. “I thought you wanted to practice our roles.” She leaned across the space between the chairs. “I have a lot of practice, you know.”

“I already guessed that,” he said. Though he tried to sound final, Sophie could hear the curiosity in his voice.

“A husband would know what it was like to kiss his wife,” she went on, not entirely sure why she was goading him, other than because she could. “No one should doubt we’re a couple.”

Abruptly, Bruce snaked out one arm and pulled her to

him. Sophie found herself tumbled over him on the chair, her legs straddling his as the fabric of her skirts hiked up. His hands slipped to her waist, holding her just firmly enough to make it clear that she wouldn't be moving unless he let her.

He kept her there, glaring. "I've already kissed you, Sophie. Remember the time you held a knife to my throat?"

"Keenly," she whispered, but with a smile that ought to take the sting out of her gloating.

He wasn't moved. "But that was not a particularly wifely sort of kiss, was it?"

"I might be an unusual wife."

"No doubt. Do you even know how a wife would kiss her husband?"

"Of course." Sophie inhaled. She knew he'd give in. Men always did.

"Then kiss me like that."

She leaned forward with a knowing smile. An inch away, he stopped her, his hands moving to curl around her shoulders. "No. On the cheek."

"You're joking."

"Not in the least," he said. "A *real* lady would show restraint at all times."

"I am restrained."

"You don't look it, with your skin so flushed and your breath so quick."

"My breath is not quick! And besides, you're not ready to lift my skirts." She rolled her eyes. "What a hypocrite."

"You forget, a man isn't supposed to control himself.

That is the province of women, who are so much more refined and modest,” he teased.

She leaned back. “I’m going to be sick.”

“Play the part, Sophie. Kiss me. Like a good wife.”

Sighing, she leaned over to the side and laid a brief peck on his cheek. His skin was warm, and the stubble of beard scratched her lips just slightly. “There, my darling husband. How’s that?”

“Passable, my devoted wife,” he said coolly.

“Passable?” Sophie struggled out of his embrace. He let her go, and she scrambled back to her seat. “This will never work,” she said. “Aries was mad to think it would.”

He watched her, his face impassive. “You have a better idea?”

“Other than you going home to your own grand estate and leaving me free to get into the house on my own terms? No,” she retorted.

“You certainly do want to get rid of me,” he said quietly.

“Imagine that, with you being so charming and helpful.”

“Darling,” he said.

She blinked at the non sequitur. “What?”

“Or dear, I suppose.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Sophie asked. “Why did you just call me that?”

“Once we’re there, we can’t use our real names within earshot of anyone else,” he explained. “Even when we’re alone, we should avoid it.”

“Ah.” That made sense to her. “So you’ll call me



darling?”

“Or dear. Which do you prefer?”

“I don’t care at all, *dear*.” Sophie paused. “Dear is boring.”

“And English,” he admitted. “Any ideas?”

“Cherie?”

“That might be better. I wish you had a distinctive pet name though. Something I can use to get your attention without alerting anyone else.”

Sophie thought for a moment. “You could say *dove*.”

“Is that what your mother called you?” he guessed.

“No,” Sophie said shortly. “It’s just a word. Unusual, but not too remarkable.”

“Yes, dove.” Bruce didn’t smile, but everything about him suggested he was laughing inside.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s time for me to sleep. We can plot our assignment details tomorrow in the coach.” Sophie retreated into the bedroom, noting with annoyance the absence of a lock. She considered whether to barricade the door with a chair, but then shrugged. Tonight would be as good a test as any. If Bruce didn’t enter her room with the assumption that as an actress and an obviously worldly woman, she was free for the taking...well, she might give him another chance.

However, she slid a sheathed knife under her pillow before she went to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

She was woken a few hours later by sounds that would

have scorched the ears of a more gently bred woman. Steady knocking of the bed posts against the floor, gasps in a rising volume, and then unabashed cries of pleasure soon had Sophie gritting her teeth. From the nearness of the cries, it could only be Bruce and the serving girl. He must have found her and invited her up to the room as soon as Sophie went to sleep.

She lay on her bed, fuming. How could he be so insulting as to bring the girl into the very same suite? They were allegedly a married couple staying at the inn. What wife would endure such offensive behavior?

She sat up, suddenly grinning. A real wife would go find the couple and give the slattern a piece of her mind. Sophie could likely get the innkeeper to sack the girl for her behavior—though he'd undoubtedly hire her right back. But catching Bruce in the act would be the coup. It would put him in his place, which was not between the legs of some village slut while they were on the eve of an important assignment.

Sophie got out of bed silently, and put her dressing robe on over her shift. The couple seemed to only have increased in their passion for each other. The woman suddenly moaned in a way that made Sophie raise her eyebrows. What was he doing to inspire such a display?

Sophie left her room, ready to play the offended wife. She started to storm across the common room toward Bruce's closed door...which she suddenly realized was *away* from the sounds of the noisy couple. In her half-awake state, her anger had got the better of her and turned her sense of direction—and proportion—completely

around.

She lurched to a halt, then noticed something else. Bruce hadn't gone to his bedroom at all. He was sprawled in his chair before the embers, a few papers still clutched in his hand, though how anyone could sleep in such an awkward pose was beyond her.

Before she knew what she was doing, Sophie moved toward Bruce, intending to wake him and send him to bed for a proper rest.

She paused to look him over. Sleep softened his features, erasing his skeptical, searching expression. His hair was mussed, the waves starting to get unruly. The subtle light of the embers caused shadows to deepen the contrast of his eyes and cheeks, and gave his mouth an interesting definition. He was more attractive when he was unconscious, she thought, and almost laughed out loud at the idea.

He'd taken his coat off after she went to bed. His shirt was untied at the neck so that it draped open, and the well-formed chest made her a little—just a *little*—breathless. Combined with his impressive height and natural grace of movement, he'd be something to look at in bed. Perhaps that was one reason her frustrated brain turned her around and made her think that the sounds of sex were his doing.

Just then, a woman's loud cry of release penetrated the walls of the sitting room. "Lord," Sophie muttered.

