

Chapter One

1819, London

The sky glowed with morning as Sam passed St. Mary Magdalen's, hurrying toward Crown Street.

Studying the crowded road, she searched the faces for any fleeting sense of familiarity, unsure if she would even recognize Major Pickering. His note, now hidden under the rough fabric of her linen shirt, crinkled uncomfortably against her skin. The sharp edge of paper reminded her that she was late.

There are facts you must know about the fire in 1806. Meet me tomorrow morning at six at the corner of High Street and Crown.

I am your sincere friend, trust me, Major Pickering.

She didn't need to see the heavy, dark scrawl to remember the words.

It was already well past the hour. She had overslept. In truth, she suspected she simply did not want to meet Major Pickering or hear what he had to say. The past was not something she cared to consider.

She passed St. Mary Magdalen's and paused to catch her breath. The warm air from her mouth puffed out in small, gray-white clouds, crystallizing in the freezing air as she rubbed her burning thighs. After a final, raw breath, she headed toward the sharp corner at High Street.

Tension tightened her shoulders and stomach, and for once, she was glad to have missed her breakfast. She was uncomfortable enough without the heavy lead of one of Mrs. Pochard's stale rolls burdening her digestion.

After all these years, why had Pickering contacted her? How had he found her?

Does he know who I am?

Nearby, a church clock chimed the half hour. Time—past time—to head toward work. With a sudden desire to be done with the matter, she started to run, elbowing past lackadaisical workmen who threatened to impede her progress. The brim of her hat whipped back in the chill, morning breeze. She clapped a hand to the crown, flouting the efforts of the wind to tear it away. Her heavy linen smock flapped around her thighs as she dodged through the busy streets, heart beating wildly.

The brim suddenly flattened over her eyes, obscuring her vision as she came around the last corner. She bumped into a fashionable young gentleman, apparently late for an appointment with his bed after a hard night's drinking. A cloud of sour garlic and alcohol hung around him, clinging to his silken finery. The odor stung Sam's eyes.

He thrust a sharp elbow into her chest and pushed her roughly out of his path. "Watch it, you damn fool."

"Sorry, sir." She nodded and stepped into the gutter to pass him. The fool stumbled, however, and in a fit of rage, turned to hit her with his walking stick.

More by habit than anger, Sam swore at him and darted away. Then, because her cowardice irritated her already-taut nerves, she broadened her curse to include the indolent gentry in general and Major Pickering in particular.

This latest worry was his fault.

Her glance strayed along to the Street. Ahead was the appointed corner. Most of the men crossing the intersection were common workmen like herself—no one of interest. She took a deep, calming breath and loped forward.

A half block away from the meeting point, she paused again, flattening the palm of her hand against the comforting, solid brick wall at the edge of the sidewalk. She cautiously considered the situation.

A ramrod-straight back caught her attention. A tall man wearing a dark green jacket stopped at the corner, turning to glance down the Street. She studied him, suddenly sure he was the one she sought, Major Pickering.

He wore a black hat, precisely set on his narrow head, which hid the color of his hair. However, a neat, gray mustache curled over his upper lip, so he was not a young man. The skin over his cheeks and nose was a dark, patchy brown as if permanently burned by years in the sun. He turned impatiently, watching the ebb and flow of souls around him. Whenever someone staggered too closely, he vigorously wielded a black lacquered walking stick to push them away.

A man of action, then, she thought. A soldier.

The cool, misty dampness of April muffled the clatter and clang of the early morning London streets as she stood there. Teeming life bustled around her, awakening to the new day with intensity and hunger. But the hubbub receded into an inconsequential buzz as she hesitated, concentrating on the man less than a block away.

She could not fathom what Major Pickering could possibly know after all this time. It had been thirteen years since the fire. Years of confusion and anguish that never quite diminished. Time could not heal all wounds, despite common sentiment to the contrary.

Her last memory of her father remained as vivid and nightmarish as the night her life as a girl came to a tragic end. And sadly, she still remained uncertain about her life before that time. Broken memories and a vague uneasiness made her wonder if the man who saved her was, *indeed*, her father.

Yet, he had recognized her amidst the confusion. Although his voice, roughened by smoke, seemed frightening and unfamiliar as he urged her to escape. Ash and blood besmirched and hid his features. The fire, smoke, and pounding ache in her head bewildered her, leaving her unsure of everything—even her own identity.

