

MYSTERIES OF LADY THEO (EXCERPT)

AGENTS OF THE HOME OFFICE

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CHAPTER ONE

HADFIELD HALL 1815

Perched on the side of the four-poster bed, Lady Theodora Neale held the dear hand that had wasted to skin and bone.

Her papa squeezed hers in return, his grasp urgent and fierce despite his frailty. “My dear, please forgive me.” His breath was labored, his eyes recessed within dark circles. “Our family has been in service to the Crown for generations, and now it will be your duty to carry on.”

A crushing feeling pressed against her ribs at the sound of her papa’s struggling breaths. He let go of her to lift a ledger from his bedside table, and she rubbed her wrists.

He handed the volume to her. “You must not share the contents with anyone. Only trust those who bear the same mark as you.”

The mark on her ankle burned as if it had recently been placed upon her.

“You must guard it with your life. Our family has been responsible for this mission for generations, and you must follow the instructions carefully.”

A tear rolled down her cheek. “I will, Papa. I will do as you ask.”

His last words were an apology of sorts. "I am sorry we have limited funds remaining. I realize I should have been more focused on the estate than our mission. You will be reliant on your cousin's generosity, and I only pray he will take care of you..."

All color suddenly drained from his face.

"Papa?"

On a tortured breath, he whispered, "God be with you, child."



HADFIELD HALL, A YEAR LATER

FACING THE DRAFTY DRAWING ROOM WINDOW, her back to her aunt, Lady Theodora discreetly pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. The heartbreaking image of the late Earl of Hadfield on his deathbed refused to dissipate.

The numbness that had seeped into her mind and body that day, leaving her devoid of emotion, was still with her. All her energy was devoted to fulfilling her promise to her papa.

Theo recalled running her hand over the well-worn volume. While there were no visual markings on the cover, the pads of her fingers had rolled over faint ridges and lines of a carefully molded impression. She squeezed her eyelids tighter as she reflected on the image still seared into her memory, the outline of a horse with a falcon perched on its back, circled by laurel leaves, a replica of the mark she bore. The electric jolt of recognition shot through her once more, making her heart beat erratically and her eyes open.

Words contained in the book came to mind:

Only trust those with the Mark.

Train daily.

The sharp sound of a book snapping shut made Theo whip around in the direction of her aunt.

Lady Henrietta Arcot Neale's usually cheerful voice now contained a touch of desperation. "Theo, I do wish you would accompany me to town."

"Beg pardon, Aunt Henri. What was it you said?"

"I was trying to inform you that Landon will insist we return to town with him."

"I'm perfectly happy to remain here. I prefer the fresh country air."

"Well, that might be the case, but we can't hide here any longer." Reaching for her cup of tea, Aunt Henrietta continued, "I haven't been subjected to the *ton* in years. To be honest, I was rather relieved when my papa disowned me."

Theo smiled at the memory of her uncle, George Neale. His marriage to Aunt Henri had upended her ties to her ducal family. A second son who embarked on working as a barrister was not an appropriate husband for the daughter of a duke. But theirs had been a love match, and the Neale family had embraced Henrietta from the moment they met her. Her kindness and intelligence were valued by the Neales rather than considered a nuisance.

The teacup rattled against the small saucer in her aunt's hand. Theo was apparently not the only one unnerved by the *ton*.

But Theo's cousin Landon, the newly minted Earl of Hadfield, strode into the room, saving her from having to respond.

"Mama." Landon bent to give his mama a kiss on the cheek, then made his way to Theo's side.

Looming next to her, Landon twisted to peer out the window and quietly asked, "Fantasizing about being outdoors? Wishing you were anywhere but here, trapped in a stifling drawing room, listening to my mama?"

"Landon, I was mentioning to Theo that we must venture to town and find you a wife."

Landon stiffened at the word *wife*. "Yes, we *all* should take up residence in town for the Season. Christopher has reassured me all is in order for our stay."

Theo was amazed at the ease with which he bore the brunt of his new responsibilities. Landon had not only inherited the title but also the neglected estate and the burden of caring for Theo. The only item he had not received was the family volume.

At the mention of Landon's younger brother, Theo couldn't prevent her lips curling into a grin. Christopher was of a similar age

to herself and had been a boon companion during their childhood. Was he still a carefree fellow? She hadn't seen him but for a brief moment during her papa's funeral a year ago.

Theo straightened her spine, took a deep breath, and prepared to reiterate her arguments for the hundredth time as to why she should remain in the country. "Cousin, I'm perfectly fine remaining here at Hadfield Hall. Papa often ventured to..." Having read the family volume, it was clear her papa had not only left her behind to travel to London but often ventured much further in his investigations. On an outward breath, she finished. "...to town without me."

Landon's hazel eyes were no longer on Aunt Henrietta. Instead, they bore into Theo. "Don't be ridiculous. I will not leave you here alone with the servants."

Theo donned a mask of cool indifference. The unfeeling woman she had portrayed this past year was in stark contrast to the bubbly little girl he had played with in their childhood. Remaining aloof was the only way she had conceived to keep Landon from finding out the truth about her inheritance. It was imperative he did not find out about the family volume and their familial duties to the Crown.

