

*A*  
SHAMELESS  
ANGEL  
ELIZABETH  
COLE

ALSO BY ELIZABETH COLE

*A Heartless Design*

*A Reckless Soul*

*The Lady Dauntless*

*Beneath Sleepless Stars*

*Honor & Roses*

*Regency Rhapsody Novellas*

*A*  
SHAMELESS  
ANGEL  
ELIZABETH  
COLE

SKYSPARK BOOKS

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Copyright © 2014 by Elizabeth Cole.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed “Attention: Permissions Coordinator,” at the address below.

SkySpark Books  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
skysparkbooks.com  
inquiry@skysparkbooks.com

Publisher’s Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author’s imagination. Locales and public names are sometimes used for atmospheric purposes. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.

Ordering Information:

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the “Special Sales Department” at the address above.

A SHAMELESS ANGEL / Cole, Elizabeth. – Sample edition

# Chapter 1



*August 1806*

THEY NEVER LET HER SEE the body.

Sarah had been engaged to her Charles for over two years. Now he was dead, and she hadn't even got the proper chance to say goodbye. She wouldn't be able to see the face she loved so dearly, or touch him one last time.

The churchyard was a sea of black, full of mourners come to pay their respects. She wore a gown of dark grey bombazine, too hot and heavy for summer. Sarah had no proper mourning dress, and no time to have one made before the funeral. The late August heat did not allow for longer than a few days before the body had to be committed to the earth.

Her head was mostly concealed by a black bonnet,

loaned by her mother. Was she wearing jewelry? She scarcely remembered putting it on. Oh, yes. The jet beads around her neck, also from her mother. All the dark colors would wash out her blonde hair and fair skin. She looked like a corpse herself: pale, thin, hideous. Not that it mattered. No one would be looking at her.

To judge by the crowd, Charlie touched many lives. Sarah was permitted to stand close to the grave, for although she wasn't family, she almost had been. *A few months until the wedding*, she thought. How quickly things could change. She felt as though she was in a dream. Perhaps she might wake up.

But she did not wake up. The parson completed his homily. The casket was lowered into the ground while she watched, her heart aching. At the sound of twinned, stifled sobs, she raised her eyes briefly to see Charlie's sisters, their hands tightly entwined as they watched the coffin sink into the earth.

*This wasn't supposed to happen*, she thought for the dozenth time that morning. Charlie and she were in love. Sarah was a practical girl, and never loved tragic romances. She planned to marry Charlie and live happily ever after.

But now Charlie was buried, and she was alone. Sarah took a long, shaky breath. Alone didn't begin to describe how she felt.

*Not fair*, Sarah told herself. Not fair. Nothing about it was fair.

After the family had done so, she also tossed a little handful of dirt into the grave. Looking down at the wooden surface of the coffin, now partially covered with

soil, she had a sense of vertigo. Then she noticed a worm industriously working its way through the soil exposed by the grave diggers, and felt pure horror. She didn't want to think of Charlie like that, at the mercy of those worms.

She turned away so abruptly she lost her balance. She started to stumble, but then someone caught her by the elbow, stopping her from falling further.

Sarah found her footing, then glanced at the hand, following it up to the arm and the attached face. The man wasn't anyone she knew, but she thought he was one of the pallbearers, though she couldn't say for certain.

"Are you all right?" the man asked. His voice was pitched low, keeping the question discreet.

"I misstepped," she said, realizing she hadn't spoken a word all morning until just then. Looking down again, she tugged at the black gloves on her shaking hands. She had been a wreck since hearing the first news of Charlie's accident. She couldn't sleep, she couldn't think. "But I have my balance now."

He released her, but didn't move away. "Do you intend to go to the wake?"

She nodded. The procession would head to the Wolvertons' home nearby, where the wake was to be held. "There's no need to shepherd me, though."

"All the same, since we're heading to the same place..." he said, falling into step beside her. Without making a show of it, he offered an arm.

Sarah accepted his decision, slipping her hand onto his arm. She was too overwhelmed to do anything else but follow as the group passed out of the cemetery. The man

was another mourner, and that was that. It didn't matter that she didn't even know his name. She had no interest in the living.

But if this man had been a pallbearer, he must have been a friend. Yet she never even met him? Odd.

"How did you know Charlie?" she asked the gentleman. She kept her gaze lowered, not willing to fully engage in a conversation with a stranger.

"We were at school together," he said. "And we both did some work for the government. I knew him well. And since you used the name Charlie, I assume you did, too."

"We were to be married."

His step hesitated very slightly, then caught the rhythm of hers again. She had surprised him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm engaged, too. I can't imagine what it must be like for you."

"I hope you never have to," Sarah whispered.

At her words, he unconsciously put one hand on hers for a moment. "That means you must be Miss Brecknell," he said. "Charlie mentioned your name."

"Sarah Brecknell," she confirmed.

"Well, since we have no one else to properly introduce us, I'm Theodore Drayton, Lord Markham. I expect we never met because your fiancé didn't want you to know what reprobates he associated with." Markham's tone was just a little teasing, perhaps in an effort to snap her out of the worst shock.

The name was vaguely familiar, and something in his voice reminded her of another conversation she once had with Charlie. She looked at him fully for the first time. He



bore her examination without any sign of discomfort. Indeed, he seemed almost to welcome it. He was not particularly tall, perhaps two or three inches above her own height. His reddish brown hair was cut a little shorter than was popular at the moment. She barely noticed his features, or really anything beyond the black clothes, because she was caught by his eyes. They were a warm green, and familiar. She had seen those eyes somewhere. “Are you sure we haven’t been introduced?” she asked, trying to place him.

“I promise you I would have remembered,” he said. “Why?”

Sarah looked down again, finally conscious of her manners. “Forgive me. I must be mistaken.”

They reached the Wolvertons’ home, where the guests would eat and drink and remember the dead...and gossip.

Sarah had been in the house the previous night, for the sitting up. At the invitation of the family, she’d sat up with the body for a few hours, and could only stare at the closed wooden box. How could Charlie be in there? she wondered. How could Charlie be so *still*? That wasn’t Charlie. He was always quick, talkative, engaging...*alive*.

It was traditional for a casket to be open, for that way family and friends could look upon the deceased one last time before they were buried. But Charlie’s death had been violent: a horrible accident. Thus, Charlie’s sweet and charming face would be hidden, because it was no longer sweet or charming. His mother declared no one would look upon her son that way. He would be remembered as he had been in life. Hence, the closed coffin, shutting

Sarah out in another small way.

His family—especially his mother and sisters—was so kind to her after the news, but Sarah felt an outsider that day. She was only Charlie's fiancée, not his wife. She was not family. And now she never would be. The ache in her heart was unbearable.

The night before, the house had been nearly silent. At the wake, it was already lively. True, all the guests wore sober colors and expressed heartfelt condolences to the family. The late Charles Wolverton had been in the prime of life, and his death came as a shock to everyone in society. Such a tragic accident!

Lord Markham hadn't left her in the few moments since they arrived at the house. He seemed to take the role of escort seriously, and Sarah was rather glad. He directed her to the receiving line the family had set up.

They both spoke briefly to Charlie's parents. His mother was crying, his father looked devastated. His younger sisters Georgia and Bryony had taken over as hostesses, putting their own grief aside for the necessary job of greeting guests and accepting condolences on the part of the family.

"Oh, Sarah," Georgia said when she saw her. "I feel you should be standing right here with us." Georgia's blonde hair was pulled back severely, and her normally bright blue eyes were red-rimmed.

Sarah said, "I only wish we didn't have to be here at all. Please let me know if there's anything I can do. I don't know what that could be, but..." she trailed off, feeling useless.

“We were going to make the same offer,” said Bryony. She was just young enough to wear her blonde hair down in braids, which had the effect of making her look especially vulnerable in a black gown which didn’t quite fit her. “A few months’ difference, and you’d be a sister. So you must remember that.”

“I’ll never forget that,” Sarah promised.

“And it’s fitting that you’re joined by our not-quite brother.” Georgia looked at Markham and smiled tremulously.

“Miss Wolverton, Miss Bryony,” Markham said then. “I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you for coming, my lord,” Georgia replied. “I was just thinking about how you and Charlie would play chess for hours on end. We still have the set out in the drawing room, you know, halfway through a game.”

“Perhaps I can call on you both and play a game or two,” he said.

“That would be wonderful,” Bryony said. “You are welcome any time. We won’t be out much...” She suddenly broke off and turned her head away. “Excuse me. I’m just not *prepared* for this...”

“No one could be, Miss Bryony.” Theo offered her a handkerchief, seemingly without even noticing he did it.

Sarah watched the younger girl with concern. Bryony was supposed to have her debut in a few months. A period of mourning for her brother would no doubt affect her socially as well as personally. “Everyone will understand,” Sarah added, hoping to reassure the girl.

“You both understand,” Bryony whispered. “I just

don't know about the rest of the world."

"Where is Lady Alyse?" Georgia asked Markham then, looking beyond him for another guest.

"Not in town, I'm afraid. She is at home in Cheltenham until the fall," he said. Sarah realized they must be talking about Markham's fiancée.

"So you escorted Miss Brecknell instead. How kind."

Sarah shook her head. "I came alone. I only met Lord Markham this morning."

"Truly?" Georgia asked curiously. "But you both knew Charlie so well! How is that possible?"

"Charlie lived in several different circles," Sarah said, with a little shrug.

Markham cleared his throat. "Let's move on. We've no wish to keep others from offering their sympathies."

"Please come see us soon, both of you," Bryony urged. "You will, won't you? The house is so quiet now. I don't like it."

They both promised, and then left so the sisters could speak to the many other guests.

Sarah allowed Markham to lead her to a quieter corner of the room. As she surveyed the chattering guests, she heard several rumors regarding Charlie's life and death.

He had a mistress, and they fought....

He was fleeing from a gang of thieves he fell in with....

He was mistaken for someone else, and it was all a tragic misunderstanding....

Sarah tuned out the words. She knew the correct story from the Wolvertons. Charlie had been driving his brougham to Woodforde, which was his private retreat

outside of the city. But he'd gone rather late at night, and on the road a group of highwaymen waylaid him. Highwaymen did not usually kill their victims, but something had gone wrong during the robbery and Charlie had been shot. The highwaymen, of course, fled the scene, leaving Charlie to die alone in the night. The truth was horrible enough. Why did people always want to add embellishments to it?

She noticed Markham watching her with those oddly familiar eyes. "You said Charlie lived in several circles," he said quietly.

She nodded. "His family, his own friends. Me, when he was in town. He was busy, you know. Always off on some important function abroad. That's all I meant."

"He told you about what he did?" Markham's voice sharpened a bit.

Sarah looked out the window, feeling a jolt of alarm. "Not the particulars," she said quickly. "He did not speak of any business or other such affairs with me, my lord." She couldn't look at Markham while she spoke, because she was not a good liar. The fact was that Sarah knew more than she should about Charlie's real work. He'd been a spy, part of a highly secret group called the Zodiac.

"So he didn't talk about his work," Markham said, in a more normal tone.

The weight of it all seemed to bear down on her again, making it hard to even speak. She said, "No. When we were together, we spoke of other things. Just silly things."

"You don't strike me as a particularly silly person, Miss Brecknell."

"I'm sure you can't judge at this point." She spoke too sharply, but his questions had put her on edge.

He immediately looked contrite. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"You're not what disturbs me today," she said.

He must have understood that a long conversation with her wouldn't look well at a funeral. He offered her a final condolence and began to turn away.

"Lord Markham," she said, putting out one hand. She arrested the movement before she was anywhere close to touching him, but she'd caught his attention.

She took a breath to steady herself. "I was wondering. Do you think...do you think anything could have been done? When he died, I mean. Do you think there was any other outcome?"

Markham looked once at the crowd, then deliberately turned his back on the room to face her alone. "There have been a lot of rumors about his death," he said candidly. "I've heard some, and I expect you have too."

She nodded slowly.

"I don't know the whole truth," he said. "I wasn't there, so how could I? But I knew Charlie. He was my friend. Whatever happened, he was not at fault."

Sarah breathed out, more relieved to hear those words than she'd expected. That was her secret fear. If Charlie had done something rash to provoke the highwaymen, if he'd been too bold.... But of course he was too careful to do such a thing. It was bad luck. It had to be. "It helps to hear that."

"If I can be of any assistance to you, Miss Brecknell,

please let me know.” He took out one of his cards, and scrawled his street direction in town on the back side with a pencil stub from his pocket. “Anything. No matter how odd or minor the request may be.”

“Out of mutual friendship?” she asked, taking the card and reading both sides.

He nodded. “Of course.”

Sarah looked at him steadily, trying to remember where she knew him from. “Thank you.”

She turned away then, shutting him and everyone else out of her private grief. She didn’t know when Markham left, and she didn’t care. But she kept his card held tightly in her hand, the edge of the paper digging into her skin through the black gloves.

## Chapter 2



THEODORE FLED THE WAKE EARLY, leaving the quiet, stunned Miss Brecknell alone in the crowd of mourners. He would have liked to stay a bit longer and talk to the others, but he had somewhere to be.