And in those last minutes, he had thrust a box into her hands and told her to run—run and hide while he went back to save the others.

Only no one else had survived the conflagration.

Now, as if aware of her scrutiny, Major Pickering caught her gaze across the street between them. His attention fixed on her. His body stiffened like a dog pointing at a likely grouse. Sam stepped closer to the brick building at the edge of the sidewalk seeking the safety of its towering shadow, her skin prickling.

She glanced around, trying to listen over the pounding of her heart. No one shouted. No one except the major showed any interest in her—other than sheer annoyance when she impeded the smooth flow of foot traffic.

Major Pickering raised his hand, his eyes intent on her face. She took a slow step forward.

Then without warning, he stumbled. His hand fell to his side. His gaze wavered. A look of confusion passed over his thin face. Glancing down, he pressed a hand to his side. And as he brought his palm up in front of his face, his legs buckled beneath him. He fell sharply to his knees, and with a shudder, he raised his head. His gaze once more met Sam's as his mouth worked soundlessly.

A sense of urgency sent her running forward, hand outstretched. Alarmed by the pallor of his face, she tried to reach him to hear the words he uselessly mouthed. Then, although she couldn't be sure with the jostling men between them, he shook his head slightly in warning. A spasm twisted his features.

Sam stopped and watched in agonized horror as he slowly crumpled, face down, onto the pavement.

A passerby dressed in black bent over him. His quick hands patted the major's back and sides.

Several men trying to pass turned and exclaimed in surprise.

"What's wrong?" one said, his voice carrying above the crowd.

"Drunk—"

"No—murder!" another man yelled. "Fetch the constable! This man's been stabbed!"

There was a scuffle as someone pulled back the man in black. More men stopped, glancing around, and Sam dove into the shelter of a nearby doorway. She leaned against the wall, heart thudding with a sense of her own vulnerability.

What if she had arrived on time and stood next to him as that blade severed his life? Would she have been the victim, instead?

He had died with his attention fixed on her, their gazes locked. They had been staring at each other across a street teeming with strangers and at least one murderer.

Had anyone looked in the direction of his gaze?

She took a deep, deliberate breath.

No. No one noticed her. Why should they? She was just another workman in a slouching, broad-brimmed hat and covered to the knees by a coarse linen tunic. She walked down this road every morning on her way to fetch the cart of bricks and her employer, Mr. Edward Hawkins, Master Bricklayer.

No one ever noticed a bricklayer's helper.

One long, shaky breath followed another. She was alive and unremarkable—naught but a common laborer. She had to believe that.

Mashing her hat more firmly on her head, she straightened her shoulders and stepped out into the throng, her eyes on the ground. This time she turned at the corner and proceeded onward, quickly passing the growing circle of men surrounding Major Pickering. Her hands fisted with fear and frustration. If she had dared, she would have slipped into the throng and searched his pockets, herself.

The man in black might already have the contents of Pickering's wallet.

Her chest tightened at the thought of what he might have carried with him. Was there a notebook or scrap of paper with her name and address on it? The thought made her stumble over a crack in the sidewalk. She caught herself, grabbing the corner of a nearby house in sudden fear.

He'd sent the note last night specifically to Mrs. Pochard's boarding house. Further, the urchin who delivered it had asked for Mr. Samuel Sanderson. That could only mean one thing: Pickering had known her name and address. And he may have written it down.

The man in black could have that information from his hasty search of the Major's pockets—if it had been a search. It could have been a simple opportunity to steal the unconscious man's wallet. Or he could have been a doctor, on his way to Westminster Infirmary or Grey-coat Hospital. Just a man trying to assist a fellow human being.

As she walked, the first burning traces of panic cooled. Reason reasserted itself. If Pickering had something in his pockets, or if anyone noticed Sam, there was precious little she could do about it.

Fate would spin the events as it wished, as it always did.

For now, she had to get to work or lose her job. In the last thirteen years, she'd never been late. Samuel Sanderson was a hard worker, always punctual, always reliable, and never a bit of trouble.

And today would not be an exception.

Still uneasy, Sam managed to find her way to the stable and hitch the horse to the cart despite her shaking hands. She got the old nag moving, but she nearly passed by her employer as he stood fidgeting at the curb. By the time she finally reined in the horse, Mr. Hawkins's ruddy face had grown even redder.