Bruce twitched, about to wake up.

Sophie quickly put her hand on his arm to wake him fully. "Bruce," she said in a low voice. "Bruce?"

His reaction wasn't what she expected. Bruce whipped

one hand around to clamp down on hers. His eyes flew open as he stood up, ready to fight whoever snuck up on him. The papers he'd been holding fluttered down to the floor like white leaves.

"It's me!" Sophie yelled. "It's just me."

Bruce held her wrist tight in one hand. His other hand was balled into a fist, about to strike.

"Bruce, it's Sophie," she gasped out. "We're here in the inn. You fell asleep in the chair."

His eyes narrowed. Then, as suddenly as he grabbed her, Bruce let her go. He took a deep breath, and stepped back. "I...forgot where I was."

Sophie rubbed her wrist where he'd grabbed her. "Yes, that's obvious. You move *fast*."

"Did I hurt you?" he asked contritely.

"Of course not. I'm tougher than that." She stooped to gather the papers on the floor. "But you should go to your bedroom now. No one should sleep in a chair like this one."

Bruce nodded, watching her pick up the papers. "Why are you awake?" he asked.

Sophie blushed, remembering how she'd been planning to humiliate him with his doxy. She explained, "There's a couple...enjoying themselves in the room adjoining mine. I couldn't sleep."

Bruce listened until he heard the now much fainter sounds. He glanced at her. "And that bothers you?"

"It was louder before," she said, defensive. "And I was much closer."

"Would you like my room?" he offered. "The bed is

undisturbed.”

She shook her head, unaccountably embarrassed now. “They can’t possibly keep that up all night. It was just annoying.” She put the messy stack of papers on a nearby table, then wondered what to do with her hands. Such indecisiveness was unusual for Sophie.

He was still looking at her. “Did you think it was me?” he asked.

“Of course not!” she snapped, irritated that he’d somehow guessed her thoughts. “Why should I? Your room is over there.” She pointed to it, quite unnecessarily.

“Because I wouldn’t do that,” he said. He picked up the papers she just put down, and subconsciously straightened the pile. “Not with you nearby.”

“What you would or wouldn’t do is of no concern to me,” Sophie said.

“If you have no concern for me, why did you wake me?”

“Because I don’t want to deal with an irritable travel partner tomorrow!”

“As irritable as you are now?” he asked, with far more amusement than the situation warranted.

“Fine, go back to sleep in your chair. I leave you to it.”

“Sophie,” he began.

“Good night, Bruce,” she said firmly.

“I thought you couldn’t sleep.”

“I’ll put yet another pillow over my head. If it doesn’t drown them out, maybe I can hope to suffocate by morning.” She turned and walked to her doorway.

He hadn’t taken his eyes off her. “Now I’ll have to

check on you, dearest,” he said.

“You’re not invited,” she snapped.

“Go to bed,” he returned. “I hope to see you alive in the morning.”

“I seriously doubt that,” she muttered.

\* \* \* \*

Bruce watched her retreat before he entered his own bedroom. Sophie might be able to play a lady, but she was truly a foul-mouthed guttersnipe. If she got any more antagonistic, she might as well report to Napoleon directly. True, she hadn’t harmed the assignment yet. But she wasn’t helping. And Bruce couldn’t talk to her without the conversation ending either in an argument or a seduction designed to drive him mad.

Sophie knew she was irresistible. It wasn’t fair. He let down his guard for one moment back in his own conservatory, and now she knew he desired her. Or rather...a woman like her. Her seductive behavior might be something he could ignore if she didn’t match it with a contempt for him that was unavoidable. That was what stung. She didn’t even consider him worthy of a conquest.

But his reaction to being woken up might have finally warned Sophie not to play with him. He hadn’t meant to scare her—he had no idea who she was for that split second after waking. But he could tell she *was* scared for a moment, before he recognized her. He wasn’t sure if he ought to be relieved or upset. He didn’t like the idea of frightening a lady unnecessarily, but if that’s what it took,

then so be it.

Of course, he felt like a heel for grabbing her. She was a woman, agent or not, and Bruce had been trained from birth to treat women as one would treat fragile glass. Was that the real reason why Sophie confounded him? She defied every expectation of what it meant to be a woman. She was fierce, independent, and certainly didn't require protection.

*So what am I doing here?* he thought. He recalled his instructions to watch Sophie. Watching Sophie would likely drive him insane. He hoped they completed the assignment before that happened.

## Chapter 8



SOPHIE SLEPT SOUNDLY FOR THE rest of the night, roused only by Bruce knocking lightly on her door. They got ready in near silence. Soon, Jem was steering the coach onward to Carterhaugh Manor.

The atmosphere in the coach was much quieter the second day. Both Sophie and Bruce were tired yet strangely anxious, in a manner peculiar to actors and spies, to begin their roles.

Sophie sat lost in thought for a time, staring out the window as the landscape of the countryside rolled slowly by. She had to put herself in the place of a lady. A high-born aristocrat who believed the world existed to serve her. Sophie had played ladies before, but never with an actual lord at her side, who would doubtless be watching her performance with a critical eye. She'd done well enough the previous night at the inn, but simply existing at Carterhaugh Manor would be a far more demanding role, with a harsher audience. Uncharacteristically, Sophie was nervous. And the presence of Bruce, a man who



embodied what she had to pretend to be, wasn't helping her confidence.

To be fair, he didn't seem a typical aristocrat, even beyond the fact that he was a spy. Sophie looked across at Bruce, wondering how he'd ended up in the Zodiac. She knew little about his real personality.

"Tell me about yourself," she said finally, to break the silence.

He looked at her as though surprised to see her there. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

"Anything. Where did you grow up? Do you have brothers? Sisters? What are your interests?"

"Lord Cassou?"

"No, *you*. Forester."

He shrugged. "I grew up at a place called Old Harrow, which you have no reason to have ever heard of. I still live there for part of the year, when I'm not working for the Zodiac, or getting stuck in London for the parts of the Season I can't avoid."

"You don't like the usual diversions of society?"