It was an almost offensively sunny day, especially for a man in Theo's frame of mind—rain would have suited him better. August heat had settled over the city of London, bringing with it the peculiar, brackish scent of the Thames, at least to some neighborhoods. The air would make the residents pray for the first breezes of autumn.

He'd been to plenty of funerals before; he'd go to many more after today. Why did this one feel so different? Because Charlie and he were almost the same age? Perhaps. Nearly the same station, too. Theo would inherit a title, and Charlie came from generations of landed gentry. They were also linked by one more fact, though



this was a closely held secret. Both men were members of a group called the Zodiac.

The Zodiac was an organization of spies, dedicated to protecting England against all manner of threats. He worked for years as a member of the group. He never worked with Charlie—or anyone else for that matter. The signs of the Zodiac were solitary. But as Pisces, Charlie sometimes briefed him on a matter of diplomacy, or informed him of news that would affect his next assignment. Theo was sure Charlie saved his life more than once.

But now Charlie was dead. Theo believed it had to be connected to the Zodiac. An enemy working against them overpowered Charlie. Or perhaps someone was taking vengeance against the Zodiac and Charlie was just a first assault. There were too many possibilities and no way to get answers until he met with his superior.

And then there was Sarah Brecknell, who Charlie never bothered to even introduce to his friends. When Theo first saw her, he briefly wondered if the fact that she was dressed in grey—rather than black—meant she wasn't particularly upset by Charlie's death. Once he saw her face up close, he knew that wasn't the case. She looked frozen, her wide grey eyes unfocused and her skin unnaturally pale.

But the whole conversation with her left Theo rather nonplussed. At times, she seemed to almost know Charlie's secret. *He lived in several circles*, she said. But Theo told himself that she couldn't have meant *the* circle, which was what the Zodiac agents often called their group. It had to

be a coincidence—if Theo wasn't so on edge, he wouldn't have thought twice about it.

As he walked, his mind drifted back to Charlie. Theo had gone to school with him, and he always admired Charlie's intelligence and humor. Theo was higher-born, but it never got in the way, because both boys had similar interests: riding, games, girls, and pulling pranks. The pranks got more and more elaborate as they grew older, often involving weeks of planning and sneaking into the headmaster's office at night to get whatever they needed. The payoff was always worth the punishment.

Over the years, Theo learned how to pick locks, hide in plain sight, lie to his elders, and keep a secret. Who knew such childish tricks would be so useful later in life?

After school, Charlie had begun work in the government, and Theo had been aimless, living the life of a lord's son awaiting his full title. Charlie showed up one day, as giddy as he used to be when he thought up a new trick.

"Enjoying yourself?" he had asked, knowing full well that Theo was bored to death. "How would you feel about pulling some more pranks...but with higher stakes?"

Of course Theo was hooked. If not for Charlie, Theo would likely still be drifting through London, living a dull and ordinary life. Instead, he risked his life for his nation, and he liked it far better.

Theo's father, the Baron Markham, was a member of the House of Lords, though he wasn't terribly active when not defending his own neck of the woods. Theo would eventually succeed his father, and he hoped he'd do well.

But he dared not wait for his father to pass away before he started living. Besides, Theo liked his father better alive.

Theo's father never would have permitted him to join the military—he was the oldest son, and thus the heir. But Theo wanted to do something. He couldn't imagine a worse fate than watching as events across the continent and across the world seemed to explode. His work with the Zodiac filled that need.

Lost in these thoughts, Theo walked back to where Charlie was buried. He didn't hurry. In his severely black clothing, he was already overheating. All too soon, he stood at the entrance to the churchyard again. He glanced over at the eastern side, where Charlie lay underground.

Theo didn't linger, but turned in through a side door. The church appeared deserted at the moment. He found the stairs to the choir loft and climbed them, suddenly dreading the meeting he was about to have. Some terrible feeling came over him, perhaps inspired by the fresh grave and the silent church. It was as if he were about to discover something hideous.

But the only thing awaiting him in the choir loft was a man with sandy colored hair and mild blue eyes. His short stature made him seem unassuming. But Julian Neville was more than he seemed.

Julian was Theo's superior. He was Aries, the First Sign of the Zodiac. Theo reported to him and received all his assignments from him. And now, Theo hoped Julian would be able to explain Charlie's death.

"Morning, Taurus," Julian said quietly, using Theo's code name. "I won't say good morning, because it won't

be. I'm afraid I have bad news."

"Worse than Charlie being dead?"

"Far worse."

Julian said nothing more, and Theo got worried. "Why are you waiting?"

"Because there's no easy way to say this." Julian took a breath. "Charlie was a traitor."

"No, he wasn't," Theo said instantly. He rarely contradicted Julian, but that was over the line. "How could that possibly be? He was a *sign*. He was my friend."

"He was a traitor." Julian's face was calm, but underneath, he was seething.

Theo knew better than to argue, but he did anyway. "There's a mistake. He must have been set up. Framed."

Julian shook his head. The light from the stained glass window hit him oddly, making his face and hair suddenly red, then blue, then gold. "Believe me, I wish to God that were true. But Charlie confessed it before he died. He'd been acting against England for over two years."

"Confessed to who? How do we know this? He died in an accident." Theo was getting angrier by the minute. How could such a thing happen and he didn't even have a hint about it? "Tell me how you found out. Tell me how he *died*."

"It's complicated. Not too long ago, I sent two agents on an assignment. In the course of their work, they discovered there was a traitor linked to the Zodiac, and then discovered the traitor was actually a sign. Pisces."

"Charlie," Theo said, to make absolutely sure he wasn't going insane.

“Yes. One of the agents, Libra, tracked him down in order to get him to confess the details. The chase led to that road outside London. Charlie wasn’t driving alone, waylaid by highwaymen. He was with Libra, who had followed him with the hope of gaining more evidence. Unfortunately, Charlie resisted and was accidentally killed.”

“Accidentally?” Theo echoed, skeptical.

“Libra wanted him alive, trust me. But Charlie preferred death to explaining himself. We didn’t have much time to concoct a story that made sense—highwaymen were something believable, and we discouraged any investigation into the matter.”

Theo sat down in one of the long pews. “A traitor,” he said. It was too much to take in.

“Yes.” Julian looked at him steadily. “I’m sorry to bring you this news, Theo.”

Something in the way Julian said it made Theo look up. “Do you think I’m complicit?”

Julian raised one eyebrow. “Should I?”

“I was one of Charlie’s best friends,” Theo said. “He’s the reason I’m part of the Zodiac. You know that. Why wouldn’t you think I was involved?”

“I don’t.”

Theo sighed. He hadn’t realized until that moment how tense he’d got. “For a moment, I thought...”

“You thought I’d set up a meeting in the church in order to kill you and have a convenient place to bury the body? If I were going to do that, I wouldn’t have given you any warning.”

The terrifying part of that was the utterly indifferent

way Julian said it. He would have killed Theo without a second thought if he considered him a traitor like Charlie.

A traitor like Charlie.

"I'm not going to say you're wrong," he told Julian. "But I'm going to need a while to come around to this."

"Of course."

"Can you..." Theo paused. "Can you tell me anything about what he was doing?"

"He was selling documents he was able to procure in the course of his work, both during his Zodiac assignments and as part of his cover work in the department. Though he seemed to sell to various players, we know he was in contact with Arceneau, at least indirectly."

Theo knew that name well. Over the past decade, the man called Arceneau had emerged as an extremely powerful criminal mind. Though French by birth, he had no sense of loyalty or patriotism. He was particularly interested in supplying governments with weapons and war supplies. To be sure he'd always have customers, Arceneau frequently meddled in politics and did everything he could to worsen hostilities between nations.

"Well, I suppose Charlie decided if he was going to turn traitor, he might as well aim high."

"Indeed. He told Libra he intended to stop. He would use the excuse of his marriage to leave both the Zodiac and his position in the government. I have my doubts."

"What else?" Theo asked.

"We don't know much more. Charlie wasn't particularly forthcoming, as Libra's multiple knife wounds prove."

“He’s alive?”

“Libra is surprisingly difficult to kill,” Julian said, with an odd smile.

“But no one is searching for any papers left behind?”

Julian shook his head. “Don’t go looking for an assignment. I have another agent cleaning up after Charlie, and besides, you’re too close to it. I wouldn’t assign you anyway.”

“But I could talk to his family. His fiancée. What if he told them something, even a slip of the tongue?”

“No. Charlie was nothing if not smart. Too smart to share a secret like this with his sisters or his bride-to-be.”

“But there’s a chance...”

“Taurus. Stop it.”

“Yes, sir.” Theo nodded, accepting the reality of the situation.

“I’m telling you the truth because you deserve to know how and why Charlie died...and why you shouldn’t lose too much sleep over it.”

“I was at the funeral. Everyone was devastated.”

“Let them remember the man Charlie used to be.” Julian stood up. “He was a good man once.”

“When did he stop?”

“I wish I knew.” Julian looked hard at him. “Have I got your word? You won’t go poking around? If this whole thing disappears, we’ll all be better off.”

Theo stood up as well. “It’s not my assignment. I understand that, sir.”

“That’s all, then,” Julian said quietly.

Theo watched the other man walk out. He didn’t move,

still shocked by the unwelcome revelation. If Charlie had gone so wrong, there must be a reason for it. And Theo intended to find it.

Thank God Julian hadn't noticed Theo's promise wasn't a promise at all.



## Chapter 3



*January 1807, five months later*

SEASONS PASSED, AS SEASONS WILL. At first, Sarah knew nothing would be the same after Charlie's death. In those first numbing and dark days, she thought about Charlie every minute. She cried nearly as often.

"You look like a widow, my dear," her mother had said. "You are far too young for that."

Sarah shrugged, unwilling to talk about it. Her mother was as unlike Sarah as it was possible for a woman to be. She was graceful, witty, and adored the intrigues of polite society. She had not gone to the funeral because she felt that black was unflattering to her complexion—the same complexion Sarah inherited.

Her mother went on, "The worst will fade. I know you don't believe me now, but you will recover."

"I don't want to recover," Sarah said.

"But you will," her mother said firmly. "Just you see."

Next year at this time, you'll have a new beau, and a new life..."

"A new beau? Mama, how can you talk about such things at a time like this?"

"Because I'm older than you, dear. You will mourn, but not forever. Trust me."

Sarah pressed her lips into a thin line. She would not argue with her mother. She would not speak of her life after Charlie. If her mother thought she was just a fickle girl who didn't know what love was, she was much mistaken. Sarah promised her whole soul to her love. She even gave him her body, eager to prove her love to him. She gave Charlie everything, because he was the only person in the world for her.

And then her grief mixed with fear. Only a few weeks before Charlie's death, on a warm summer night, they had been alone. They were often given time alone, thanks to the impending marriage. The legitimacy of the engagement gave them leave to be together without offending propriety. But on that particular evening, seduced by summer and love and her fiancé's charm, Sarah allowed him to do something she knew she shouldn't. But he loved her, and she loved him. And they would be married soon. What difference would a few months make? She let him take her virginity, because he said he adored her and couldn't wait. She wanted to make him happy. And she was curious.

It had been, if not magical, mostly pleasant. She thought she understood why men and women did such things. And she did love him.

But then the tragedy of his death put all her silly, dreamy notions to shame. Once the first shock and grief passed, Sarah was seized by a new fear. What if she was with child—a real possibility, considering the timing. She turned nervous and jumpy. Her prayers alternated between begging for evidence that she wasn't carrying, and begging for forgiveness for committing such a great sin. For two weeks after the funeral, Sarah didn't leave her house.

Then, she awoke one day to find blood on her sheets. Oddly, she broke down in tears when she discovered she wasn't pregnant with Charlie's child, because that meant he wouldn't live on. Her maid Naomi had to coax her out of bed just so she could change the linens.

But somehow, life was indifferent, and went on regardless. Weeks later, she realized with a start she had gone a few hours with no thought of Charlie at all. Then she felt a horrible sense of guilt for forgetting him for even an hour, and she cried again, but this time alone in her room.

Summer came to a gentle close, and Sarah ate food, slept, and held conversations like a perfectly normal person. She dressed in mourning and refused nearly all invitations. But the worst grief—and the worst fear—seemed to pass.

As the weather grew cooler, so did her heart. She sometimes went a day or two without thinking of Charlie, and when she did, the tears didn't always come. Some of the memories were happy, and some were simply there. Was it possible she might endure?

Sarah's parents began to prevail on her to go outside of

their home. Her mother, always alert to social niceties, counseled Sarah to accept more invitations and to put off her full mourning clothes. She said Sarah's fair coloring suffered in black—and that was impossible to refute.

Her father's requests were easier to accept, since he only urged her to go with him to her favorite place in the world: the Athenaeum. The building housed a society for the advancement of science and knowledge. While only men—such as her father—were permitted full membership, Sarah had been there so often over the years she was practically considered a sort of communal niece. She was as common a sight around the place as Cassius, the Athenaeum's Chief Mouser.

Cassius was a sleek, beautiful black cat with an affectionate manner and the soul of a murderer. He more than earned his keep with his dedication to keeping the building free of mice and rats. The books were protected from rodents' teeth, and Cassius was well fed at no cost.

