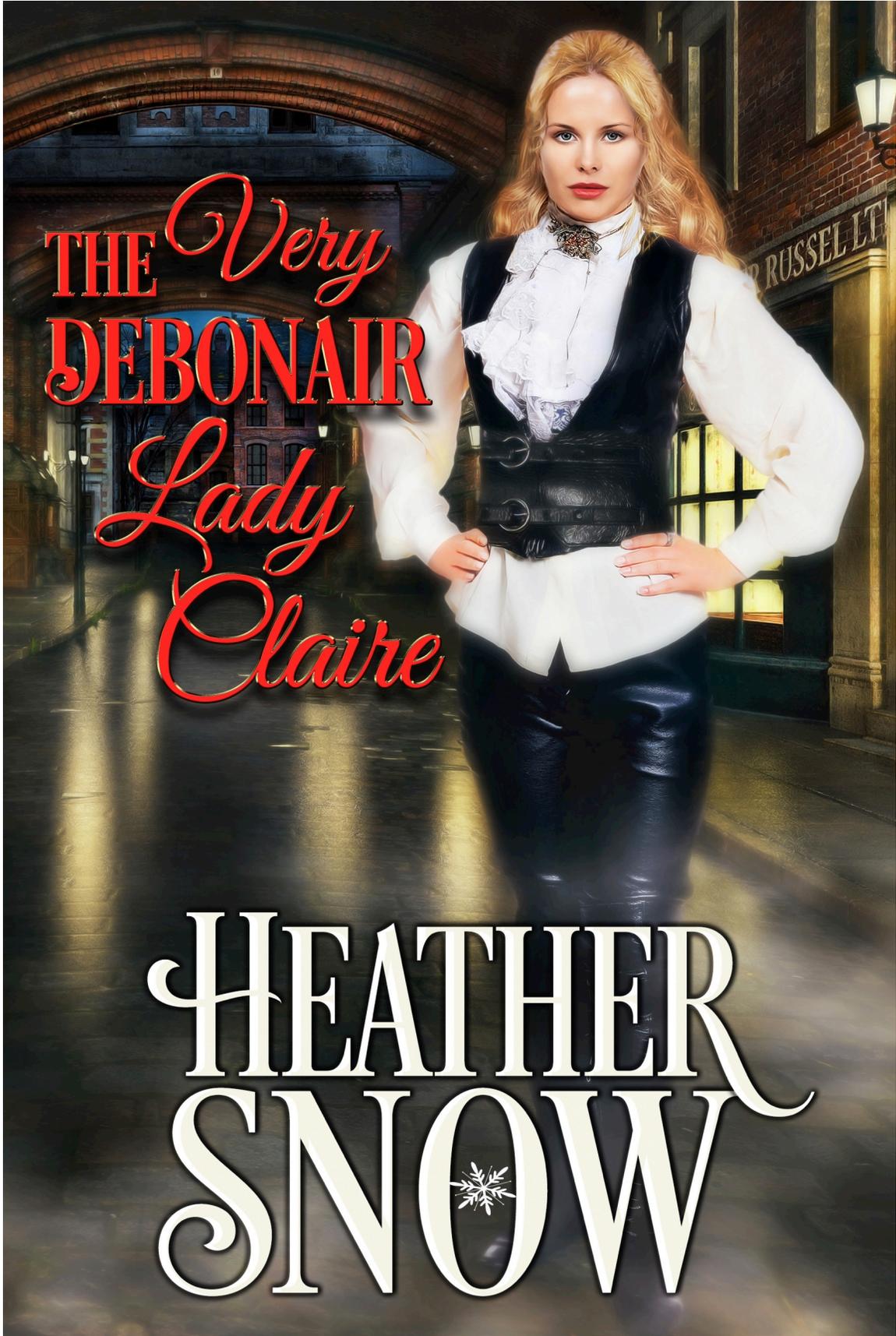


*The Very Debonair Lady Claire*



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FIRST CHAPTER EXCERPT



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## Chapter One

*December 1813 ~ The Black Chambers, Abchurch Lane, London*

Sweat snaked down Claire's face and neck, a slow trickle that did its best to annoy and distract her until, finally, it met the starched linen of her cravat and was absorbed.

While outside this room London was experiencing one of the coldest winters in recent memory, here at Abchurch boiling kettles spouted steam into the air and fires burned to heat wax and wire.

It didn't help that she kept her jacket on when most in the room had stripped down to their waistcoats. But the extra layer covering her chest helped maintain her disguise.

She wished she could spare a hand to swipe the perspiration from her brow, but she needed both for this most delicate part of her task. Should she break the seal while opening the missive meant for the Russian ambassador, the man would know that the War Department was pilfering his post...rather than just suspecting it.