"It's a contest of inanity," he groused. "Hundreds of petty souls all staring at each other, gossiping and watching for the slightest weakness or misstep. Then they swoop down on the victims and glory in their misfortune."

"But they are your peers," she said, though she couldn't help laughing at his characterization.

"Only by the chance of blood and the ties of family."

"When did you join the Zodiac?"

He closed his eyes, remembering. "I bought a commission in the army nearly fifteen years ago. Then I

met Julian Neville. He offered me a role doing something worthwhile, and I was in the mood to accept. Haven't regretted it. I suppose it must be over ten years. You?"

She counted on her fingers. "Eleven since I came to London, I think. It was the autumn of 1795."

"That was when you met Aries? You must have been quite young."

"Yes, Aries," she said hastily. "We met at a party. For some, life was nothing but parties, a *beau monde* from dusk till dawn. But I asked about you. Tell me more. How do your parents feel about your disdain for the *ton*?"

"My father is dead. I never really knew the man," Bruce said. "He was very cold, and very concerned with the honor of the family." Bruce trailed off for a moment. "I have a brother," he said suddenly. "Ashley. Younger by five years."

"Are you close?"

He laughed, though he didn't look happy. "Not any more. Ash nearly drowned himself in scandal several years ago. Himself and our family name. I haven't seen him in a long time."

"What did he do?"

"He seduced a married woman," Bruce said shortly. "And her daughter."

"Forgive me for noting that isn't a terribly unusual sort of scandal."

He laughed, a dark sound. "Both at once? Keep in mind he was nineteen, and a divinity student at the time."

Sophie raised her eyebrow. "That *is* a bit more unusual."

“He was serving at a church in a small town where he was supposed to be learning how to tend a flock of the faithful,” Bruce continued.

“He got too invested, I take it.”

“He shocked a whole county. Drummed out, of course. And a field day for the gossips. He should have been ashamed of what he’d done. But what did he do? He ran off to London and immediately took up with none other than Regina Fox. Have you heard the name?”

“The Golden Lady?” Sophie nodded. She’d never met the woman, but the courtesan Regina Fox was infamous. She was said to be a dazzling beauty who favored gold and yellow in her wardrobe. She was one of the most sought after, and most expensive, ladies of her class. “What sort of wealth does your family have that a second son could afford her...if I may ask?”

Bruce shook his head. “We’re not that wealthy. I don’t know how he paid for her attention, and I don’t want to. But Ash somehow saw her exclusively for over a year. They still see each other occasionally, and not simply because both are part of that world. Anyway, now the Honorable Ashley Allander is one of the more notorious men in the demimonde of London. A rake and a scoundrel. In fact, I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t even know why I’m telling you this.”

Sophie guessed he hadn’t spoken about it to anyone for years. “And you have no other siblings?” she asked, keeping her voice gentle to draw him out.

“None. And my mother died soon after Ash’s descent into scandal.”

“He broke her heart,” said Sophie.

Bruce shook his head. “I wish I could say that, but it was consumption, pure and simple. She had never been a robust woman.”

“So no parents to hound you, and no siblings to run with. No wife or family to think of. You really don’t have many distractions from your chosen path as an agent.” Sophie realized from this glimpse into his life that he had virtually no one to tell him what to do.

“I keep care of my estate,” Bruce said. “Other than that, I can do whatever I like. But the Zodiac is my life.”

“How dedicated.”

Bruce focused his gaze on her again. “And you?”

“What about me?” she asked. “I don’t even have a title or an estate to care for like you do. The Zodiac is all I have.”

“So tell me how you got here. Why work for England when you’re French?”

She put up a warning hand. “I’m *Parisian*, not French. I have no love for Napoleon, nor for the regime before him. Just because I speak the language doesn’t mean I endorse a madman who grabbed the crown and named himself Emperor.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you fled to a different country entirely.”

“I’d had enough of Paris, and Aries offered me a choice.” She leaned forward. “Don’t forget when I was there. I saw what the Revolution did to the people I knew in Paris, people I loved. Innocent people died on the altar of liberty. Good people. And now this Emperor thinks to

rebuild Rome, and he doesn't care how many people die to make his own dream come true. Yes, I was born in France. But my loyalty is to England, the country that sheltered me after the chaos descended. And the Zodiac, and what it stands for."

Bruce looked at her for a long time, considering her words. "Tell me about your most difficult assignment," he said then.

"Why?"

"Why not? We've got hours."

Sophie thought about it seriously. There were several contenders, but she picked the one most likely to shock him. "In 1800. I had to seduce someone with a direct line to the general, as Napoleon was then. If I were exposed, I might have imperiled the Zodiac as well as myself."

"But you successfully seduced him."

"Her," Sophie corrected with a smile.

"You seduced a woman?"

"Yes. To be precise, I let her think she was doing the seducing. After that night, she had no secrets from me."

"And how exactly—"

"Curious?" She shrugged. "It was not that different, really. Less pain, true, and no concern about... consequences. It was a little strange for me, but I would do it again."

"Hmm," he said.

"I take it you've never been in a similar situation."

"Seducing a woman?" he asked, with a wry grin.

"Seducing someone of the same sex," she clarified.

He shook his head. "No."

“Do you think you could?” Sophie asked. She half-hoped to make him uncomfortable, but he didn’t seem shocked.

“I don’t know,” he said, thoughtful. “It would depend on how high the stakes were.”

“But so often we don’t know,” said Sophie, thinking of several assignments that seemed quite simple, only to be revealed later as vitally important.

“That’s true.” He paused. “I expect it would be easier for a woman.”

“Why?”

“Desire, or lack of it, is more easily hidden.”

“Men are more obvious,” she agreed, with a laugh. “And predictable.”

“Predictable?”

“What man doesn’t want to have every woman he can?”

“Isn’t it the same for women?” he asked, looking a little offended.

She laughed. “You don’t understand anything, do you?”

He straightened up in his seat. “So enlighten me.”

“Oh, I will,” Sophie said. “I’ll tell you a secret that will change the way you see women, if you’re smart enough to understand it.”