"Hey, there you are, my lad," Mr. Hawkins said as he climbed with a grunt into the cart. "Almost given up on you." He eyed Sam before slapping her thigh with a meaty hand. "Thought you held your wine with a fair head last night, but maybe I was mistaken, eh?"

Flicking the reins, Sam eased the cart out into the narrow road. Despite her attempts at concentration, she could not push aside the memory of Major Pickering's anguished gaze as he crumpled to the pavement.

"No, sir," she said at last. "Just late is all. Overslept."

“Let’s hope you’re not making a habit of it come next Friday, eh? Can’t be late to your own wedding, son. The banns ’ave been read twice now. Just once more and you’ll be my son all right and proper. Then Hawkins and Hawkins will again be true, just like in my father’s day.” He eyed her before his heavy features tightened into a frown. “You’ve not changed your mind, have you, about taking our name?”

“No, sir,” she replied glumly. “I haven’t changed my mind.” And at the moment, Mr. Hawkins misconceptions about the sex of his “assistant” were the least of Sam’s worries.

She might not live long enough to give Miss Hawkins the shock of her very short lifetime on their wedding night.

As they clattered along, Sam flexed and then straightened her shoulders. A sudden, itching sensation spread over her back. It felt as if someone stood along the road, staring at her. With cool deliberation, she slouched again, forcing herself to relax.

No one would follow a common workman. *No one.*

Mr. Hawkins’s sharp little black-currant eyes flashed over Sam’s face. “You remember, lad. It was I as took you in when you was but a child and gave you work nigh on thirteen years past. ’Tain’t a love match, but you could do worse than my Kitty. And it’ll set you up with your own business. You could do worse—a lot worse.”

“Aye,” Sam agreed morosely. She might have been on time this morning and gotten a knife in the back along with Major Pickering. That would have been worse, though not by much. And there was still time for that to happen, too, if she wasn’t careful.

“We’ve drawn up the papers already. You’ve only to sign them. Then after the wedding, you’ll be Mr. Samuel Sanderson-Hawkins. I likes the sound o’ that. I’ve sore missed having a son, but you’ll do right nice. You’ll do, though you ’tain’t much to look at. Bit narrow in the shoulder. Howsom’ever, you’re sturdy enough and a hard worker.”

“Yes, sir.” She clicked her tongue to get the heavy drayhorse clopping along at a marginally faster rate. *Why can’t you move faster*, she thought, trying to ignore the nagging itch between her shoulder blades.

Just what *was* she going to do? Her carefully crafted life was somehow spinning out of her control. She had avoided agreeing to Mr. Hawkins plans and tried to push Kitty into running off with someone more suitable in the meantime, but she had not. And now Mr. Hawkins was determined to move forward with his appalling plans and Sam wasn’t sure how to escape.

Perhaps Kitty Hawkins wouldn’t take her vows too seriously. And Sam could escape the wedding bed and encourage Kitty to take an interest in adulterous affairs. At least then, Mr. Hawkins might get the grandchildren he wanted, and Sam could remain hidden in the guise of a bricklayer.

The question was: could she deceive a *wife*? Forever?

Well, if anyone could be fooled, Miss Kitty Hawkins was that one. So, there might still be a way for Sam to make do and stay alive. No reason to panic just yet. Plenty of men were shorter than Sam’s five foot seven inches. Many were just as thin or thinner. No wonder, when hard work and too little food were the

best a man could expect. Rickets, scurvy, and starvation bent backs and legs until some men could scarcely stand.

She could regain her peace.

Besides, she had been luckier than most. She had gainful employment that put plain food on the table and gave her a dry, private place to sleep at night. A workman's smock covered her from shoulder to knee, and long trousers from knee to ankle, so there was little difference between her and the other men. Her hands were calloused and rough from work. And her cuffs covered her thin wrists.

A sudden slap on the back startled her. Mr. Hawkins laughed, clearly pleased with his future plans. He rubbed his heavy thighs with glee.

Grunting, she tossed him a grin. Sam felt a bruise forming, but at least it relieved the incessant itching. As the street grew more crowded, she concentrated on maneuvering the heavy cartload of bricks into the alleyway near their current work site in a quiet, but elegant neighborhood.

Her employer whistled off-key, leaning back in the narrow seat. His small, black eyes roved over the expensive townhouses towering over them. Their windows glittered like diamonds in the early morning sun, set into frames of freshly painted, glossy white wood and rich black shutters.