Another droplet started its trek down her cheek, but Claire did her best to ignore it. Pulling her lower lip between her teeth, she slid the heated wire beneath the seal—a precarious operation that required her to move the hot metal slowly enough to melt the wax without breaking it, yet quickly enough not to scorch the vellum beneath.

The seal pulled free of the parchment, and Claire examined the wax rendering of a double-headed eagle closely. Not bad. She saw no cracks or marring of any kind. She should be able to reseal the missive after copying its contents, and send it on to the Foreign Ministry with the ambassador and his aides none the wiser.

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Leaning back in her chair, Claire scanned the Cyrillic script, so very different from English writing. She'd need to transcribe it word for word in Russian, of course—any hidden messages would be in the mother tongue, not in a translation. But that was a laborious undertaking, and she was anxious to know what the letter said *now*.

She was running out of time to figure out who had killed her brother...and why.

“Who do you reckon they've tapped to replace Marston?” a voice boomed from behind her.

Claire started, only just stopping herself from crumpling the letter in her surprise. She'd been so focused on interpreting it that she hadn't heard Pike's approach. She blew out a harsh breath, smoothing the vellum flat on the table. All that work preserving the seal would have been for naught if she'd crushed the blasted letter in reflex.

She threw a disgruntled glare over her shoulder at Pike, who only grinned at her as if he'd pulled some great jest. He lifted the cup of tea he'd brought over for her like a salute and then set it on the corner of her table.

*Men.* She'd never understand them, even after spending the past several weeks living *as* one of them.

A sharp ache pierced her chest as his words registered, followed quickly by a twinge of dread. Who *did* she think would replace Marston?

“I've no idea,” she mumbled, turning back to the work at hand, her throat tight.

She still couldn't believe the man was gone.

Lord Marston—Uncle Jarvis to her and her brother, though they'd not been related by blood—had been a great friend to her late parents and a constant in Claire's life since before she could remember.

He'd *also* been the head of the Abchurch offices, where England's brightest minds secretly spent their hours deciphering codes and messages discovered in diplomatic posts, uncovered through espionage efforts on the continent, or relayed from battlefields and naval ships via shutter telegraphs.

More important, Uncle Jarvis had been her co-conspirator these many weeks. Without his help, she'd never have been able to infiltrate Abchurch by pretending to be her twin, nor would she have the chance to uncover the truth behind Clarence's death.

“I suppose there's no point in speculating,” Pike mused. “Whoever the man is, he

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should be here any moment to assess the operation. Take our measure, as it were.”

The unease that had started in her chest flared as it settled low in her stomach, jostling for position with the grief from Uncle Jarvis’s sudden death. How could she possibly continue this ruse without his protection and aid?

When she’d arrived at Abchurch last month, no one had questioned that she was Sir Clarence Barton. Not when she resembled her brother so closely. Not when she could mimic his mannerisms so perfectly. Not when she was so impeccably tailored, any hints of her femininity ruthlessly strapped down under her fine gentleman’s togs.

Not when Lord Marston, respected spymaster, had declared her to be so.

But Uncle Jarvis was gone, felled by a heart ailment in his sleep two nights past.

And she was all alone.

“I hope they don’t send some high-in-the-instep dandiprat,” Pike went on, oblivious to Claire’s distress. “Some earl’s spare who wants to do his part in the war effort, but who’s never been outside Mayfair, you know?”

Claire nodded, wishing Pike would be quiet. Or at least go bother someone else. She picked up a quill and pointedly went back to her transcription—and her worries that the new head of Abchurch would find her out and make her leave before she could learn what had happened to Clarence.

“A man of action is what we need. Someone who’s seen battle.” Pike slammed his fist into his palm with a thwack, clearly just warming to his topic. “Someone who knows first-hand how important the work we do here is to the—”

The click of a lock and the creaking of the heavy oak door at the far end of the room stilled Pike’s lips. Indeed, a hush fell over all of the men in the chamber as they waited to meet their new minister.

“Let’s introduce you to the men who will be under your charge, my lord,” echoed the voice of Greeves, Uncle Jarvis’s aide-de-camp, as he stepped into the room, followed by a tall figure.

Claire’s stomach rolled, and her heart kicked in her chest. She peered down the long expanse, trying to glimpse the man who would turn her out on her ear if he even suspected she wasn’t who she claimed to be.

But it was no use.

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The black chambers of Abchurch were, by necessity, clandestine. No windows opened onto the street to allow curious eyes to see in, much less to let in any natural light. Instead, this room resembled a darkened laboratory. The only pockets of light were oil lamps, the fires in the grates, and smaller flames for steam kettles and such, which burned at the tables where the men went about their secret business.

Claire cursed the room's air of obscurity. While it undoubtedly helped her maintain her disguise, it also kept her from seeing the man who held her future in his hands.