“Why would I not understand?” he asked. “Are you going to tell me in Latin?”

“I’ll tell you in English or French...your choice. But it will be up to you to comprehend its significance. If you do,” she paused and smiled, “you will know more about women than ever before. It will make you a better spy.”

He shrugged. "You assume I don't already know this secret."

"From what you just told me, I *know* you don't know this one."

"Very well. Humiliate me with your greater wisdom. But don't expect—"

A shout came from outside the carriage. Jem yelled something, either a warning or a curse. Then the carriage lurched to the side.

Sophie gasped in surprise as the carriage threatened to overturn. Bruce moved toward her, his arm thrust out to come between her and the window. She knocked into him, unable to stop her slide toward the rapidly tilting side. Her head nearly hit the glass, saved only by the fact that he'd reacted so quickly.

Before either could speak, Jem yelled again. The horses whinnied and the carriage lunged forward. The carriage righted itself, but their forward motion suddenly halted. Sophie landed in a heap on the floor of the carriage, half on top of Bruce.

"Bloody hell," Sophie muttered, disentangling herself from Bruce's arm. "That could have been very bad. Jem?" she called in a louder voice. "Are you all right out there?"

"In one piece, ma'am!" his voice came back.

Bruce pushed Sophie gently back into her seat. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm quite safe. Let's see what happened."

Bruce found the door still worked perfectly well, and he climbed out just as Jem jumped down from his perch to calm the skittish horses. "What's the matter?" Bruce asked.

"Sorry, my lord. A fox ran across the road. Fool creature! It spooked the horses. I'm afraid we veered a bit off course when I tried to get them under control again."

Sophie turned to look at the carriage. "The wheels aren't broken," she said hopefully.

"True, but they are stuck in that mud," Bruce added. Jem's attempt to control the horses meant forcing the carriage to the side of the road, where sticky mud claimed the wheels.

"We'll get it out in no time," Jem said confidently.

However, it was not so simple. The weight of the carriage caused the wheels to sink further when Jem tried to steer it out.

"Wait, wait," Bruce called. "The corner's stuck. It's pulling everything down. Let the lady mind the horses. We'll have to lift that part of the carriage out of the mud."

"Lift it?" Sophie echoed. "You mean, by yourself?"

"Unless someone else comes along to help." Bruce took his jacket off. "Hold this, please."

Sophie took it without a word, placing it carefully over her arm. She was so surprised the lord was willing to do the work himself that she couldn't think of anything to say.

Jem quickly unhitched the horses and handed Sophie the reins. "Keep well away, ma'am. This may be messy."

That was an understatement. The two men were besieged by mud as they worked to free the carriage from the puddle. Bruce provided most of the power, while Jem used his wiry strength to slowly inch the carriage out of the mire.



Sophie looked on from the other side of the empty road, feeling helpless. Bruce, now wearing only his loose-fitting shirt, was already sweating and dirty from the heat of the day and the strain of such work. Jem didn't look any better, and he let loose strings of inventive curses.

His temper short, Bruce reprimanded him about his language, reminding him there was a lady present. Jem apologized to Sophie, who merely nodded. Neither man was in the mood to hear her say she was not a lady and had muttered all those curses herself at some point or another.

Eventually the men got the carriage back on the road. Jem rehitched the horses and frowned at the sun.

"We lost some time," Jem said, "and I'm wary of pushing the pace, lest we break a wheel under the strain."

Bruce told him to stop at the nearest decent inn, then clambered back into the carriage, where Sophie already waited.

"Sorry for the delay," he said. "I can take my jacket back now."

Sophie made no move to return it. "Are you insane?" she asked, surveying him. "Your shirt is ruined. You can't put this clean jacket over it."

"I can't not wear a jacket," he said. Indeed, a gentleman *never* went out in public without a jacket.

Sophie could tell he was uncomfortable appearing as he did, but she remained firm. "You must endure, my dear. You're safe in the carriage where random passersby will not be offended, and we'll be at an inn soon enough."

She was correct. The inn was not so fine as the one from the previous night, but it looked quite clean, which

was all Sophie cared about at the moment. In her most ladylike way, she ordered the best room, and insisted the hot water be brought up as soon as possible. Bruce had stayed with Jem to see that the coach was indeed fit to travel the next day.

Sophie was shown to a large, bright room. The water was heated and brought up with remarkable efficiency by the innkeeper's children. Sophie hoped it wouldn't cool too quickly.

Fortunately, Bruce came in then, worn down by the effort of final repairs to the carriage. "Good news," he said. "There's only minor damage. Jem will handle the rest of it, and we can continue on in the morning as scheduled."

"I ordered you some hot water," Sophie said, pointing to the pitcher and basin.

He grinned. "Of course, you're going to stay with me while I clean up."

"What wife wouldn't?" she retorted.

Bruce stripped to the waist without so much as a warning. Sophie, a little stunned, watched him as a wife might...though in a society marriage, it was entirely possible that a woman might never see her husband half-naked save for in the darkness of a bedroom. And many proper ladies would never dare look more than they absolutely had to.

He was...impressive. His face was not exactly handsome, not in the way that made younger ladies sigh. His features were not quite regular, and his deep-set eyes were too direct. But he didn't need to be handsome when

he had that height and musculature. Still, Sophie wasn't defeated by the situation, even though she was positive Bruce intended to discomfit her.

He started to wash the mud off his face. "Tell me the secret," he said, as if they were having a normal conversation. "The one you were taunting me with before we got stuck in the mud. I'd say I've earned the answer."

Sophie was glad to have a topic to focus on. "So you did. Here's the question: what's the first thing a woman thinks when she meets a man?"

"All women, any woman?" he asked, dipping the cloth into the hot water and wringing it out. He didn't even glance over at Sophie.

"Yes," she said. "It's the same thing. Guess what it is. And then I'll tell you the true answer."

He echoed, "When a woman meets a man...she decides whether she wants to bed him," he finished crudely.

Sophie thought he was trying to shock her. He'd have to try harder than that. "No. Guess again."

"She decides how much money he has, or if he's worth her time."