The Athenaeum liked such practical arrangements.

Sarah's arrangement was also practical. As a child, the old men (they all seemed like very old men to her then) were amused and delighted by her interest in their subjects.

As the years went by, Sarah was educated in a manner befitting her station...and indeed far beyond it, for Sarah proved to have an insatiable appetite for learning. So it must have seemed quite natural to give the very young lady a space of her own, where she could study or read or perform some administrative tasks for the society while her father pursued his own work in the larger reading room where all the men gathered.

It was a happy compromise. Sarah got her privacy and a space to read, and all the proprieties were observed, since Sarah was surely adequately chaperoned by dint of having so many elders surrounding her.

Sarah loved her little office. It was tiny, scarcely more than a closet. But she had a desk to work at, a chair to sit in, and another, more comfortable chair to read in if she chose. Because the room was all the way at the end of the hallway, she did not disturb the gentlemen going to and fro. Not that the usually silent Sarah disturbed anyone. She was a model of a young lady, all the members said.

As she gradually came out of mourning, Sarah felt comfortable attending lectures, because it appeared she was being social, when she in fact barely remembered half the topics. But it kept her mother from hounding her about other commitments for the length of autumn. By the time winter settled on the city, she had established a routine, one centered on avoiding society in favor of hiding with the academics who populated the Athenaeum.

One day in January, she was ensconced in her office. She had accompanied her father there in the early afternoon, just when her mother settled into the drawing room to accept any callers who might come by. Sarah hated the idea of sitting and waiting for callers, so she was doubly glad to escape the house. This afternoon, she was curled in the chair, reading. Cassius prowled around the office, listening for mice. She was thoroughly lost in her book. For the moment, she was a Roman general, exploring the dark, barbaric forests of Gaul at the height of the Republic. That the book was in Latin made no

difference at all. She could read Latin as easily as English ever since she was young.

A noise at the door brought her back to reality for half a moment. The sound was like that of claws scratching the wood.

“Cassius!” she said sharply, without dragging her eyes from the page. “Stop that or you won’t get the fish I saved for you!”

“What a shame. I do love fish.” The voice was almost a purr, but it was no cat.

Sarah jumped when she heard it. Her eyes snapped up to see a huge man standing at the door, overcoat still spotted with snow. His dark hair was long, and damp from the weather outside, so it gleamed in the light of the single lamp on her desk.

He stepped inside the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

She was trapped with him.

Cassius took one look at the newcomer and hissed, his back arching up. The man ignored the cat.

“Who are you?” she gasped, regaining her voice. “Get out!”

The man shrugged aside his overcoat to reveal the pistol he held. “You’re not in charge. I have an item of business to discuss with you, Miss Sarah Brecknell, and *then* I will be on my way.” His voice was accented, but he spoke his English perfectly, adding special emphasis to her name. The man’s bulk was almost entirely muscle, and the width of his shoulders implied a vicious level of strength. She would never get past him.

“How did you get so far into the building? Please leave. I am sure that I have no business with you,” Sarah returned sharply, despite her racing heart. The pistol held her gaze.

“You do,” he said. Sharp eyes surveyed her from head to foot and back. His expression shifted from indifference to appreciation.

Sarah noted his appraisal and shivered. She looked instinctively at the letter opener lying on the desktop. It was the only thing she had which even remotely resembled a weapon.

He saw it too, and smiled, showing surprisingly white teeth. Before she could do anything, he leaned forward and seized the letter opener with his free hand. He twirled it with three fingers, and she saw his hand was completely missing the last two. The detail made him even more alarming.

He said, “The business I refer to involves a gentleman you might remember. Charles Wolverton.”

He may as well have pulled the trigger of the gun. Sarah moved backward, her breathing erratic. “Charlie?” She sank back onto the chair.

“Charlie,” he confirmed. “So you do remember him. Of course, since you were his lover.”

“His fiancée, you mean,” Sarah corrected weakly, too weakly. “But Charlie died.”

“And good riddance to him.” The man sneered. “He was weak at the end. Made mistakes.”

“What can you want with me?” Sarah asked plaintively. How dare he say that? Charlie had been unlucky. An

accident could happen to anyone.

“He left something behind,” the man said. “Something important. You are in a position to get it for me. If you do, I will disappear from your life and you will have nothing to fear.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you’ll have plenty to fear.” He looked at her again, showing those white teeth once more. Sarah knew exactly what he meant by that gaze. She shuddered.

“What am I supposed to find?” she asked, striving to keep the terror she felt from surfacing in her voice.

“There were some letters and other documents he was, ah, keeping safe. You must find the hiding place he used, and bring the items to me.”

“But I don’t know...”

“You can find them, Miss Sarah,” the man said. “Surely a gentleman so close to his fiancée told her a few little secrets, passed her a few little love notes. You must remember his quirks. Where he might have hidden a letter...or concealed a message. Wolverton was good at that sort of thing. But you know that already.” His smile was cruel then, hinting at many more secrets.

Sarah nodded before she could stop herself.

“I can try,” she whispered. What else could she say?

“Excellent. I give you to the end of the month, the night of the 31st. If I do not see what I want by then, you will regret it for the rest of your very short life. I will send you a note to tell you where to go. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Sarah whispered, her mind whirling.



With a negligent gesture, he flipped the letter opener past her, onto the desk. He waved his malformed hand in a mocking gesture of farewell, then turned his back and slipped out of the door, utterly unconcerned that she might attack him or cry for assistance. He didn't bother closing it after he left.

She stood up shakily, but made no move to call for help. What would be the point?

Cassius chose that moment to rub against her legs, and she snapped at him out of sheer shock. The cat hissed in response. Sarah bent to pick him up. "Oh, Cassius. What am I going to do?"

The cat, now nestled in her arms, began to purr. However, true to his species, he offered no solutions.

She shivered. "What can I possibly do?"

Sarah remained in the little office until her father rapped on the open door an hour later. She jumped in alarm, and Cassius, who had been curled on her lap, sprang up in irritation, streaking out of the room.

"That cat!" her father exclaimed, his voice going up a register. "He'll give us all heart attacks one day!"

"Is it time to go?" she asked.

"Far past. I lingered over some work and the building is nearly deserted."

He was a thin man, shorter than Sarah by an inch. He had greying hair, worn in a queue, just as he had worn it for decades previously. His grey eyes were weak, requiring him to wear spectacles all the time. But he nearly always wore a smile on his face, and had a habit of humming to himself while he worked.

“I thought you would come find me, dear,” he went on. “It’s well after dinner. We’ll be lucky if Bette gives us some cold meat.” He chuckled, knowing his words to be spurious. Their cook Bette pampered the family, and they never lacked at meal time. He expected Sarah to laugh too, but when she didn’t, he squinted at her. “I say, are you feeling well?”

“Yes, yes,” she said hastily. “I was distracted. Let’s return home. I’m famished. And we ought not neglect Mama, or she’ll be cross.”

Sarah put on her heavy pelisse. On the street, her father hailed a driver to take them back home. Behind her, the Athenaeum stood dark and silent. Until now, she thought of the place as some inviolable sanctuary. But the man had no trouble getting inside. Who would stop him?

She did her best to hide her anxiety from her father. It was not difficult. Stephen Brecknell was a man devoted to study, often to the point of ignoring the outer world entirely. He could go for a day without eating, and he was not to be trusted to pick out his own clothing. Sarah thanked her stars for his absentmindedness that night. She wouldn’t dare get her family involved in whatever madness just happened.

But she couldn’t solve the problem on her own.

## *Chapter 4*



WHEN THEY ARRIVED AT THEIR house, Sarah hurried her father inside. She saw nothing out of the ordinary, but she still felt watched, and she glanced around her as if she would see the hulking form of the stranger there, too. The man knew where her office was. Surely he knew where her home was as well. So why did he need Sarah to find something Charlie left? Or was this all a trick of some kind?

Inside the modest home of the Brecknells, everything appeared normal. The fires in each room were kept going against the cold and damp. Both Sarah and her father were given a very hearty late dinner by Bette, who had kept the food warm and even managed a perfectly timed sweet cheese soufflé for dessert.

After dinner, they went into the parlor where Mrs Brecknell usually spent her time. Sarah found her mother asleep in a chair.

“Mama?” Sarah asked, nudging her shoulder. “Mama, you ought to go to your bed now.”

Her mother blinked and yawned. She was a proper lady, and even her yawns were delicate. “Sarah, are you back at last? Your father keeps you out too late at that place. You ought to be at home instead.”

“I want to be there, Mama,” Sarah reminded her. Then she thought of the incident again. If that man could simply walk into the building and accost her, perhaps she *didn’t* want to be there. “You were asleep already. Should you go off to bed?”

“Not yet,” her mother said. “I have a few things to discuss with you.”

Sarah sighed. She knew exactly what was coming.

The social season had begun earlier in the month. Invitations were trickling in again for parties and teas. The Wolvertons even sent a dinner invitation, despite the fact that they still mourned their son’s death. However, with Bryony’s coming out to consider, life had to go on.

A few cards from gentlemen she had known also came to the house—names of those who courted her before she accepted Charlie. Sarah often said she was not at home, but some of those gentlemen would not be put off forever. Perhaps they had found no replacement since then. They would all be quite disappointed in her now. She was not the same girl she had been three winters ago.

Her mother picked up a short stack of papers. “I saw several invitations on the table. Have you responded to these yet, my dear?” she asked.

Sarah said, “I will send my regrets tomorrow. I was too

busy to write today.”

Her mother frowned. She was a pretty woman, still mostly blonde like her daughter, though she had rich brown eyes, where Sarah inherited her father’s eyes. “I would council you to accept at least one of these. If you keep refusing, eventually you will no longer receive any invitations.”

“Thus saving me the bother of sending regrets.”

“If you don’t want to venture out alone, join me to make some calls.” Seeing Sarah’s wrinkled nose, she added, “Or ask your friend Chloe. She’s always happy to go visiting! You need not be alone, dear. People wish to see your face.”

Sarah stifled a huff. “Mama, no one cares in the least. *You* are the person they all want at the parties. You’re the witty one. Why don’t you accept an invitation?”

“So councils the hermit!” Her mother sniffed.

But Sarah did see the point, so she said, “You know, the Wolvertons are hosting a dinner in two days. I said I will go. Georgia had been after me about it.”

“A dinner is better than nothing.” Her mother smiled a bit. “Then I shall go to Lady Mathering’s little event next week. You see how your obedience heals your mother’s heart.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Yes, Mama.”

Her father sat on a chair near his wife. She turned to him, but didn’t let Sarah off the hook.

“Though a dinner with the Wolvertons will hardly better your chances at another proposal. It would be good for you to consider future prospects and put the past

aside.”

“Put myself on the market again, you mean.” Sarah’s own coming out had taken place three years ago. She would not be seen as a catch next to the young debutantes this winter, even with her respectable dowry. “Besides, I won’t catch any eyes in my grey gowns.”

Her mother sighed. “Then wear a color. You were not his wife. Five months, six months...you have shown very proper grief. But you still have a life to live.”

“Ah, let her be,” her father interjected in a mild tone—his tone was always mild, truth be told. “Sarah goes out nearly every day when she comes to the Athenaeum with me. She is such a help. And what is the point of having a brain if not to use it? Let her be.”

“Of course, dear,” her mother responded, though she waved another invitation at Sarah meaningfully.

“I will consider them,” Sarah said, hoping to appease her mother.

“Truly?”

“Of course.” Of course she would consider attending meaningless parties and dances. And then she would choose not to go.

Her mother sensed her recalcitrance. “I will insist.”

“Can you insist tomorrow? I have a book I’m keen to finish.”

“You and your endless books. Your father is far too indulgent of your habits,” she groused.

“And too indulgent of yours, Madeline,” her father said. “You should go to bed. Let me take you there.”

Once her mother was on her feet, she kissed Sarah on

the forehead. "Don't stay up too late. You will get shadows under your pretty eyes."

"Yes, Mama."

After her parents went up to bed, Sarah walked over to a bookshelf and hunted for a particular title. She found the book, bound in red leather, and took it up to her room. She had read this one before. It was not the book that interested her.

She opened the front flap and a card fell out. *Theodore Drayton, Lord Markham.*

Sarah picked up the card and traced the edges. She needed assistance—badly. But was that the sort of favor Markham had in mind when he handed her the card? Probably not. In all likelihood, it had been a meaningless gesture of comfort. What else does one say at a funeral?

And yet. She thought back to that painful day, trying to recall the man and the conversation. She couldn't remember what he looked like, but she could call up the words. *If I can be of any assistance to you, Miss Brecknell, please let me know.*

He just appeared at the funeral. There was no reason to seek her out at all. But he did. Perhaps there was another reason he spoke to her. Charlie had a secret life as a spy. He was more than he seemed. What if this man was too?

She didn't sleep, but lay staring into the darkness for a long while. She had to get help from somewhere. Georgia spoke of him as an almost-brother.

"I'll ask her about him at the dinner," she said out loud to the darkness. "She can tell me if he can be trusted."