In the driest tone she could manage, Theo asked, "Why must I accompany you?"

His grin revealed the dimple that rarely graced Landon's features. "You will assist me in becoming better acquainted with my peers."

"Me? I've only been thrown to the wolves once, my debut Season. You were fortunate not to have been there. It was a complete disaster."

Landon's dimple deepened at her response. Damn the man; he had managed to crack her cool exterior. Why was he so determined that she participate in the Season? Was he intent on marrying her off? Landon had mentioned he had set aside a modest dowry for her. It was impressive how he had managed to fatten the estate coffers within such a short period. Her cousin was not averse to hard work and had used his personal funds to invest in some lucrative

ventures. They proved successful, resulting in his amassing a small fortune worthy of the Hadfield title.

"Theo, you will accompany us to town come Monday. I'll hear no more excuses as to why you should remain here in the country. Am I clear?"

As if she was swallowing toads, she answered, "Yes, cousin."

Theo fought the urge to fidget as Landon's gaze raked over her. He eyed her haphazard coiffure. Would he notice her raven-colored hair was now streaked with lighter strands due to the hours spent outdoors practicing?

Her mourning clothes sagged in places where her body had reduced as a result of her training regimen. She ran her hand over the well-worn material. The nervous reaction drew Landon's attention closer to her garments.

Landon sighed. "I will ensure you are both outfitted with new wardrobes."

Aunt Henrietta chimed in, "Landon, you will escort us to the theater—balls and such—will you not? As the patriarch, it is now your duty."

"Mama, I will be busy in town. I still have a law practice to run with Christopher in conjunction with all the estate matters."

Her aunt's nostrils flared. "Christopher is quite capable of running the practice without you. You now have other responsibilities. One of them is to find a wife and produce an heir."

Theo lowered her gaze to the floor in an attempt to avoid her aunt's attention. However, Aunt Henrietta had not forgotten her. "And you, my girl, will accompany me into town. We shall set out after we break our fast on Monday."

Not having grown up with a mama, Theo hungrily sought out Aunt Henrietta's opinion and favor. Her aunt had willingly taken on the parental role and treated Theo as one of her own children. Theo was extremely grateful, for it allowed her to relinquish the management of the household and gained her the freedom to train.

Raising her eyes to meet her aunt's, Theo said, "If that is what you wish, Aunt Henri."

Upon hearing Theo's agreement, her aunt smiled and clapped

her hands together. “Now that is settled, who would like a cup of tea?”

Now was her opportunity to escape. “If you will excuse me, I think I will go outdoors and take advantage of the clean country air while I can.”

As Theo made her way to the door, Landon ordered, “Don’t stay out too long. You will need to start preparing for your departure. Monday will be here before you know.”

Midstride, Theo turned, nodded. *I have three days to plan and prepare.*

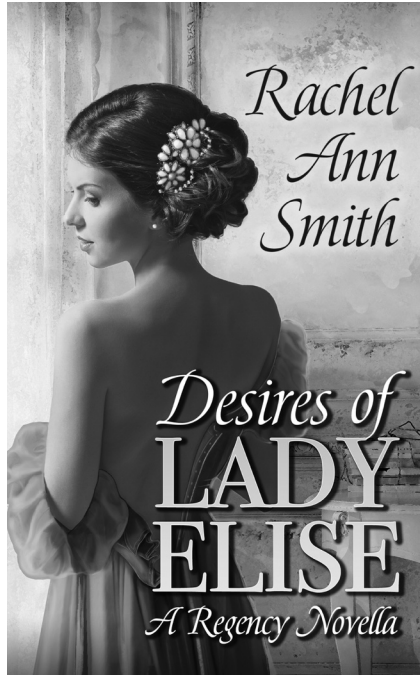


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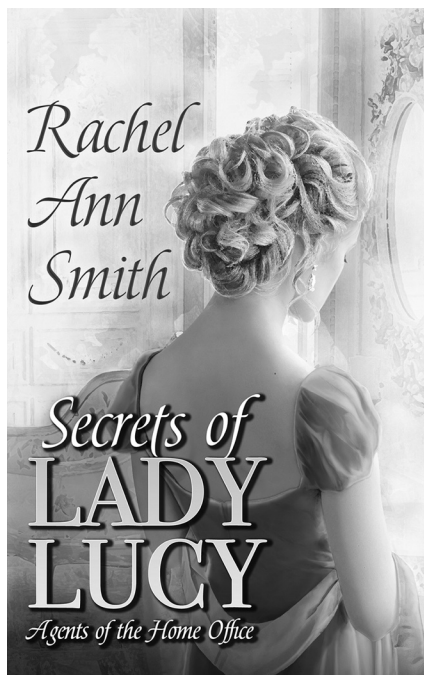


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RACHEL ANN SMITH writes steamy historical romances with a twist. Her debut series, *Agents of the Home Office*, features female protagonists that defy convention.

When Rachel isn't writing she loves to read and spend time with the family. You will find her with her Kindle by the pool during the summer, on the soccer field in the spring and fall, or curled up on the couch during the winter months.

She currently lives in Colorado with her extremely understanding husband and their two very supportive children.



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