She squinted her eyes and saw that the two men had stopped to speak with Peter Finch. Finchy, brilliant at maths, could decipher complicated French codes that used over 1,200 numerals with the seeming ease of a schoolboy doing sums—once said code had been broken. He was also notoriously cantankerous. Yet whatever the new minister said to the man brought a series of nods and, rarer still, an actual laugh.

A moment later, Greeves ushered the stranger to the next table. Claire's station was at the very back of the room, making her the last "man" to be introduced. But they'd get to her soon enough. The knot in her stomach tightened and she turned away, back to the Russian missive and back to her work—for as long as it would remain hers.

So lost was she in the syntax of the language, the foreign ebb and flow of letters and words, that the men were upon her before she realized.

"And lastly," Greeves was saying from behind her, "is our most keen linguist. Aside from English and French, of course, he's fluent in Greek, Latin, Spanish, Italian, and a variety of Balto-Slavic languages. Invaluable, he is, at finding hidden codes within foreign missives for the others to decipher. Couldn't have won the battle of Vitoria without him."

Claire closed her eyes briefly, willing her heart to cease its rapid tattoo. Then she took a breath, pasted on her brother's ne'er-do-well smile, and turned to face whatever came.

And her racing heart stopped dead.

Greeves gestured towards her. "May I introduce you to Sir Clar—"

But the new head of Abchurch interrupted the aide, his voice sounding as shocked as she felt.

"*Claire?*"

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After serving five years in a brutal war—part of it as a prisoner in France—very little had the power to shake Lord Andrew Sedgewick.

But he must say, finding Miss Claire Barton, dressed as a *man*, in the War Department's hidden enclave of code breakers shook him straight to his polished Hessians.

He blinked once...twice... Perhaps the flickering shadows in this damnably dark chamber played tricks upon his eyes.

But no. Claire definitely stood before him. In trousers. And a cravat. A badly tied one at that.

Her cerulean-blue eyes widened in the awkward silence before she recovered herself.

“Sedgewick,” she chided, in a voice so like her brother's that Andrew took another hard look at her.

His gaze touched on her hair, red-golden locks trimmed short in a fashionable men's cut that curled slightly around her face. He took in her wide shoulders and thick waist. Padding could accomplish both, he knew, as well as fill out the boots upon her feet. His eyes drifted to her bosom, or lack thereof. If there were feminine curves hidden under the burgundy jacket and cream-colored waistcoat, they were bound flat.

Yet her breath caught, just slightly, at his frank perusal. And if he wasn't mistaken, pink tinged her cheeks. Definitely Claire.

“You're lucky we're old friends,” she went on gamely. “The last person to call me ‘Clare’ got planted a facer, you know. I detest that blasted nickname.” Then she laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “When did you get back from the continent, my friend?”

Greeves, apparently his new aide-de-camp, looked between the two of them, brow scrunching. “You know Sir Clarence already, my lord?”

Claire's eyes flashed a warning, even as her smile widened.

Andrew still reeled. He couldn't fathom how she'd come to be here. Couldn't imagine a scenario where her brother would allow it. And if she was here, where was Clarence? Myriad questions burned his tongue, but in front of an audience of curious

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onlookers was neither the time nor the place.

He found his voice. “I do.” Turning his gaze back to Greeves, he said, “Barton and I attended Harrow together, which was why I was so taken aback when you presented *him* as your best linguist.” He hoped that was enough explanation to cover his blunder. Humor should take care of the rest. He chuckled and tossed Claire a cocky grin. “If I remember correctly, pup, you copied your Latin *and* your Greek off of *me*.”

She snorted. “True, but Cambridge cured me of *that*,” she said, not missing a step. He had to admit, she played her part well. “Since you had to go and desert me for the Royal Military College, I was forced to learn the stuff myself. Found I actually had an affinity for it, and here we are.”

She raised her chin, just slightly, but he recognized the subtle challenge.

“Here we are, indeed,” he murmured. *She* shouldn’t be here. This place was dangerous enough for grown men, given the secrets that passed through Abchurch every day. Secrets someone was willing to kill for.

A young woman shouldn’t even know such a place existed.

But he’d have to be patient. He couldn’t reveal her for who she was. Her reputation would be left in tatters, at the very least. But beyond that, if Claire had gone to this kind of trouble, she had a reason. A reason he wanted very much to know.

Still, he couldn’t spend time lingering in conversation when he was supposed to be discovering who’d murdered his predecessor. It would draw attention, and that was the last thing either of them needed.

Andrew tipped his head in a quick nod. “Good to see you, Barton,” he said. “I’m sure we’ll speak again...soon.”

Claire held his gaze for a moment, then dropped her chin and turned back to her work.

As Andrew turned on his heel to continue his tour with Greeves, he knew one thing for certain: He wouldn’t allow Claire to escape Abchurch Lane tonight until she told him exactly what she was doing here.

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