## Chapter 5



THE NEXT MORNING, THEO WOKE up long before the dawn. He hadn't been sleeping particularly well for the past few months, whether he was at the family estate or in his own townhouse, tucked in a quiet corner of Berkley Square.

It was better since his sister and her husband came to stay with him for the duration of the Season. Katherine and Harry lived near the Markham home in rural Gloucestershire, not far from Cheltenham. But they always managed to come to London for the Season. Katherine was older than Theo by three years, but she had never lost her love for the gaiety of society, even after she bore two girls and settled down to a considerably quieter life.

Theo found the presence of his family comforting. He always wanted a family himself, but his work with the Zodiac meant he kept putting it off. Luckily, his Alyse was understanding. As the first daughter of a wealthy earl, she



had a comfortable life already, and little need to rush into a marriage.

Theo dressed, then sat down to look over a few notes he'd made for himself. He liked working at this time of day—all was quiet, so he could think. For the past few months, Theo had been pursuing a few lines of investigation into Charlie's past, despite being told not to. Theo simply couldn't leave it alone. In the guise of his legitimate role as an attaché for diplomatic work on the Continent, Theo exploited his contacts and chased down any potential lead regarding the possibility of stolen documents offered for sale.

As Theo carefully talked with people he could trust—or bribe—he learned of Charlie's past sales, which revealed his sometime friend as a shrewd businessman. Charlie sold a few stolen documents nearly every time he went on an assignment for the Zodiac. How he smuggled the documents to the buyers was another question. He was never caught by either British or Continental authorities, so he must have devised a wickedly clever way to hide the contraband. Smuggling one letter one time was difficult enough. Charlie crossed the Channel so often that he couldn't possibly have escaped the occasional run in with authorities. Whether it was custom officers, police, or military intelligence...someone must have searched him and his belongings occasionally. All spies knew it would happen. The best ones had good hiding places, good stories, or a good amount of money to pay off their interrogators. Charlie must have had all three to succeed as long as he did.

He did find out that Charlie was interested in things such as troop movements and plans for war machines. All of Theo's investigations kept pointing to Arceneau as a main customer. Charlie often sold the documents to assistants because the man himself was mostly above such transactions, but the money came from Arceneau.

And yet, with Charlie's death, everything seemed to have stopped. Perhaps Julian was right; chasing down more clues would only risk exposing there'd been a mole. With every passing day, the risk diminished. If Theo listened to logic, he'd give up his hunt. But Theo also listened to his gut, which told him if Charlie was involved, nothing would be simple.

Throughout his investigation, he kept returning to Sarah Brecknell. Though he only met her once, she became a symbol in his mind. She stood for all the people Charlie betrayed. The young woman had done nothing, yet she—like so many others—suffered because of Charlie's selfishness.

She should not have had such an effect on him. It was silly. He built her up into a beautiful, tragic heroine. But he didn't know much about her. She was respectable. She was extremely well educated. And she was engaged to Charlie. Nothing about her situation gave Theo a reason to see her again.

But for some reason, he wanted to.

He made a sound of frustration, and packed away his notes. In any case, he could do nothing more without a new lead. He glanced outside and saw the sky was much brighter as dawn came.

The door opened and Theo's valet walked in. "Oh," he said, on seeing Theo up and dressed. "Why did you not ring?"

"I am capable of dressing myself, you know, Baxter. I'm twenty-nine, after all."

"Indeed you are, my lord," Baxter replied, artfully avoiding whether he was referring to Theo's age or his abilities. "Started your work early?"

"Yes, but I will be leaving the house after I have some breakfast. I have a few things to attend to." Theo put his notes in a drawer and locked it.

"Do you want the carriage brought around?" Baxter asked.

"No, I'll walk. I want to think." Theo always thought best when he was moving.

Baxter nodded and tidied up a few things around the room, while Theo went downstairs to find something to eat. He frequently ate long before the rest of the household, so the cook never bothered with a sideboard for him, instead bringing hot food directly from the kitchen. He drank his tea and ate some ham on bread without tasting much of anything.

While Theo sat at the table, two servants entered. He looked up, seeing the two newest employees at his house, Jem and Ivy. "Good morning," he said. "What brings you both here?"

After checking that no one would overhear the conversation, Jem said, "We'd like to know if you've any assignments for us particularly."

The young man was taller than Theo by a few inches,

and his lanky frame increased the effect. He possessed mouse brown hair and plain brown eyes and a forgettable face. Those features had no doubt been an asset in the boy's former life, when he worked as a pickpocket on the London streets. His proper name was James, but the casual Jem fit him better.

"Aye, my lord," the maid named Ivy added. "Your windows are clean and the silver polished, but that's not truly why *we're* here." Ivy was an unassuming girl with a head of dark glossy hair that was pinned back and almost entirely hidden under her maid's cap. Indeed, she was so properly turned out and starched in her uniform that she disappeared behind it, which was a great advantage both in servitude and spying.

Both servants had been in the house about a month. Theo hired them at the express order of the Zodiac. Julian first learned of this odd group of disreputable servants during another agent's investigation into missing plans for a warship, which led to a woman named Miss Bering. Her servants, it turned out, were all former criminals she hired out of mercy. A criminal history would destroy the reputation of a servant, condemning him to low paying jobs or yet more criminal activity just to make ends meet. Miss Bering offered some of those people a new life, and her faith was repaid. Her servants were both uncommonly loyal and competent.

Julian realized the implications right away. History had many examples of servants who spied on their masters. But to train servants as spies...that was a step further. Servants were so often invisible. With the right letters of

introduction, or the proper references—both easily fabricated—a uniformed servant could practically turn into a ghost, floating through the most secret rooms and overhearing the most sensitive conversations without drawing attention.

But first they had to be prepared, which was why Jem and Ivy were working at the Markham townhome. Theo leaned back in his seat, surveying them. “Ivy, how many guests have come to this house in the past week?”

“Seven, if one counts your aunt Lady Amelia as a guest,” she said.

“And we must,” he said, with a hint of sympathy. His aunt was the definition of a cantankerous old woman. Her arrivals were viewed with dread and her departures with elation. “Of those guests, whose rooms did you see to personally?”

“Lady Amelia’s, your sister’s, and her daughter Melissa’s.”

“Did you look in my sister’s jewelry case?”

“Yes, sir,” Ivy said, without a trace of shame. Most servants would deny such an act until they drew their last breath. But he wasn’t accusing Ivy of theft, and she knew it. “She has an interesting collection, and she favors blue stones. Melissa, of course, is only permitted to wear the coral ring and beads.”

“Does she read? My sister, that is?”

“She has a few books on her own table—the Bible, Mrs Radcliffe’s latest novel, and *Christian Thoughts for Ladies*. Melissa has been given *The Road of Life: Improving Stories for Young Boys and Girls*, but she only reads it when her mother

orders her to. She has dogeared a few passages in the Radcliffe novel, though—her mother underestimates her abilities.” Ivy was sharp-eyed.

“If she were hiding something in the room, where would you look?” he asked then.

“Under the bed,” she said. “Or perhaps on top of the wardrobe. Your sister, begging your pardon, is not an original thinker. If I could do so without seeming suspicious, I’d just ask Miss Melissa. She has her nose in everything and likely found whatever it was by accident already.”

He nodded. “That’s all too true. Well, Ivy. You’ve more than proven yourself as an observer.”

“Does that mean you’ll give me a real assignment soon, sir?” she asked eagerly.

“As soon as I have one to give,” he promised.

“Not that we’re complaining,” Jem added. “Had worse jobs than this, by far.”

“How are you getting on?” Theo asked Jem. He knew the boy’s skills already. Jem was able to get along with fellow servants, gentry, and common folk alike. His ready smile disarmed most people, and his various skills—legal and not—made him a good man for odd jobs. He also had a way with horses. He mainly worked as a hostler and driver, though he’d been a footman in the past.

“Nothing to speak of, sir,” Jem said. “I exercised your horse Lightning this morning. That’s a fine beast. The stables are cleaned and all the equipment mended.”

“You’re dying to do some real work, aren’t you?” Theo said. “But you’ll have to be patient. Remember that this

experiment is still quite young.”

“We know, sir, and we are grateful,” Ivy spoke up. “It’s just that we want to help, sir.”

“I’m sure you’ll get the chance, Ivy.” Theo sent the servants onto more mundane tasks, and then realized he needed a dose of normalcy. So he did the most normal thing he could think of: he called on his fiancée.

Theo usually went round to visit Alyse once a week or so. She smiled when he walked into the lavishly decorated drawing room of the Templeton family’s home. *She is beautiful*, he thought. He’d thought so since she was about twelve years old and he was not that much older. She was petite and had long, dark curling hair she wore pinned up for the morning. Her sweet brown eyes crinkled at the corners when she laughed, which was often. She also possessed a dimple in each cheek, which he *knew* had got her out of trouble on many occasions during childhood.

“Theo,” she said warmly. “I didn’t think you’d be over today.”

“I should have sent word,” he said.

“Don’t be silly,” she said, laughing. “You’re always welcome here.”

“Would you mind getting out for a bit?” he asked. “It’s cold, but sunnier than it’s been for the past week.”

“That sounds splendid. As a matter of fact, it’s good you came. I have something I need to discuss with you today.”

Despite the chill, they walked through the park. As they were engaged, Theo was granted far more indulgence than a man normally would be toward the unmarried Alyse.

She was well bundled against the cold, and her cheeks were a healthy pink after a few moments. She talked amiably enough for a while, but Theo could tell her mind had wandered.

He asked, "What's troubling you? You're drifting along and barely aware of where we are."

"Well, it's just that Mama has been after me to set a date."

Something lurched a bit inside Theo's brain. "She knows I'm content to wait, correct? It's not any great concern."

"Believe me, she is profoundly unconcerned with our unconcern," Alyse said, with a wry look. "*Her* concern is paramount."

He said nothing, taken somewhat aback. He knew they had to set a date for their wedding at some point, but he'd got used to the idea of the marriage being in a misty future, at a time when he was not so involved with the Zodiac and when he'd have more attention for Alyse and his own duties as a husband and—presumably—father.

"I told her we would discuss it today," Alyse went on.

"And we are discussing it."

"Yet I'm not sure that will satisfy Mama, who has been pointing out any tiny baby in her line of sight."

He couldn't stop a laugh. "So, that's the issue."

"Yes, issue is the issue," Alyse quipped, though she quickly sobered. "Not that I don't want children. Of course I do."

"But..."

She looked around the quiet park. "I am quite spoiled,



you know. Since I have you, I have neither to impress a brigade of hopefuls nor worry about making a wrong step. I can simply *live*."

"I hope you don't think you'll be shackled to a wall once we're married. Much will be exactly the same as before." Why did that seem damning, rather than reassuring, as he'd meant it to be?

Alyse didn't seem to notice. "Oh, Theo, I know that. But you have your interests and I have mine, and we're not rushing to please everyone else, so why must we bend to the will of the mothers?"

"You'll not look at it that way when you're the mother."

She laughed, suddenly looking carefree again. "That's true. I *am* spoiled. Listen to me!"

"I am listening to you, Alyse. And I happen to agree... with you and with your mother."

"Meaning?"

"We ought to set a date, if for no other reason than to reassure the world we are dedicated to the marriage."

"Yes, you're right. You're always right, aren't you?"

"Perhaps in spring?" he suggested, thinking it sounded far off.

"Spring," she mused. "Maybe. At the end of the Season...that way the wedding will be an event Mama can plan to death. All the other events will be done, so she'll know which ones to top."

"Late May," he said. "Lots of flowers around then. Much better than a dreary winter day."

"Indeed." Alyse nodded, looking decisive at last. "Thank you, Theo. It always helps to talk to you."

“I hope so. It’s what I’m here for, after all.”

“Mama will be quite happy to hear it.”

“Are you?” he asked.

Alyse looked at him, her head tipped to the side. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” he said, suddenly doubting himself. “Nothing. Don’t mind me. I just wasn’t expecting to set the date today.”

“I sympathize. But we have to do it sooner or later, don’t we?”

“Yes.” Theo smiled, hoping to reassure both her and himself it was a happy occasion. He loved Alyse. He always had. So why wasn’t he eager to marry her?

## *Chapter 6*



FOR THE NEXT TWO DAYS, Sarah couldn't sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the man again, with his cruel smile and his hand with the missing fingers. She had literally no idea what to do about his threat. What could he have meant by his implication that she could somehow get hold of Charlie's secret papers? And indeed, how did the man even know Charlie was a spy? She turned over possibilities in her mind, and came to no conclusions because there was no one but herself to talk to.

She didn't go to the Athenaeum, too afraid to encounter the man again. Instead, she stayed at home, sitting near her mother and fretting silently. She looked composed from the outside. She was actually quite good at hiding her own thoughts, which was a skill she learned when defending her intelligence against various men and women who thought her interests frivolous. But all the same, she worried.

Thus, by the time Naomi dressed her for the dinner at the Wolvertons on Sunday evening, Sarah was a wreck. She wore a gown of dark grey wool, and she insisted on restrained jewelry and hairstyle. Naomi grouched that her skills as a lady's maid were being squandered. When given free rein, she was capable of turning any woman into a stunning work of art. She'd learned her craft from her mother, who brought her from the West Indies to London when their old employer died.