Mr. Hawkins smiled at the sight of all the tasteful, luxurious homes filled with wealthy gentlemen just aching for bricklayers to build them a new brick wall. "Next week, after the wedding, we'll set you up here in London so I can go back to Clapham. A new business for my son-in-law, eh? Fancy brick work, and you're just the lad for it. Our employer's the uncle of a duke, so look sharp. There's no telling how far we'll go." He rubbed his hands on his smock before yelling at the other workmen slouching along the sidewalk, awaiting their arrival. "Unload it, lads! And no slubbering, you lazy sots!"

Setting-to with the rest of them, Sam unloaded the bricks into wheelbarrows and hods, keeping her eyes on her business. Nonetheless, despite her concentration, she couldn't shake her anxiety. The occasional passersby occasionally stopped at the entrance to the alley to gawk at the workmen. Their gazes felt hot against her back.

Sam tried to ignore the idlers but suddenly, her short hair tickled the back of her neck. She stopped. She glanced over her shoulder, searching for a pair of watchful eyes. A quick movement caught her attention, but it disappeared before she could be sure of anything.

The mouth to the alley appeared empty. All the workmen were occupied unloading the cart and getting ready for the day's labors. Mr. Hawkins had pitched in with the rest, unloading ten bricks at a time with his massive hands.

The sensation of being studied faded as Sam slipped through the alley to the back of the house. She carefully stacked her load near the decorative wall they were building. Then, she looked around, relieved that the townhouse blocked the view from the street.

Had the man who murdered Major Pickering followed her? *Unlikely.*

Perhaps she just didn't like the city and its busy, crowded streets overmuch. Her uneasy feeling had started when they arrived in London a little over a week ago, but it was hard to resist Mr. Hawkins's joy over winning the bid. He had finally gotten an opportunity to gain a toe-hold in the great city, and all his men would profit from it.

However, Sam wasn't interested in cities—great or otherwise. It wasn't an *opportunity* from her perspective. The job was just another wall with an arched doorway leading into an herb garden. And now, London also presented the danger of a dead man who might have had her name in his pocket.

Not to mention, Mr. Hawkins's sudden and appalling scheme to marry his only daughter off to Samuel Sanderson, the lad who was going to handle their London office after the wedding. It was all a miserable tangle.

Glancing down at her empty hod, Sam shook the brick dust off her hat before going back through the alley for another load of bricks. Her chest thumped wildly as she got within sight of the bustling street. The hair along her arms rose under the long sleeves of her smock, feeling like spiders running over her skin. With conspicuous nonchalance, she turned her back to the road and filled the wheelbarrow with the last of the bricks. The sense of someone observing her would not leave her alone.

Wheeling the last load toward the half-built wall, she took a deep breath and filled her mind with the comforting, solid geometry of bricklaying. The brick townhouse behind her glowed with deep rich red in the midmorning sun. Some previous bricklayer had spent extra time and effort to lay in a subtle design in the brickwork around the windows. The arch should match if they followed her plans, elegantly repeating the unknown bricklayer's design.

Then, if they did well, Hawkins and Hawkins would expand to include a new London establishment. And she would be in charge, as Mr. Samuel Sanderson-Hawkins, the son-in-law to Mr. Edward Hawkins of Clapham. Pride swelled in her chest.

However, despite the soothing repetition of her work, she couldn't ease her growing tension. Over lunch, she made yet another half-hearted attempt to dissuade Mr. Hawkins from his ridiculous idea to make her his heir and business associate.

He laughed, slapped her on the back, and commended her humility. None of the other men had been with him as long or worked as hard. None of the others could read or do sums. So Hawkins made it clear that Sam could either marry Kitty, his sole living child, or search for other employment.

And employment was not easy to find. Sam didn't want to risk losing the only job she knew. Bricklaying was a hard, methodical work but after her hands callused up, she'd grown to like the permanence of it. What she created would live on, well past her lifetime. One day, *she* would be the unknown bricklayer whose work was admired, or even imitated, by a fellow craftsman.

On a good day, when she stood back to contemplate her efforts, her heart nearly choked her as she examined the high, solid walls soaring toward the sky. The solid bricks and mortar stood as an enduring testament to her existence. Her legacy.

So she'd done well by Mr. Hawkins, and he knew it. Her brickwork formed more intricate designs than Hawkins and Hawkins traditionally tackled, and because of this, business had grown from Clapham to London. His reputation was built upon her back, her ingenuity, and talent. And she took immense pride in that.