"No. That comes a bit later. Try once more," said Sophie.

"She...I don't know. She assesses whether he has something she wants. People always see others as a way to get what they want."

Sophie shook her head. "You're not trying. Those things all happen. But I said I would tell you the very *first* thing a woman thinks on seeing a man."

"I give up. Tell me what a woman thinks on seeing a man."

Sophie said, with deliberate calm, "She thinks, *How can he hurt me?*"

Bruce stopped what he was doing, the washcloth falling into the basin with a splash. "That's not true," he said instantly.

"I promise you it is," Sophie said. "It is the first thought to cross a woman's mind, no matter how young or old, rich or poor, powerful or desperate. Maybe not all women even realize they think it—but they do."

"Honestly?"

Sophie nodded. "She thinks: Can this man hurt me? How much could he hurt me? In what ways could he hurt me? How can I escape? How do I fend him off? How do I survive this?"

Bruce stared at her, his previous task completely forgotten. "Is that what *you* thought when you first met me in the club?"

She nodded again.

"But Julian vouched for me, did he not?"

"What does that matter?" Sophie asked. "Believe me, all women share the same fear. Only after she asks that question and makes those dozen small decisions can she move on to what *you* think of as normal thoughts."

"That's mad."

"That's life for a woman. Understand this, and how can you go about treating half the world in the same way?"

He frowned. "You make me sound like a monster."

"Not at all. I merely acknowledge you're a man, and as

such have never had to ask yourself the same questions.”

Sophie paced to the other side of the room, then stopped in surprise at what she saw. Along the back of Bruce’s shoulder, there was a long, ugly, raised scar. The skin around it was puckered red, while the scar itself was bone-white. The whole thing ran about nine inches from the edge of his arm to near his spine. The peculiar straightness of it showed that it had been a most unnatural accident, but Sophie couldn’t think of anything to cause such a wound.

He glanced over with a smirk. “Are you watching me? What are you thinking now?”

She’d be damned if she would let him think she lusted after him. “You have quite a scar,” she said.

“Burn,” he said shortly, looking away again. “Happened when I was young.”

“It looks painful.”

“It was.”

“Does it hurt when you move? Does it restrain you at all?” she asked.

“Not anymore. If you want a closer look, make yourself useful.” He held out the washcloth.

Sophie bit back a few choice words about the level of usefulness he could expect from her, and stepped forward to take the cloth. She did have to get used to being near him, after all. The nervousness she was feeling would fade as soon as she conquered the unfamiliarity of working with him.

She let the warm water run down his broad back, not paying particular attention to the scar, other than to keep

wondering about its cause. A burn, he said. Perhaps a stick? A burning branch or beam? But it was narrow, and perfectly straight.

“A poker,” she said, thinking out loud. “One that had been held in the fire deliberately.”

Bruce’s body stilled. “Good guess,” he said. He didn’t offer anything more about the incident.

Maybe he’d been struck as a child at school. But by a poker? Who would do that to a child? Swayed by the uncomfortable image of Bruce as a young boy, suffering such a thing, her touch gentled. “I am sorry,” she murmured, without intending to.

He didn’t reply, other than to ask, “Am I free of mud?”

Sophie dipped the cloth in the water again, and ran it over his shoulders and neck, carelessly this time. “You look clean enough to me now. You should put a shirt on before you get cold.”

“You’re remarkably uncurious for a woman,” he said.

“How so?” she asked, thinking that she had been peeking at his body more than she should.

“You didn’t ask who held the poker,” he said, inadvertently confirming her guess.

Sophie stepped back. “It’s not my business. In fact, with the exception of those people who I am hired to spy on, I do respect others’ privacy. Just as I guard my own.” Sophie headed to the door. “I’m hungry. I’ll request some supper after I check on Jem.” She was absurdly glad to get away from the room. The less clothed Bruce was, the more he affected her, which was not something Sophie usually encountered.

They ate supper in near silence and turned in early, tired out from the day. Bruce took a few blankets and stretched out on the floor, leaving Sophie with the bed. She thought his refusal to sleep next to her was a bit too conspicuously chivalrous, but she didn't complain. She much preferred to sleep alone. At Carterhaugh, she'd be able to retire to her own room, which would be a relief.

They both rose early the next day. Bruce muttered quiet curses as he worked the kinks out of his back. Sophie packed her trunk swiftly, again reminding Bruce that she wasn't a lady by birth. Finally, Sophie seized the blankets from the floor and flung them onto the bed.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"Precaution. Let's not give anyone a reason to think we're not sleeping in the same bed every night. All it takes is one person to get suspicious and ask around about us."

"I see," he said. "Good thinking."

Sophie was careful not to smile. As victories went, it was a small one, but she'd take it all the same.

## Chapter 9



THEY WERE ON THE ROAD well before the sun rose above the trees. They were behind schedule now, and wanted to get to Carterhaugh Manor as soon as possible.

After talking a bit more with Bruce about the particulars of the assignment, the monotony of travel lulled Sophie into a doze. A touch on her arm brought her awake again instantly. Sophie's eyes flew open, and she saw Bruce leaning over her from across the carriage. "What is it?" she asked. "When is it?"

"Relax, Sophie. We're getting close to the village outside of Carterhaugh Manor. I thought you might want to see the lay of the land."

She nodded, still a bit drowsy. Automatically, she smoothed her outfit and checked that everything was in place. More than once, men had tried to take advantage of her while she slept. However, she didn't think Bruce would try such a thing. She was quite in order. Irritatingly, the new ring she wore caught her attention when she adjusted her gloves. It still did not feel right.



“Problem?”

“No, I’m quite well.” She touched the hilt of her blade she always wore under her skirts.

“I didn’t rob you, my darling wife.” He paused. “Nor did I touch you.”

“Of course not,” she said. “I would have known if you tried.” She tried to affect unconcern. “If we’re getting close, I should become Madame Cassou now.”

“You weren’t already?”

“Before, I was just wearing her clothes,” she said. “Now I have to wear her mind.” Sophie pulled the diamond cross from her reticule and fastened it around her neck. Bruce watched with interest. “Where did you get that?” he asked.