"Your mother at home so often, and you darting back and forth from here to that place where there isn't a gentleman under the age of fifty," Naomi said, her smooth brown hands working efficiently to brush Sarah's hair to gleaming. "What do you need me for? I may as well give my notice."

"We'd never survive without you," Sarah said. She watched the maid's face in the mirror, and caught the teasing light in her wide set, brown eyes. "Would you like to curl my hair?"

"I would, but you'll be late for the dinner then," Naomi said, with regret. "I'll put it in a twist tonight. And may I use the coral pin? You must be sick to death of jet."

Sarah raised her eyebrow at Naomi's choice of words, but merely said, "The coral won't match my outfit."

"Nothing matches charcoal grey. I remember dressing you in colors. Like a garden. And now you insist on winter all the time."

Sarah sighed. She missed the colors, but the grey clothes made her nearly invisible, and she did not like the idea of attracting attention, particularly after the incident

the other night. "Someday, Naomi. I need time."

The maid paused in her efforts and gave Sarah's shoulders a friendly squeeze. "Yes, miss."

After a moment, Naomi asked, "Who will be there tonight?"

"Oh, just the family, and a few friends," Sarah answered. "It's quite a small dinner." She wouldn't have gone otherwise. Since the Wolvertons were practically family, she didn't need to have a parent or chaperone along. The truth was that Sarah found herself in an odd space with regards to how people saw her. She was no longer a young miss under anyone's watchful eye. And since she'd been engaged to Charlie for so long, she was seen almost as a widow, despite not ever being married. She was so quiet that most people didn't even notice her, and no one was ever concerned about her behavior. Thus, Sarah slipped through the usual social requirements without anyone making a fuss.

When she arrived at the Wolvertons, Georgia was there to greet her. "Come along, and I shall make sure you are acquainted with everyone. There may be a few you don't know."

Inside the parlor, Sarah surveyed the faces. She had seen the family several times since the funeral, but this was the first proper dinner she had attended. Mr and Mrs Wolverton greeted her kindly. Bryony, healthier and happier now, chattered about her upcoming Season. Sarah also knew Mr Faber, who was courting Georgia.

Then she saw someone else, a gentleman who had remained in the background while she was speaking to the

others. Sarah felt a slight shock when she noticed him. At first she thought it was simply because she didn't see him right away. He really was that unobtrusive.

Yet how could he be unobtrusive? True, he was not so tall, only a few inches above her height. But he had narrow, almost foxlike features, and interesting green eyes that appeared to miss nothing. Reddish brown hair only added to the notion of him as a fox. The dark green jacket contrasted with his natural coloring, and the cut of his clothes was superb, showing off a lean, athletic figure. She would wager her dowry he was a rider.

He was also unnervingly familiar. She felt as if she knew him.

"You met Lord Markham before, of course," Georgia said.

Lord Markham! The same man she had wanted to quiz Georgia about. "At the funeral," Sarah said. How could she have forgotten what he looked like?

Markham looked at her, his expression unreadable. "Yes, though I would not be surprised if Miss Brecknell didn't remember me, under the circumstances. I hope you are well, or at least on the way to well," he said in a quiet voice. "I wish I had something more diverting to say, but I've never been known for my charm."

"Thank you, my lord," was all she managed in response. She hoped she did not seem horribly rude.

Georgia noticed her difficulty and quickly moved on to the final guest. "And may I present you to Lord Carlin. He has been a delightful friend to us all in the past months. My lord, this is Miss Sarah Brecknell. You may know her

mother's family, because they have land in Kent."

Carlin bowed. He was an older gentleman, with silver hair and a quick smile. "Kent, you say. Whereabouts?"

"She grew up on an estate called Wheystoke."

"Wheystoke? I know of it. Not very far from my own seat. Do you go there at all?"

"Nearly every summer," Sarah said.

"I should like to hear your impressions of it at some point."

"You'll find she is a font of information," Georgia put in eagerly. "Miss Brecknell is a scholar all on her own, and can tell you the history of nearly anything!"

"That is an exaggeration," Sarah said. "But I do like to read."

"You like to read in five languages!" Georgia laughed. "Don't let her be modest, gentlemen. She is all brain!"

"Not all brain, for there is beauty too," Lord Carlin said. "May I take you in to dinner, Miss Brecknell?"

"Thank you, my lord." Sarah looked down, feeling very shy. She knew Carlin was just being kind.

Markham then offered to escort Miss Bryony in, and they trailed Sarah and Lord Carlin into the dining room.

Sarah had sharp ears, so she heard when Bryony whispered to him, "Georgia is a matchmaker. And not a subtle one."

Markham responded in an even lower tone. "Not that it's my business, but isn't he too old for her?"

"That's what I said," Bryony agreed. "But Georgia was certain they'd get on. But honestly, can you picture a man *less* like Charlie?"

She lost the conversation in the bustle of being seated. So that's what Georgia was about when she urged Sarah to come to dinner. Sarah wasn't quite sure how she felt about the effort.

True, Lord Carlin was amusing as a companion. He told stories Sarah couldn't help but smile at. She did her best to respond to Carlin, and to be as polite as possible. But even something as simple as a chat took so much effort. She couldn't wait to get away.

Was Bryony right? Sarah wondered. Granted, Carlin was charming and certainly not decrepit, but he might have twenty-five years on her. Or thirty.

Sarah's gaze flickered to Lord Markham across the table. He must be the same age as Charlie, if they were old school friends. He kept Bryony giggling, his manner just like an older brother, half teasing and half protective.

Further down the table, Georgia was discussing some of the recent events of the *ton*. Mindful of her age, Bryony kept relatively quiet, allowing her older sister to control the conversation. But the naturally bubbly young lady could be easily encouraged to talk, especially when Markham asked about the upcoming ball, which would be her official coming out.

"Just a few weeks left, Miss Bryony," he noted. "Are you prepared?"

She nodded. "My gown for Almack's is ready. The gown I'll wear for my ball is nearly done too. I hope it will look all right. My friend Susanna said she got three proposals the night of her coming out. What if no one proposes to me at all?"



Georgia rolled her eyes. “She’s been insufferable on this point, my lord. Will you please tell her she has nothing to fear?”

“You have nothing to fear, Miss Bryony,” Markham repeated dutifully. “And, if I may add, any gentleman who proposes to you on a single evening’s acquaintance is unlikely to be a good match.”

“*Thank* you,” Georgia stage whispered.

“But it would be so romantic!” Bryony sighed. “Just like Cinderella.”

“Who had to run away, and lost her shoe in the process,” Carlin pointed out with a laugh. “And any marriage would certainly have to be approved of by your father first.”

“Too right,” Mr Wolverton said, jabbing a finger on the table to emphasize his point. “No daughter of mine will make a poor match.”

Theo nodded. “By spring, you’ll be swimming in proposals.”

“But how do I know which is the right one?” Bryony asked. She turned to Sarah. “When Charlie asked you, you knew right away he was the only one for you, didn’t you?”

“Bryony!” Georgia hissed.

Sarah’s eyes rounded at the question, and for a second, she wanted to bolt out of the room. The table was momentarily silent.

“Oh!” Bryony said, realizing her gaffe. “I didn’t mean to...I didn’t think...”

After a moment, Sarah recovered. “It’s all right. When Charlie proposed, I thought myself the luckiest person in

the world. That is the simple truth.”

Mrs Wolverton said, in a slightly too loud voice, “Of course. We all knew our son had good taste. A girl with a good head on her shoulders! Smart enough to keep up with him, the dear boy.”

“And Charlie must have loved that,” Markham said.

Georgia nodded. “True enough. When they talked together, it was like another language! And no one could join in. It was just them.”

Just them. Sarah looked down, hoping she wouldn’t do something embarrassing, like cry.

Hoping to rescue the evening, Georgia cast about for another topic of conversation. “My lord,” she asked Markham, “are you traveling again?”

“Not until March,” he said. “A delegation to Vienna, though I’ll admit I don’t think anything will come of it. Still, it’s a break from my usual round of work.”

“What sort of work is that?” Carlin asked.

“Not trade, of course. Lord Markham lends his services to the government,” Georgia explained. “Much like Charlie did, you know. Diplomatic missions to various places.”

Sarah looked up again. “Is that so?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, his eyes flickering towards her, “though I should stress it’s not glamorous work. I assist the undersecretary in preparing materials and making sure His Majesty’s government doesn’t stumble into some horrible political morass at the meetings.”

“So you are familiar with the issues causing so much strife on the Continent at the moment?” Carlin guessed.

“As much as any other man,” he hedged. “Well, a little more, perhaps.”

The way he said it caught Sarah’s attention. She remembered what he had said at the funeral, his questions about whether she knew of Charlie’s work. Sarah didn’t look at him again, but she made a decision in that moment. She *would* ask him for help.

But how? On such slight acquaintance, Sarah could hardly arrange to meet him anywhere. And she couldn’t ask him to call on her, where they would be under the watchful eye of a parent the whole time.

So how was she to speak to him alone?

## Chapter 7



THEO WAS GLAD HE CAME to dinner. He always liked the Wolvertons, but he was especially glad he got to meet Sarah again. The lady had been hovering in the corners of his mind for months. Maybe seeing her as an ordinary person—not some tragic figure—would get her out of his head.

True, she wasn't exactly ordinary, Theo thought. She was a little taller than most women, and her head was crowned with thick blond hair likely to reach her waist if it were not bound up so tightly. Theo also noted how her simply cut gown displayed a figure that hinted at ripeness. He wouldn't want her any slimmer. Her body would probably be luscious to touch. At that thought, he deliberately made himself think of something else. He should not be considering Sarah Brecknell in such a light.

After dinner, the guests idled some more time in the parlor. But as the hour grew later, they left. Lord Carlin was first, content to leave after securing Miss Brecknell's

permission to call upon her at home. Theo watched the exchange without seeming to. Her response was polite rather than effusive, but Carlin seemed quite pleased. Georgia was smug, while Bryony shot Theo a look of disgust.

Miss Brecknell left not terribly long after Carlin. She thanked the Wolvertons for inviting her, and gave a modest little curtsy—not much more than a nod, in fact—to Theo.

“My lord,” she murmured. She did not look at him directly, and he had the odd impression she was trying to fade away.

“Miss Brecknell, I hope to see you again sometime,” he responded.

“It’s possible,” she said, with a ghost of a smile. Then she told the group good evening, and drifted out of the room.

“Well,” said Georgia, still taken with the initial success of her matchmaking. “I think that went perfectly!”

Bryony shook her head. “You can’t seriously contend she’ll fall in love with Carlin. He’s the same age as her father!”

“Oh, you exaggerate. Lord Carlin is a dear, and he ought to marry again.”

“Yes, but not to Miss Brecknell! My lord,” she appealed to Theo, “what is your opinion?”

Theo wanted no part of the debate. “It’s not my place to say.”

“Oh, I wished for better from you.” Bryony pursed her lips in profound disappointment.

“Theo is well aware the world requires practicality,” said Georgia. “Both Miss Brecknell and Lord Carlin ought to marry. She will gain a title, and he’ll get her dowry. And they’ll both have security and friendship. What’s wrong with that?”

“Security and friendship!” Bryony wailed. “How can we be sisters?” She stood up. “Good night, my lord!” She flounced out.

Theo bit back a smile. It must be pleasant to be as sheltered and idealistic as young Bryony. “That is my cue, I fear,” he said. “I should not wear out my welcome.”

“You could not do that, Theo,” Georgia said. “You are the next best thing to a brother, you know.”

“Well, I have a lot of practice,” he allowed. And indeed, with four sisters and a younger brother, that was true.

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Georgia. “Remember a few months ago, you asked whether Charlie left any journals. Well, when I was puttering around this week, I found a few notebooks tucked away with a box of oil paints and brushes in a corner of his room, which I thought was a strange place to keep them. But I put them aside for you. Please take them if you like.”

Theo’s heart quickened. “Thank you. I’ll be sure to return them.”

She waved it away. “No need. I glanced at a few, and it seemed to be mostly nonsense. Charlie was always trying new little hobbies, and I suppose that’s what these were. But I thought them gibberish.”

“Yes,” he said, trying to sound calm. What Georgia considered gibberish might very well be a code. “Charlie

always had a new hobby, didn't he?"

"I'll say. Last spring and summer it was art collection. I never dreamed Charlie would care about art."

Theo frowned. In all the years he knew him, Charlie never showed the slightest appreciation for art. "He was collecting art? For pleasure?"

"Or investment," Georgia said. "I hope so, because none of the pieces were remotely interesting. And the way he hung it all up...just a mishmash. No order at all."

"Hung up where?"

"Oh, at Woodforde, his lodge. I went there once in September to check on it after Charlie passed away. I've never seen such poor taste as on those walls. One doesn't speak ill of the dead, but he was lucky he couldn't hear me laugh."

Georgia walked Theo to the door, where she offered him a small box. "All the journals are in there. I don't expect you'll get much out of them. What were you hoping to find?"

"Nothing in particular," Theo fibbed. "I just wanted to know what he was doing in his last days."

"You're more sentimental than you pretend, my lord," Georgia said, squeezing his arm. "But don't worry. I'll never tell."

"I'm at your mercy, Miss Wolverton." Theo bid her goodnight. He then saw Jem at the front door, probably just come from the kitchen where he would have stayed with the other servants, keeping warm during the long wait.

"Ready to go, sir?" he asked. "I brought the carriage up

a few minutes ago.”

Theo followed Jem out into the cold night, walking through the light dusting of snow which had fallen during dinner.

Jem held the door, then leaped up into the driver's seat and already had the reins shaken out by the time Theo settled himself. So it happened Jem was already urging the horses forward when Theo first looked across to the other seat. He barely suppressed a curse.

Sarah Brecknell was sitting opposite him, her pale face seeming to float in the air, surrounded by her dark hood and the greater darkness of the carriage.

“Good evening,” she said. “Again.”



## Chapter 8



SARAH SAW THE SURPRISE ON his face.

“What the hell are you doing?” he hissed. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I’m aware of that, my lord. But I need to talk to you, and I wished for some degree of anonymity.” She knew as well as he did the scandal she was inviting by riding with him, particularly at this hour.

His eyes narrowed as he surveyed her. “How did you even get in here?”

“Your family crest is painted on the side,” she explained. “So I knew it was the correct vehicle. The footman ordered a carriage for me, but I dismissed the driver when the footman’s back was turned. I told him I had to go back inside. Then I snuck into yours when I passed by the whole clutch of carriages. I was a little worried your driver would check inside, though in the dark he might have missed me even so.”

“What would you have done if I lingered over another

drink?” Markham asked.

“My cloak is really rather warm,” she said. “I would have waited.”

Markham sat back. He was either still surprised, or he just didn’t know how to react to her presence. Finally, he said, “Either you misread something I said this evening, or I have mistakenly given you the wrong impression about...”

“My lord,” she cut in. “Despite my unconscionable behavior, I am not here to throw myself at you. At least, not for the reason you seem to think.”

“No?” He raised an eyebrow, looking rather devilish.

“No,” she said, her voice rising. “And besides, I’m not the sort.... Never mind. Let me just begin with this. I think it will explain...” She looked nervously at him, then took a deep breath, and spoke a single word: “Pisces.”

Instantly, Sarah wondered if she had made the mistake of a lifetime. As soon as she said that fatal word, Lord Markham’s whole attitude shifted into something very cold. He did not look benevolent at all.

He knocked twice on the ceiling of the coach.

“Sir?” a muffled voice called.

“Jem, if we get too close to home before I knock again, keep driving in circles,” he said.

“Yes, sir!”

Sarah asked, “Won’t he wonder at that?”

“My driver’s curiosity is the least of your worries, Miss Brecknell.”

The way he looked at her made Sarah question the wisdom of her move. It was beyond the pale, by any

standard. She was alone with a stranger, she had no legitimate reason to be with him, and she had no idea how he might treat her.

“Tell me what made you say that word,” he ordered.

“It...belonged to Charlie. You know what it means, don’t you?”

“I do.”

His confirmation was not reassuring. But Sarah had to know she was on the right track. “You know because you’re part of it too. I didn’t realize it when we first talked, but Charlie once hinted you were like him. Aren’t you?”

“If I was, do you think I’d admit to it?”

“It’s not as if it’s shameful,” Sarah said heatedly. “You should be proud to be part of something so important. Charlie was! He said he was protecting the whole natio—”

Seeing his expression, Sarah choked off the last of the word.

Markham stared at her, assessing. Sarah waited in agony as the silence stretched out. He had to say *something*.

Finally, he did. “It’s not shameful. But it *is* secret.”

He offered nothing more. She remembered him as being kind, when he spoke to her at the wake. And his eyes were so familiar. But perhaps she had been too shocked to properly assess the man at the time. His features were sharpened by the odd light in the carriage, and his eyes, which had been green, now looked black. But she couldn’t look away.

Why had she revealed Charlie’s secret to him?

Because she needed his help.

Before she lost her nerve completely, Sarah hurried on,

“Please. Charlie once told me when he was in trouble, he turned to you. That you were the man for a crisis.” Her voice broke then. She swallowed hard and forced herself to finish her prepared speech. “I realize you have no reason to trust me. Or listen to me. I must appear half-mad. But I am in a crisis now, my lord. And I have no one else to turn to.”

“You’d best explain your crisis,” he said. The tone was calm, not encouraging, but at least not disdainful.

Sarah told him the story of two nights ago, right down to the mysterious man’s implied punishment should she fail to deliver. She watched Markham’s eyes narrow as she went on, until he looked less like a man and more like a predator. Sarah instinctively leaned against the back of the seat, as if she could flee that way. She finished her story with another plea for assistance.

“You are right to characterize your problem as a crisis,” he said quietly. He did not offer to help her, though, and Sarah quailed. She *had* made a mistake.

Perhaps he was considering whether to dump her on the side of the road and be done with her. She would not have been at all surprised if he had. She did not know what went on behind his scrutinizing eyes, but she felt the chance slipping away, and tried to plead one last time.

“I know I have no claim on you, but I have no idea what to—”

“I’ll help you,” he said.

Sarah sighed in relief.

He went on, “If someone approached you so recently, there is clearly some current danger concerning those

papers Charlie possessed, or else no one would care. A danger to the country as a whole. That's my main concern."

Sarah nodded. "What will we do?"

"I need some information from you. Tell me everything Charlie told you about his work."

"You mean, as...as Pisces?" Sarah looked at Lord Markham, and realized how deadly serious he was.

"Precisely." There was anger in his voice. It wasn't directed at her, but she felt it all the same.

"Charlie should not have told me anything," she said, understanding his fury.

"But he did," Markham noted coldly.

"Yes. I think he may have wanted to impress me. To convince me he led an exciting life. Does that make sense?"

Theo raised an eyebrow. "I can see why he might do that. Go on. What did he tell you? And don't leave anything out."

"Well," she began. "He didn't tell me anything about what he did until well after we were engaged. He was always off on some matter, and I made a comment that he must not find me very interesting. And then he told me his business was vital to the Crown. He told me all about his latest assignment to Paris—he was meeting with some contact to learn about the Emperor's troop movements at the time. That would have been over a year ago. It *was* very exciting to hear, but even then I felt it was wrong for him to tell me. Rather indiscreet."

"To say the least. You realize he told you his code

name.”

“Yes,” said Sarah. “But I suppose I pressed him.”

“If an eighteen year old girl could press him, he had no business in...” Markham suddenly stopped.

“No business being in the Zodiac?” Sarah finished.

Markham looked supremely annoyed. “So he mentioned that name, too.”

“No!” she said quickly. “That is, not exactly.”

“How did he not *exactly* mention it?”

“Well, I guessed. From the name of Pisces, you see. I asked if there were only twelve, or if they had to exploit other myths. And Charlie said no, it was the Zodiac for a reason...” She broke off, watching his expression.

“You *guessed*.” His tone was skeptical. No, incredulous.

“It’s not as if it were a particularly challenging puzzle,” she said, suddenly defensive. “A random collection of names would have been better.”

“Charlie keeping his mouth shut would have been better,” he growled.

“I’m sorry,” Sarah said, worried she’d goaded him.

He suddenly put his head back, closing his eyes. “No. I don’t mean to snap at you. You aren’t to blame for his—” A sudden thought occurred to him, and he looked at her sharply again. “You didn’t tell anyone else about the code names, did you?”

Sarah frowned at him, managing to convey censure despite her turmoil. “No! Do you imagine for a second I would have done *anything* with that information?”

“I don’t know you, Miss Brecknell,” he countered coolly.

"No, you don't," she snapped back. "You don't know a thing about me."

"I know you're unusually brave," he said quietly.

She blushed, thinking he was referring to her scandal-courting ride in his carriage. "I don't feel brave, my lord. I have no choice but to beg you to help me."

"And I will." His voice, at last, offered some support. "I'm not going to leave you to twist in the wind."

She winced at the reference to hanging, but assumed he'd spoken like that to shock her into paying attention. She began again. "I don't know why the man thought *I* knew anything, but he was convinced I was the key. He was sure I'd be able to find this hiding place. It must be a mistake. But I don't think I can explain that to *him*."

"Unlikely," Markham said. "But it's also unlikely he would risk accosting you unless he was certain of his information."

"Speaking of that, I don't know why he would have waited so long to contact me. Doesn't it seem odd?"

His eyes brightened. "You're right. And the specific deadline of the 31st is interesting. Why do you need weeks? If you had the documents, why wouldn't he simply force you to get them immediately?"

"But I *don't* have the documents," she insisted. "You must believe me."

He looked at her, his expression skeptical, and then a little sympathetic. "Is it possible Charlie gave them to you without your knowing it?"

"How would I not notice that?" she asked tartly. "Hello, dear, here's a few letters I'm keeping safe for the

Crown. Tuck them away for me, but don't peek, Pandora!"

Markham actually smiled at her words. "I didn't mean it quite like that. He could have hidden something at your home while he called on you. Perhaps slipped something onto a book shelf? Or left something behind?"

"That's possible," Sarah said. "Though it's more likely he hid something in my office at the Athenaeum."

"What's that?"

She quickly explained what the Athenaeum was and why she was associated with it. "I could look through my shelves there."

"May I call on you tomorrow?" he asked. "At the Athenaeum, I mean? I'd like to see your office myself. The whole place, actually."

Sarah nodded slowly. "Say you're there to see my father, if anyone should ask. We'll have to tell him we met before, and somehow convince him he's forgotten you—which shouldn't be too difficult. He doesn't pay attention to most events after 1500."

He nodded. "Don't worry. I'm fairly good at making stories up. I will call on you there around two. And now you'd better return home yourself."

She couldn't agree more. Though he hadn't done anything untoward, the fact that she was alone with him at midnight was frankly terrifying. She told him where she lived, and he called the street direction up to his driver.

As the carriage wound its way through London's twisting streets toward her home, she looked at the man across from her. "I have a question for you. Will you give me an honest answer, seeing as we're as alone as we're ever



likely to be?"

"That sounds ominous."

"Do you know how Charlie died?"

"He died in an accident," said Markham, his expression suddenly closed. "You heard the story."

"Do me the courtesy of not taking me for an utter child." Sarah refused to look away from him, even though she dearly wanted to. His gaze was disconcerting. "While I only know a little about Charlie's secret life, his death could not possibly have been an accident. Highwaymen! On that road? I assume your little club didn't have much time, or you wouldn't have created such a flimsy story."

Markham wouldn't give an inch. "I can't tell you the details of his death."

"Can't or won't?"

"Won't."

She sat back. "Well, at least you're honest."

"You're generous with your terms," he said. "I refuse to tell you a thing, and I'm honest for it?"

"You didn't lie," Sarah said. "I don't think I could take another lie. Since that man appeared, I feel like I've been dropped into some sort of mirror world. Everything looks the same, and yet feels completely different. I look at books and wonder if the words are the same inside them. I look at people and wonder who they really are. I look at myself and wonder how I could not have known that something was happening so close to me. It's one thing to learn the one you love is a spy. It's quite another to be drawn into his life...especially after he's dead."

The carriage came to a halt. So did Sarah's confession.

She looked outside where the carriage had stopped on the street, a few doors away from her own. The incurious driver did understand discretion.

“Thank you for taking me home.”

His lip quirked. “No inconvenience at all. Should I see you to the front door?”

“No,” she said. “I appreciate the chivalry, but I had best go in by myself.” She didn’t want anyone to see her alighting from a carriage with only a strange man in it. But on the street at night, she supposed, it would be anonymous enough. She stepped out.

“The carriage will wait until I see you go into your home. Good night, Miss Brecknell,” he said, before he shut the door again. Suddenly, he smiled at her. “And for what it’s worth, I do think you’re brave.”

Sarah smiled back, feeling much better than she ought to, considering the situation.

She turned to walk back to her house. The light snowfall of the evening left everything dusted white, and the world was quiet as she moved. Her nerves were practically singing after the encounter with Lord Markham. Hiding in his carriage was one of the most daring things she’d ever done. Asking for his help took even more strength.

But he did say yes. Sarah sighed, her breath clouding the night air. She thought she might actually sleep that night, unlike the previous two evenings, when she’d lain awake until dawn, praying things were different.

Now things *were* different. She had an ally. Not a friend, but an ally. Tomorrow she would see him again. And

they'd find the secret Charlie left behind.

## Chapter 9



THEO WOKE UP MONDAY MORNING feeling as if he hadn't slept a minute. After he dropped Miss Brecknell off the previous night, he returned home as soon as possible. The journals Georgia gave him were suddenly even more exciting. If he could match something found in those notebooks with what Sarah told him, he might be able to put the whole business to rest.

He couldn't believe it. Months of waiting for a lead, and it turned out Sarah might be exactly the person he'd been hoping to meet. Such a strange moment, finding her there in his carriage. She was not at all like the image of her he'd created in his head based on their brief meeting at the funeral. The real Sarah Brecknell was more composed, more practical. And obviously intelligent.