“Julian gave it to me,” Sophie said. She saw the flash in his eyes before she explained. “Madame Cassou is known for always wearing a cross of great value. It was necessary for the deception.”

“I wonder how he explains the bills to the Astronomer,” Bruce said.

Sophie smiled at the image. “I’m sure he has *carte blanche*.”

“So long as we keep bringing back the goods.”

“Oh, yes. As we will this time.” Sophie almost corrected herself to say “as I will this time,” but it was pointless to argue with him so close to Carterhaugh. She’d discover the best way to get the information once she got inside. If Bruce stayed out of her way, she’d be in and out like lightning, and then they could both go on to other assignments.

As she watched out the window, the coach passed through the village, and then a while later by the gates of the vast, isolated estate. Towering stone pillars flanked the driveway, and a fence backed with tall greenery marked the division between the estate and the outside world. Sophie sensed a shift in the air around them.

She looked over to Bruce. "Are you ready?"

They finally reached the lands claimed by the estate of Carterhaugh. To Sophie's eyes, the whole countryside was gorgeous. Pockets of old forest divided patches of farm fields and grazing lands. The terrain was softly rolling hills, and the shortened horizon was compensated for by the charming, peaceful picture.

As a child who grew up in cities, Sophie had no memories of such scenes. To her, they were always a little magical...places that existed only in stories.

It was also lonely, and Sophie knew the house was chosen for that reason. Very few people would be able to wander this area without being seen. Their host wanted a secluded spot. He'd certainly found one.

Bruce had been looking out the windows as well. "Shameful," he said. His brows were drawn together in a scowl.

"What is?" Sophie asked.

"The land around here."

"What do you mean? It's lovely!"

"The country is beautiful, but the land of the estate is horrendous. Can't you see it? Nearly half the fields are fallow, and those that have been sown are still choked with weeds. The man in charge of this place has no idea what

he's doing."

"He just doesn't care," said Sophie, knowing instinctively she was right. "The house will be beautiful inside but...People like Theriot don't care about anything they can't see themselves. I wager he's hemorrhaging cash to maintain his lifestyle, because he's never learned how to make money off land."

Bruce didn't appear to hear her. He stared out at the fields. "I'd have planted wheat along the road, and vegetables along the stream, where the water will run down the slope," he said. He pointed at one field. "They're grazing sheep on the stretch most likely to be the richest soil. Stupid! I'd pasture them upland."

She laughed at that. "Are you a viscount or a farmer?"

He gave her an injured look. "I know how to run an estate, Sophie. As you guessed, the income is what provides for *my* lifestyle. My duty is to see that the land is used in the best possible way, and that the tenants are equally well-treated. It's my role in life...well, one of them."

He sounded confident. But something about his words rankled her. "Well, it must be reassuring to know you'll have something to fall back on once you leave the Zodiac."

"Who says I'm leaving? You're not still proposing that wager, are you?" he asked. "Sophie, are we doing this as planned? Because if you won't cooperate, I need to know right now. You won't sabotage this once we step over that threshold. I can't let you." His eyes bored into hers.

She took a breath. "I'll follow the plan. But I don't have to like it."

The carriage drove up along the main road leading to the manor itself. At close range, the neglect that bothered Bruce was more obvious. The current owner didn't help his tenants with their cottages, and only a few people in poor clothing could be seen working in the fields.

The house itself was impressive though, Sophie had to admit. A bit run down, true. But the sheer massive bulk of the great house of Carterhaugh Manor as outlined against the afternoon sky forced one to admire the glory of the place.

She remembered what Aries had written about the estate. Once the property of a now vanished noble family, Carterhaugh had been empty for a long time. It now housed the dubious Mr Theriot, who had the valuable papers Sophie needed to get. Any beauty of the house would only be a distraction for her.

At last, the carriage reached the front entrance and rolled to a stop. At the door, they were greeted as if they were royalty. A man who could only be Thomas Theriot stood in the open doorway. Obsequious servants, dressed in fashions about one generation behind their master, all bowed and scraped...and watched the newcomers carefully. *They've been warned to watch for anyone out of place*, Sophie thought. *I must never give them a hint about me.*

Bruce's plan called for them both to be circumspect on arrival. They'd hold back until they could see how things worked. Only then could they decide on how to proceed and what to say.

But when Sophie saw their host's eyes linger on the neckline of her dress, she decided Bruce's caution could be

damned.

Just as Bruce was helping her down, Theriot himself addressed them. "Ah, Monsieur and Madame Cassou, is it?"

Bruce turned and bowed a little stiffly, "Yes." He looked their host over with a critical, cool gaze.

Sophie, however, wore a wide smile. "Monsieur Theriot, your invitation came at a most opportune time. London in the summer is hideous."

Theriot said wryly, "Is there a season in which London is not hideous?"

Sophie frowned at Bruce. "Darling? What do you think?"

He pretended to consider the question. "Usually, one or two afternoons in October prove tolerable." He gave her a look, probably wondering what she was about.

"England is not tolerable at all. I cannot wait to find a new home back in Burgundy," Sophie purred to their host. "It's been too long."

Theriot laughed. "Well, we can talk about that notion later. For now, let my humble abode do. We have been expecting you. Please come in, come in."

Sophie latched onto Theriot before Bruce could stop her. "I hope we have not kept you waiting. I myself detest waiting for nice things." She flirted shamelessly with the man.

"You are worth any wait, madame," their host said, with a quick glance at Bruce. Sophie noted his bland expression, and knew he was seething at her inside. Oh, well.

Then Theriot continued, "Allow me to show you around Carterhaugh personally. I have a few moments to spare."

He led them into the halls, and Sophie put on her dreamiest look as she surveyed the interior. "*C'est belle*," she murmured over and over. "*Magnifique*." Playing the snooty aristocrat was easy for her, and it made her feel closer to the memory of her mother, who had done it so well in plays.