He wouldn't have been surprised if the woman had been in hysterics after the encounter she described to him. Yet Sarah showed very little fear. She laid out the problem plainly, merely wondering about the oddity of the request

surfacing after so many months of silence.

Which was an excellent question to ask. Why *did* the stranger confront her after so long? Had something happened to bring Sarah to the man's attention? And who the hell was he? Did he work for Arceneau? Was he another opportunist like Charlie, but for another side?

Theo groaned at all the possibilities. He had so much work to do. He had to reexamine all the puzzle pieces he'd already gathered. Unfortunately, once he got home and had the privacy to examine Charlie's notebooks, he discovered they were virtually unreadable. He spent three hours poring over them, burning several candles more than usual. He could read a few lines written in plain English. But the majority of the notebooks appeared to be in some sort of code. Several codes, perhaps, to judge by the many different pages of letters, columns of numbers, and even sketches. He wasn't skilled enough to break a single one. Nothing made sense. But Theo refused to believe it was useless. Charlie never dabbled. If he did something, he always had a reason for it.

After he gave up on the notebooks for the night, Theo lay in bed, eyes wide open as he turned over all the new information in his mind. Sarah kept reappearing, her grey eyes asking questions he had no answers to.

One other thing he realized from speaking to Sarah was that although she knew about Charlie's work and about the existence of the Zodiac—a fact that would give Julian a seizure when he learned of it—she did *not* know Charlie had turned traitor. And thank God. She was obviously so proud of him, and in love with his memory. Learning such

a thing would only hurt her, which Theo didn't want to do.

And of course, if she did know about Charlie's perfidy, she would be far less inclined to help him recover the papers. She wouldn't want to summon any sort of proof of her beloved's fall from grace. No, Theo had to keep the truth from her if he expected her to cooperate.

Eventually, he slept a little, and when he woke, it was full daylight.

Downstairs, he encountered his sister Katherine in the sunny parlor. She was sewing, and her youngest child Estelle was crawling around at her feet.

Theo came in, happy to be distracted for a moment. "Good morning," he said. "How's my favorite niece?"

Estelle turned at the sound of his voice and held her arms out imperiously. "Up!"

"Yes, my lady," he said, bending to scoop her up in his arms. Estelle squealed in delight as he swung her around.

Theo gave her a kiss, then sat down opposite Katherine. Estelle laughed as she bounced happily on his knee.

"See what I told you the other day?" Theo told Katherine. "She's going to be a rider. I can tell."

His sister smiled indulgently at both of them. "You promise to teach her?"

"Naturally. Who else would you trust to do it? Estelle," he said. "Listen carefully. It will be my duty to teach you to ride and jump fences and chase carriages and race and perform all manner of stunts that will have your mother cursing my name."

Katherine shook her head. "Not if I have anything to

say about it!”

He bent his head and mock-whispered, “As soon as she turns her back, little star, we’ll be off.”

“You look ten years younger when you smile, Teddy,” Katherine said.

He cringed at the old family pet name. “Don’t call me that. What do you mean?”

“You’ve looked so dragged down these past few months.”

“I have not.”

“Of course you have.” She looked at her baby and then back to him. “When you have to seek out a toddler for solace, I know something’s wrong.”

“Nonsense.”

“Mama was by to visit yesterday. She said you finally set a date with Alyse.”

“The end of May,” he confirmed. “There’s no reason to put it off longer.”

“No, indeed.” Katherine shot him a sharp look, but then held up her work. She appeared to be embroidering the hem of a baby’s outfit. “What do you think?”

“You’re asking me?” he said, amused. “I suppose it’s pretty.”

“A word of advice, dear brother. When Alyse asks you a similar question, you need to be much more effusive.”

“Is that so? Let me try again. How *darling*,” Theo said, putting false enthusiasm into his voice. “How do you manage to stitch all that and still be a perfect wife and mother?”

Katherine muttered, looking skyward, “I wonder if

Alyse knows what she's getting."

"Alyse and I understand each other very well. And in any case, we have over a year before I have any chance to be interrogated over the stitching on a baby's outfit."

"Theo," Katherine said, more gently. "You're never so short tempered. I know something's wrong. Can't you tell me?"

No, no he could not. Katherine was his sister and he loved her dearly. But the truth wasn't something he was entitled to share. "If I've been distant, I apologize."

"I don't want your apology. I want you to be happy."

"Happy!" Estelle echoed.

He smiled at her, then said to Katherine, "Don't worry about me. I've had a few concerns over the past months. But they are nearly concluded. And when I marry Alyse, I'm sure all will be well."

Katherine didn't look as if she believed him, but let the matter drop.

Later, when Theo walked to the front hall dressed to go out, Jem was waiting patiently.

"Where to, sir?" he asked as they stepped outside.

Theo said, "We're going to the corner at Adam and Manchester Streets."

"Oh, the Athenaeum." Jem nodded confidently.

"How did you know that?" Theo, asked, exasperated. Did everyone know everything now?

"Could find that place in the middle of a fog, sir. Didn't I drive milady there nearly every month?" he said, referring to his former employer.

"So you know what the place is like?"



Jem shrugged diffidently. "Only the outside and the mews nearby. I'm not exactly the typical lecture-goer, sir."

Theo laughed as he climbed into the cab. Jem had a gift for understatement.

He arrived a few minutes before two, just as he said he would. Not surprisingly, the building was a model of classical architecture, though in wood and brick rather than marble. It sported columns all along the front façade, and the windows glowed from within, for even the afternoon did not bring much light in winter.

Theo found little difficulty in gaining entrance. The name of Mr Stephen Brecknell was well known to the people there. He did not seek out the gentleman, however. Following Sarah's instructions, he instead found his way to the end of a long hall. He knocked at the last door on the left.

Sarah was waiting. She stood up when he entered, looking as if she were nervous.

"Thank you for stopping by, Lord Markham," she said formally. "We are lucky," she added in a quieter voice. "Papa is quite busy preparing for an upcoming lecture. So you shouldn't have to explain yourself at all."

Theo nodded, looking around the small room. "This belongs to you?"

"I have the exclusive use of it. They think it more seemly than if I were out among the men."

He glanced at her. "Are they worried you'll show them up? What do you study?"

"Oh, I just dabble. Classics. History. Languages. Whatever catches my fancy."

“Have you looked through your books yet?”

Sarah nodded and pointed to a stack of books on the desk. “These were all gifts from Charlie. I had to start somewhere.”

“He gave you books?”

“They last longer than flowers,” Sarah said defensively. “And I enjoy them considerably more.”

Theo looked through the stack. Titles in German, Latin, and Greek. Many were well-thumbed. Sarah was probably not a dabbler, but a very serious scholar. Theo wondered if she downplayed her dedication because some men were affronted—or intimidated—by it.

“I’m twenty-one,” Sarah said suddenly, as he was still examining the titles.

He looked up at her, puzzled at the announcement. “What?”

“Last night, you said if an eighteen year old girl could press Charlie...” She paused. “In fact, I am twenty-one. Nearly twenty-two. We were engaged for years, ever since he proposed to me at the end of my first Season.”

Theo was amused at her precision. “I stand corrected.”

“It’s important to tell the truth,” she said.

Theo’s sense of amusement fled. “Indeed.” The truth was the one thing he couldn’t tell her.

They both looked through the books more carefully, but there was nothing hidden inside.

Theo did notice a rather odd inscription on the flyleaf of one book: a series of three numbers, in columns all down the page. “What are these?” he asked, pointing. It looked similar to a few pages in Charlie’s notebooks.

Sarah looked at the inscription. "They refer to Bible verses. That's all."

"Chapter and verse only explains the first two numbers."

"The third is the word of interest in the verse," she said shortly. She pulled the book from his hands. "It doesn't have anything to do with anything he left behind. He gave this to me shortly after we became engaged."

Theo saw how nervous she was, and took the book back. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. Please forget about it." She moved as if to take it again, but she stopped when Theo made it clear she'd actually have to touch his hands to do it. A lady like Sarah would never be so bold.

"Why not tell me the significance, or do I need to look up all the words myself?"

Sarah looked down, then muttered, "She is my one love, until the end of time."

"What?"

"That's what it says," she said, her eyes glued to the floor.

He could see a blush spreading over her face. "This is a coded message?"

"Yes. It was just a game we played."

"Charlie taught you codes," Theo said.

"No," she corrected. She looked up at him, gauging his reaction. "I taught *him* codes."

## Chapter 10



SARAH WATCHED THEO CAREFULLY, AND saw his eyes widen when he heard her words.

“So you know about codes?” he asked.

She nodded. “It’s always been an interest of mine, since I found references to them in my Greek and Latin histories. There’s a number of people interested in cryptography around town. It’s not so unusual.”

“I know a few myself,” he said. “I just didn’t think Charlie was one of them. Beyond a certain practical interest, that is.”

“Oh, he was obsessed with it for a few years. That’s actually how we first met. We kept trying to borrow the same books on the subject.”

Theo nodded slowly. Sarah had encountered men who refused to believe she could be genuinely interested in such things. But Theo accepted it without argument. In fact, he suddenly looked hopeful.

“If you communicated with Charlie that way,” he said, “perhaps we can discover where this supposed cache is. I just received some of Charlie’s notebooks, but I haven’t been able to read them at all. If you can read his code, maybe you can learn where it is. Perhaps that’s why your mysterious friend thought you could do this.”

“Don’t say friend. He was horrible.” Nevertheless, Sarah felt a little jump in her heart. “But I can certainly look at Charlie’s notebooks. Even if he invented a new code, I’d wager I could decipher it.”

He smiled at her. “A bet I wouldn’t take, Miss Brecknell. Something tells me you’re quite good at codes.”

“Oh, I like puzzles. Where are the notebooks? When could you get them to me?”

He straightened up. “While I think you are above reproach, I can’t let those notebooks out of my sight until I know if they’re valuable or not. We are going to have to solve them together.”

“But how? It will take time, and we can’t be seen together.”

“But we can both enter this building,” he said. “Is there any place here we could meet? Someplace we won’t be interrupted.”

“Oh! Well, perhaps I can find a spot that will be out of the way. But even so, I’m not sure it would be appropriate.”

He frowned at her. “Believe me, Miss Brecknell, I would much prefer to do everything myself. But it appears I may need you, and you did ask for my assistance. Now, do you still want it?”

“Yes.”

“Then you must accept it on my terms. We work together, and the notebooks don’t leave my possession. As that man proved, even these walls aren’t a safeguard.”

Just then, a sound caught Sarah’s attention. Familiar footsteps in the corridor. “Oh, bother,” she said. “I think my father is coming to collect me. Are you any good at lying?”

“Would you believe me if I told you?”

Sarah smiled at his unexpected levity. “Say you were offering me condolences, and I’ll say you were just leave —”

“Darling? Are you still working?” Sarah’s father said as he shuffled in through the door.

Sarah said, flustered, “My lord, may I introduce my father, Stephen Brecknell. Papa, this is Theodore Drayton, Lord Markham.”

“Good afternoon, my lord,” the older man said, clearly puzzled at Markham’s presence, though he didn’t look concerned in the slightest. “Have we met?”

Markham stood up as soon as he entered. “Good afternoon, Mr Brecknell. We have not had the pleasure. I am sorry to say that this is a rather sad visit. I have been out of town, and hadn’t yet had the opportunity to offer my condolences to those people Mr Wolverton left behind.”

“Oh!” Sarah’s father shot her a sudden, worried look.

“Lord Markham was a good friend to Charlie, Papa,” she explained. “We talked a bit about him, and I must say it wasn’t as painful as it used to be.” Strangely, Sarah found

that was true.

“Yes,” Theo added. “I wanted to hear some things about Charlie’s life last summer. You see, I was in the country, to be closer to my fiancée. Our families’ estates join.”

“Indeed? How fortunate.” Mr Brecknell’s expression was back to its normal calm.

“Miss Brecknell has been most accommodating, but I have taken up far too much of her time.”

Before he could leave, her father held up a half-sheet of paper. “Before I forget. Are you quite sure all the invitations have gone out for the lecture tomorrow evening?”

“I did that last week, Papa,” Sarah said gently. But the sight of the invitation gave her an idea. She plucked it from her father’s hand and gave it to Lord Markham.

“Now that you’re back in town, perhaps you could come to the lecture. Bring your fiancée. You can explore the building a bit,” she added meaningfully.

He gave her a quick nod of approval as he took the invitation. “What a good idea, Miss Brecknell.”

“Yes, do come,” her father added. “A Mrs Heath will speak on her recent finds among the Egyptian ruins at Karnak and the Valley of the Kings. Should be fascinating.”

“Really? I’ve always been interested in Egypt,” Markham said. Sarah couldn’t tell if he was lying, but she supposed it was an important skill for spies.

Mr Brecknell beamed at him. “Then you must come! Need not be a member of the Athenaeum! And do bring

your fiancée. We need more bright young ladies like my girl around here.”

“Papa!” Sarah said, blushing.

“We’ll be here,” Markham said. “But at the moment, I should not intrude further. Excuse me. I will see myself out.”

After he left, Sarah sat back down, suddenly drained.