As they walked through the mansion, Theriot showed off his treasures. Sophie felt an acute sense of dislocation. The inside of the house was astonishing. Furniture in the latest style graced every room. Portraits and landscapes hung on the walls, including images even Sophie recognized as the work of famous artists.

"Is that a de la Tour?" Bruce asked at one point, stopping before a painting in which one brilliant candle flame illuminated shadowy figures.

"Yes, it is," Theriot said, looking back.

Bruce stepped closer to examine it. "The linseed," he muttered, "And the brushstrokes..." He spent a moment looking at the image. "Remarkable," he commented at last.

"Rather lovely, isn't it?" said Theriot. "I had many such works shipped over from France...rather than let the rabble destroy them."

"And thank God you did," Sophie murmured. Theriot smiled at her, apparently ensnared.

"Madame Cassou, you are not only as beautiful as rumor has claimed, but as cultured as well. I knew from your letters that you would be a most charming

companion, but meeting you at last..." he trailed off. "Your sympathy for my position is most encouraging."

"Yes, I am eager to hear your latest thoughts on our discussion," Sophie said smoothly. Inside, she felt a jolt of anxiety. If Cassou and Theriot had corresponded so much, they had surely been in each other's confidence. There were so many things Sophie didn't know!

"Oh, I shall tell you all about it when the guests are assembled. That is, after all, the point of this retreat."

She murmured, "But you can give me a tiny hint now, can you not?" She leaned slightly toward Theriot, disregarding Bruce's presence entirely. "You must indulge a woman's curiosity!"

"I will indeed, madame." He glanced back at Bruce, who'd wisely dropped behind, ostensibly to study more of the art. Theriot whispered, "I have some curiosity about you as well, my beauty."

Sophie allowed her eyelids to drop just a bit. "We must discuss that a different time, Thomas," she said huskily. Her confidence returned. Theriot's interest was obvious. He *wanted* to be seduced. She had him. Any mistakes she might make in terms of past information could be smothered with a kiss or a caress. And the information they came for could be secured with a promise of illicit pleasure. She was back in her element.

\* \* \* \*

Bruce wanted to *throttle* Sophie. How could she take such a risk? They'd barely stepped through the doors when

she tossed all his planning aside and directly confronted their host. They knew so little about what was going on, yet Sophie spun lie after lie with no care for what she might do if she were caught out.

He'd have some choice words for her once they were alone again.

As they continued on, Bruce watched the lady at their host's side. He was torn between wanting to excoriate her for recklessness and wanting to see how she worked. She was infuriating, aloof, condescending...utterly perfect. She charmed Theriot by exploiting his desire to be seen as important and well-heeled. She also plied for information in a subtle way, wringing the names of several other guests and their connections to him with enviable ease.

The man was obviously smitten with her, and just as obviously willing to take her right from under her "husband's" nose. Bruce tried to ignore a sense of masculine ownership. In fact, he should encourage this development—subtly, of course. If he were Theriot and had a woman like Sophie clinging breathlessly to him, he might say more than he ought to as well. In fact, even when he knew about Sophie, he'd still almost done that the first night, when she overwhelmed him in the conservatory. She was a remarkable woman. He didn't fully trust her, but he couldn't deny her appeal.

Was it because she was actually very similar to him? A solitary person, really, who lived by her wits. True, she was maddeningly impulsive where he chose to plan, but their outlooks were not that different.

She glanced back once, smiling at Bruce and giving him



a tiny wink. He realized with a slight shock that nothing in her expression was challenging. She was reassuring him, even as she clung to Theriot's arm.

He noticed the same thing again when Theriot completed the main tour and released them to the care of the housekeeper. Sophie accepted Bruce's arm with a relaxed smile. In fact, Sophie's antagonism toward him seemed to recede completely, and they started to respond to each other's unspoken communication. Perhaps it only took that final step for Sophie to put on her chosen role. In a very real way, entering Carterhaugh was like stepping on stage.

\* \* \* \*

After the tour, a pixie-sized maid showed them to their room. Sophie was elated after her first encounter with Theriot. She could handle this assignment after all.

But when they reached their room, she faltered. The room was just that, a room. It was not a suite. Sophie hadn't expected that their plan would require them to share a bed over several days or even weeks. Unlike the inns, they could not sleep separately here and expect it to go unmarked.

"I am used to my own room," she commented to the maid in her loftiest tone.

The maid said nervously, "I do apologize, madame, but it is all we have. The guest list is quite large. At the master's orders, all the married couples are sharing."

"I see. Of course, I shall need an attendant. I hope *that*

is not too outlandish an accommodation.”

The girl curtsied automatically. “I’m to be your lady’s maid too, ma’am.” She looked even more nervous. “My name’s Maggie.”

“And your family name?” Sophie asked. Ladies’ maids were customarily referred to by their surname only.

“Sawyer, ma’am. But I’m not a proper lady’s maid, so Maggie it is.”

“Very well...Maggie,” Sophie said, letting doubt color her tone.

The trunks were there in the room, all of them still locked. The housemaid apologized for not unpacking them. “I didn’t know where the key was, ma’am.”

“I have it. I prefer to direct the unpacking,” Sophie answered distantly. “I like everything just so.”

“Yes, ma’am. Just ring when you’re ready to do so.” The little maid left, closing the door behind her.

The two spies stared at each other. Before Sophie could utter a word, Bruce stepped up to her and leaned to whisper in her ear. “We have to assume that everything we say will be overheard, even in this room.”

“Do you think they’re listening? Are they *watching*?” she murmured back.

“Not watching. They shouldn’t take such steps unless we make them suspicious. So let’s not give them a reason to watch.” Bruce’s breath tickled her skin.

“What should we do?” she asked, a bit breathless. He smelled good. There was no reason he should, after traveling all day, but he still did.

“Unpack our mysterious locked trunks so the help can

examine all our things?"

"I have a better idea." She fluttered her eyelashes and whispered, "Will my adoring husband escort me on a walk through the formal gardens? I am weary, and want the solace of nature." That last phrase was from one of Sophie's recent plays.

"I would be delighted," he murmured back.