Her father sat beside her in the other chair. “Sarah, dear. Are you sure that thinking of such sad things hasn’t made you melancholy?”

“No, I’m quite all right. Lord Markham was only making a courtesy call.”

“Very courteous, yes,” her father murmured, already thinking of something else entirely. “I hope he was not affronted you were alone today. I know we don’t hold you to the strictest standards at your age, but a family such as his must observe all the niceties...”

He saw the stacks of books on the table. “Cleaning out the shelves? Good, good. Well, we should be off home now. Your mother doesn’t like to be alone all day. Tidy up and I’ll see you at the front hall.” He patted Sarah on the hand, smiled, and wandered out.



## *Chapter 11*



THEO LEFT THE ATHENAEUM FEELING as if something was finally going right. If Sarah was any good at codes—and something told him she was—the notebooks could be deciphered and the cache found. She would be able to confront her tormentor, and Theo would learn what Charlie had stolen. Everyone would win...except the tormentor, who Theo planned to capture or kill, depending on how he felt that day.

He was deeply annoyed at the idea of the man involving Sarah in his schemes. Why should he think the lady could succeed where trained agents—criminal or otherwise—had failed? How did he know Sarah would not simply have melted down in pure panic?

Theo had to find out who the man was as soon as possible. He'd begin with Sarah's description. Tall and muscular, she said. Dark hair. She had been frightened, but

she didn't seem the type to misremember. Still, that wasn't much to work with. The last two fingers on his right hand were missing, she said. Such a detail was far more useful.

Wasting no time, he began to work his various contacts throughout the city. He knew people in high and low places. Some were genuine friends, who he'd got to trust over the years. Some were allies, willing to share a secret if the cause was good. And others were simply eyes on the street. They would give Theo the information he needed for a price, but they'd do the same for Theo's enemies. It was not always a simple matter to ask a question among London's underworld.

But after several hours of careful work, he was able to get a name from an unlikely place: a beggar who used to work in a freak show. His limbs had been malformed at birth: his legs mere stumps with no feet to speak of, his right arm whole but spindly, and his left only grown to the elbow, where a half-formed hand grew. Short Henry, as he was known, only had three fingers on that hand. He kept informed about other people in the city with similar deformities—he worried about rivals.

"Penny for the poor, good sir?" Short Henry called out piteously as Theo walked toward him, the darkness of a winter night already obscuring most of the scene.

Theo pulled a few coins from his pocket. "Got more than that, Henry, if you can answer a question for me."

"Down the alley," Henry muttered, recognizing him. "Two minutes."

Theo tossed a coin in Henry's cup and strolled on, turning down the next alley as if on a whim. He waited in

a doorway well away from the street. Soon enough, Henry came down, by means of a little rolling cart he'd had made especially for him. He could reach surprising speeds with it.

"Well, now," Henry said when he drew up to Theo. "What brings you to my exquisitely-scented neighborhood?"

"I need information, Henry. And I think you might be the man who can help."

"Fire away," the beggar ordered, an eager light in his eyes.

"There's a man in town I'm looking for. He might be a newcomer, but perhaps not. He's a big man. Dark hair. Healthy. Tough, in the sense that he'll look muscular and mean. But he's missing the last two fingers on his right hand."

"Two fingers gone? But healthy otherwise?" Henry mused. "Maybe. Anything else about him?"

"He speaks with an accent. I've never heard it, so I can't say what. But my source is reliable."

"Accented, but he speaks the King's English?"

"Perfectly well."

"And a big man." Henry nodded to himself. "I have a name that comes to mind. But what's this worth to you?" he asked.

Theo held up two silver coins. "One to pay for the name, and the other to pay for your silence should anyone else ask about him—or me."

"That will do," Henry said, as Theo handed over the coins.

The beggar took them in his good hand and hid them away in a flash. "The name I have is Matteo Rossi. He may not be who you want, but I'd bet one of these coins he is."

"He's missing two fingers?"

"Aye, and he's a big fellow. From somewhere far south. Italy or Spain, if I recall. He used to work in a circus among the elephants and lions. He would wrestle a bear for the show, all mostly an act, but still one that requires real strength. He was mean among people, but kind to the animals, and strong enough to deal with them."

"Why did he leave the circus?"

"Run in with the law. He was said to have killed a man over money. I can't say what the truth of the matter is."

"But he's in London now?"

"Yes, but I don't know who he might be working for. He's not the type to work on his own—not that bright. There's a woman with him sometimes. But what their link is, I don't know."

"You're earning another coin with all this," Theo said. "Answer me one more question. Where was Rossi last known to live?"

"St Giles, so you'd best keep a gun with you if you look for him there," Henry replied. He accepted the next coin just as quickly. "I thank you, my lord. And now I'd best get back to begging."

"I'll leave the alley the other way," Theo said, before Henry could suggest it.

"One thing I'm curious about," Henry said as he prepared to leave. "What's this man done to bring you down here and pay me so much for a name? I doubt I'm

the only coin you spent on this.”

“I would have spent more if I had to. As for his crime, he was rude to a lady,” Theo said.

“Must have been quite the insult,” Henry muttered. “Good hunting, my lord. Kindly don’t seek me out again till your business with him is done.”

“God keep you, Henry,” Theo said, meaning it.

Armed with the name, Theo felt much better. He was tired from a night of no sleep and hours spent traversing the city, but he had one more place to stop before he could go home.

The offices of the Zodiac were tucked away in a building that housed several private firms and offices. Theo privately thought the architect must have been unfamiliar with the concept of a straight line. There were so many twists and turns one had to make before reaching one’s destination that the place felt more like a maze. In that respect, it was an excellent location for a group of spies.

He arrived at the door on an upper floor and knocked once. It was opened by a woman in practical clothes and ash blonde hair. She moved aside as soon as she saw who it was.

“I’ll tell him you’re here,” she said, shutting the door.

Theo nodded. “Thank you, Miss Chattan.”

She ushered him into Julian’s inner sanctum. Despite the hour, neither person showed any hint that they intended to leave at any time. “Do you live in these offices?” Theo asked suddenly.

“It sometimes seems so,” Chattan said with a faint

smile. She closed the door on her way out.

“I don’t have you on an assignment at the moment,” Julian said. “What’s happening?”

“I found a link to Pisces.”

Julian went cold. “I told you to stay well out of that.”

“A lead landed right in my path,” he said.

“By coincidence, I’m sure,” Julian said.

“It surprised the hell out of me, I promise you.” Theo explained about Sarah’s appearance in his carriage, and her story about meeting Matteo Rossi.

At the end, Julian asked, “But why did she tell you about it? You said you only met her once before.”

Theo took a deeper breath. “She knows about the Zodiac.”

The other man’s eyes narrowed to slits. “How did she find out about it?”

“Not from *me*,” Theo said quickly. “Charlie told her. That is, he told her a little about his work and his code name. She guessed there must be twelve of us, and identified the name of the Zodiac on her own, which he confirmed.”

“Why would he do that?”

Theo shrugged. “Miss Brecknell is quite pretty.” It was a pat explanation, but essentially true. Theo could well understand why a man, even one as intelligent as Charlie, could have lost his better sense around Sarah. She was exactly the sort of pretty that made some men talk too much.

“My God.” Neville leaned over in his chair. He called, “Chattan?”

The woman appeared in the doorway. "Yes, sir?"

"Can you make up a list, Miss Chattan? Just the names of the people in England who *don't* know about our clandestine organization?"

Chattan didn't even blink. "Certainly, sir. I'll be back in five minutes."

"See her? Not a flinch. She keeps me sane." Julian turned back to Theo. "I expect you to watch this girl carefully. Find out who she talks to and if she's spilled any other secrets. And don't start spilling any yourself."

"When have I ever done that?" Theo asked. "I've been engaged to Alyse for years and never breathed a word to her."

"These things have a way of getting out of hand. If Miss Brecknell knows a little, you might not think it a problem to tell her a little more. In for a penny, in for a pound."

"She's not in for anything at all, sir," Theo corrected. "I'm going to use her to decode Charlie's notebooks. Once she does that, I'll be done with her...other than to deal with Rossi, of course."

"Good," Julian said. "Maybe we can arrange for her to marry someone who lives very far away then. Do we know anyone who lives on the Orkneys? Or Ireland. Some man must need a wife in Ireland."

Theo rolled his eyes. "She knew Charlie's code name for well over a year, and said nothing. I'm not concerned."

"Her life wasn't in danger before. That tends to change people's outlooks."

"Her life isn't in danger now. We'll find the cache, I'll

intercept Rossi, and it'll be done."

"God grant it. The sooner everything about Charlie Wolverton is dead and buried, the happier I'll be."

Theo left the inner office and found Chattan sitting at her own desk outside. "Still working on your list, Miss Chattan?"

She gave him a wry smile. "It's not as bad as all that."

"I knew he'd hate learning a random citizen heard the name of the Zodiac, but the risk is minimal."

Chattan kept her voice low. "You have to understand. Wolverton's betrayal shook his confidence. He had such faith in his agents, and to be failed by one...that's never happened before. I mean, perhaps it did during the Zodiac's earlier history. But not under Julian's watch. He's furious. He's been simmering for months."

"We'll just have to make sure it can't happen again," Theo said. "Though I don't know how to go about it."

Chattan said, "A few of the agents—the ones involved in exposing Charlie—want to make the Zodiac a bit more open. They think the agents should know each other, and sometimes work together."

"Isn't that the Astronomer's decision to make? Or Julian's. He's the first sign."

"He's been considering it. Slowly. You might mention your opinion to him."

"And what's your opinion, Miss Chattan?"

"I think it's a good idea. Secrecy and isolation can be weaknesses as well as strengths."

"You talk like a spymaster yourself. Sometimes I wonder how you grew up."



She smiled. Chattan had never revealed a thing about her past in all the years he'd known her. "I leave you to wonder."

"And I'll leave you to work," he said. "I have to sleep at some point. Tomorrow I'm off to break codes with Miss Brecknell."

"Do you like her?" Chattan asked suddenly.

He stopped short. "What does that mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like."

"Yes, I like her," Theo said slowly. "She's intelligent, discreet, and keeps her head when no one would fault her for losing it." He saw Chattan's disturbed expression and made an intuitive leap about her concerns. "Charlie didn't deserve her."

"That's what I feared," Chattan said. "Just one more person he hurt. Look after her, will you?"

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

\* \* \* \*

The very next morning, Theo sent a note to Alyse about the lecture. Her reply came shortly after, telling him she would be delighted to join him. So that evening, Theo drove to the Templetons' home. Alyse was waiting for him, having dressed with considerable care.

"Do I look scholarly enough?" she asked him, showing off an outfit of a rich burgundy velvet coat over a wool gown. "All my other frocks are so lacy and light. I wish I had spectacles."

Theo laughed. "It's a lecture, not a costume ball. Are

you ready to go?”

“I suppose. I just don’t want anyone to laugh at me.”

“Who would laugh?”

“I don’t know. There’s probably a host of old dusty men who will blink at me with their owl eyes. What if I’m the only younger lady there?”

“I’m quite certain there will be others. Though I wasn’t sure you would want to attend.”

“Oh, it sounds interesting,” she said. “And different. I was just telling Mama that if I had to attend another tea, I’d scream. How did you hear about it? It’s hardly your typical event.”

He shrugged. “A friend mentioned it. And I too can get bored of the usual entertainment.” Personally, he was far more interested in exploring the building. If Sarah could find a safe place to meet, they could start working the next day. If they were incredibly lucky, they might even find Charlie’s stash of papers in the building. Then the evening would be worth it.

At the Athenaeum, Theo noticed Sarah immediately. She was again dressed in a dark grey gown, and wore black gloves and a black ribbon in her blonde hair, which made her pale complexion look even paler. It was as if she wanted to fade away into the dark paneled walls.

She nodded in greeting, but didn’t have time to come over before the lecture began, so Theo simply escorted Alyse into the main hall.

The talk was on advances in archeological study. Theo didn’t have much interest in the matter—ancient history was a subject he merely endured in school. But the

presenter was unusual and her talk far more compelling than he would have guessed. The explorer and scholar Mrs Elena Heath had spent years in Egypt, digging out the ruins of the pharaohs.

Mrs Heath was dynamic and entertaining as a speaker. She combined the dry facts of her work with amusing stories of the local culture, and often peppered her tales with humor stemming from her unique position; she was quite often the only woman at the digs, aside from a personal maid.

Alyse appeared completely enraptured. "Can you imagine!" she said more than once, under her breath.

At the end of the lecture, everyone applauded, and Alyse leaned over to him. "Theo! Wasn't that fascinating?"

Theo smiled at her. "Perhaps you can tell Mrs Heath directly."

"Oh, what could I say to her?"

"Just ask a question. You must have some." He saw Sarah then. "Let me introduce you to someone else first. She's the reason we're here."

## CONTINUE READING...

This is the end of your free sample. Get the rest of *A Shameless Angel* at your favorite retailer from the links below.

- [Amazon](#)
- [Apple iBooks](#)
- [Barnes & Noble](#)
- [Google Play](#)
- [Kobo eBooks](#)

## 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.