Bruce slipped a possessive arm around her as soon as they reached the gardens. Sophie responded by leaning into him. Anyone watching would think they were a couple.

As they walked, Sophie asked, "How did you know that painting was a de la Tour?"

"I did study a bit in school," he said, shrugging.

"Well, that's lucky. I had no idea. Until you mentioned the name, I didn't know I should be impressed."

"Don't be too impressed. It's a fake."

"You're sure?" Sophie asked.

"Fakes. Almost all of them. You can smell the linseed oil once you get close, and the paint is barely dry. They're good reproductions, but they aren't the real thing."

"I wonder if Theriot knows, or if he got taken. He sounded impressed with himself," Sophie said thoughtfully.

"And you sounded like you knew what you were talking about when he was escorting you around," Bruce added.

Sophie said, "There's an art to talking about things you don't know. Mostly, you ask a few questions and let other people show off their knowledge, which they're happy to do."

"So you don't know about art?"

“As I told you before, I know plays and politics,” Sophie said. “On nearly every other matter, I make it up as I go along.”

“I should have expected that,” he muttered.

Sophie’s plan to flee outside, where they could speak without being overheard, was slightly marred by the fact that only a small portion of the gardens closest to the house were tended with any degree of care. But Sophie noticed a small hill with a crown of trees at its top, and directed Bruce to walk her there. The view would be excuse enough.

On the hilltop, she sat down on the grass and he followed suit, remaining close by her to maintain the fiction of their relationship, should anyone be watching from the house.

Sophie smiled as she leaned over to him. “What do you think so far?”

Bruce smiled back, but his hand clamped down on her arm. “I think you’re reckless.”

“What do you mean?” Sophie felt a sting from the unexpected criticism.

He continued, “We had a plan, yet you ignored it completely. You had no idea what you were walking into!”

“I trusted my instincts!” she hissed back. “And it worked. He’ll be eating out of my hand by this time tomorrow.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.” He leaned closer to her. “Making it up as you go along! Do you have any idea how close you were to getting both of us exposed? One wrong phrase, and there wouldn’t be

anything I could do to save you.”

“I’m not looking for a savior!” Sophie snapped.

“Well, you’ve got one whether you want it or not. My job is to protect you, dove. And I do that by thinking ahead. When you go off on your own, both of us suffer. Do you know how many times in that conversation I nearly had my heart stop, wondering if your answer was the right one?”

Sophie had been worried too, but she didn’t think Bruce had been. “Look, it all ended well enough. Don’t you think we learned something?”

After a long moment, he nodded and released his hold on her. “I think we know the nature of our host, and why the Cassous were invited. You’re the prize. He wants you as a lover.”

“He didn’t waste time, did he?”

“But you won’t seek his company tonight?”

“Far too early,” she said. “He’ll not value the conquest if it comes without effort.”

“You did well to draw all those names out of him,” he admitted grudgingly.

“Did any of them sound meaningful to you?” she asked.

“A few. Known sympathizers of the old monarchy in France. Interestingly, I don’t think any are vocal supporters of the Emperor.”

“Which doesn’t make them allies to England.”

“God, no. Staying in this house will be like sleeping in a snake pit.”

“There’s a pleasant image,” Sophie said, shuddering.

She put one hand on his. "Let's discuss what precisely we should do at dinner. I know you like a plan."

He glared at her, his eyes still stormy. "What's the point of making a plan if you dance off the nearest cliff each time?" His face was tight with anger and—she was stunned to realize—disappointment. In his eyes, she'd failed him. Sophie wasn't used to failing.

She also sensed something else beneath his anger: concern. He genuinely worried that she'd put them both in physical danger, which would destroy the whole façade.

Sophie at last felt a twinge of regret. "I should have given you some warning."

"You bloody well should have." His expression didn't change, but some of the darkness in his eyes retreated. "There will be plenty of time to risk our lives, dove. Don't go looking for opportunities."

He *had* been concerned for her. Sophie felt a tension rise in her chest. She didn't know how to deal with Bruce's concern, so she pushed it aside for the moment. "Tell me your plan for tonight. I'll stick to it. I promise."

"Once we go down to dinner, we can split up. Flirt just like you did before. It seems to be effective. We should each talk to the other guests and find out exactly what everyone is doing here. Did Theriot invite them all? What has he told them...if he told different stories, why? And why is he planning such a large party? Who is here for other reasons?"

"And who might know the Cassou couple?" Sophie added. "So many guests. I don't like it. We don't know if any of them has actually met 'us'. If so, someone could

expose us in a heartbeat.”

“Oh, now you recognize the dangers! We’ll deal with that when and if it comes. Just get through dinner tonight and get back safe to our room. We can compare notes then. Later on, I want to get the layout of this whole house down. I’ll slip out of the room tonight to map it.”

“A likely story,” Sophie said, playing up her role as a jealous wife to lighten the mood. “I saw how that maid looked at you.”

He was startled for a moment, then laughed. “I doubt it. I’d try to seduce the lass if I thought it would do any good at all. But she doesn’t seem like a font of knowledge.”

“Nonsense. She’s a local girl, and she’s obviously intimidated by the quality of the guests. A few kind words from you would have her spilling every secret in the shire.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps I’ll try, if the opportunity arises.”

“You should. If nothing else, your attention might thwart a previous order to spy on us.”

“You think she got such instructions?” he asked.

“Remember how upset she was when I said I’d be there for unpacking! I’ll wager anything the entire household staff has orders to report anything odd.”

“Which means Theriot is expecting trouble. Well, perhaps I should pay a bit more attention to the maid after all,” Bruce said.

“Let’s go back,” Sophie said, standing up again. “I want to rest before we have to get ready for this evening. The prologue went well, but the first act starts tonight.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Elizabeth Cole** is a romance writer with a penchant for history. Her stories draw upon her deep affection for the British Isles, action movies, medieval fantasies, and even science fiction. She now lives in a small house in a big city with a cat, a snake, and a rather charming gentleman. When not writing, she is usually curled in a corner reading...or watching costume dramas or things that explode. And yes, she believes in love at first sight.