Finally, as the sun drifted behind the steep roof of the townhouse, Mr. Hawkins slapped her shoulder. Sam stood up in surprise. A sudden wave of exhaustion rolled over her as she rotated her sore shoulders. It was after seven already.

The men were idling along the wall and waiting for dismissal so they could visit the tavern before heading home. Mr. Hawkins stood back and grinned as Sam laid the last brick for the day.

With a satisfied chuckle, Hawkins released the men.

Gritty dust covered Sam's face. She rubbed the sweat from her face using the crook of her arm, which only served to deposit more reddish dirt than she swept away. However, the brick dust hid the fact that she alone of all the workers had no day's growth of beard shadowing her jaw. Wiping her arm up over her brow, she smeared a bit more on her cheeks as Mr. Hawkins strode along the wall to examine the work.

"Good job, lad. Another week like this, and we'll be on to the next."

"Yes, sir," Sam agreed. She stacked the remaining bricks in the rectangular hod next to the wall and covered them with a canvas tarp before picking up her tools.

"To the tavern, then?" Hawkins asked in a voice rich with anticipation.

"Sorry, sir, not tonight," she said. "I've got some personal matters to attend to." After an uneasy day, she had decided she could not ignore the past any longer.

She had to find out what Major Pickering died trying to tell her. If she was truly under observation, then like as not, it was related to his murder—and her past.

And whoever was watching her might intend to kill her, too.

"Personal?" Hawkins eyed her with a frown. His face had the look of a round piece of partially-baked dough with plump cheeks, a soft, bulbous nose, and small black-currant eyes. Still, he had a friendly expression despite the beetling brows wrinkling at her. "What business could you have that I wouldn't know about, eh, after thirteen years?"

She glanced at him and then stared down at her dusty shoes. Unconsciously, she scratched the codpiece she wore under her trousers to hide her sex. Then, realizing what she was doing, she felt a flush seep through the dust on her cheeks. "I've got something I've got to do, sir."

Noting her actions, he laughed and clapped her on the back. "A visit to the apothecary, eh? I told you to leave old Peggy alone last night. Though I guess there's nothing to stop a lusty young man from sowing his wild oats while he may. Crabs, is it?" Instead of anger, Mr. Hawkins appeared proud of Sam for allegedly doing what so many young men desired to do. Perhaps he thought it boded well for his chances of getting grandchildren.

Sam mumbled something under her breath and scratched again. Old Peggy was an understanding woman who liked nothing better than to sit on her rickety bed and talk to Sam for a few shillings. Indeed, according to Peggy, she had many customers who preferred to spend a few minutes gossiping.

And although spending time in private with Peggy led to many ribald jokes from the other bricklayers, there was no one who doubted Sam was exactly who and what she said she was after a half-hour or so spent in a “confidential chat” with the woman.

So, if a case of the crabs could get Sam a little privacy tonight, then she was willing to have them.

“I’d best be getting along, sir.”

“The apothecary were closed, son. Hours ago,” Mr. Hawkins said, walking with her to the cart.

Sam unhitched the tan-and-white draft horse and led it over to Hawkins. He brought up the traces of the cart and held it while Sam strapped the horse into place in their familiar routine. The horse nuzzled her shoulder. Sam rubbed the warm velvet of its ears before fastening and readjusting the harness straps.

“I’ve one near my lodgings. I can catch him right enough and get what I need.”

“Sulfur and ashes, that’s what you want,” Hawkins said, climbing into the seat. “Rub it in every morning and night. You’ll be right again soon enough. Climb in, my lad.” He smiled before adding, “That is, *son*.”

Scrambling up, Sam took the reins and clicked her tongue, trying to ignore Mr. Hawkins. She didn’t want to think about Kitty tonight—or any other night. The horse clopped forward, head down, looking as tired and glum as Sam. The empty cart lurched and bumped as they moved down the cobbled road, making Sam’s bruised back ache.

As she drove, Hawkins warmed the cool evening air by talking about his plans for their new offices in London. He grew so entranced by the prospect that he fairly ignored Sam unless she failed to grunt during his brief pauses. When they got to High Street, she gave the reins over to him and scrambled down.

“I’ll get out here, sir. Good night!” With a wave, Sam slipped away, quickly cutting between the buildings and heading for her street, determined to put an end to the prickling sensation between her shoulder blades.

Across from the dilapidated boarding house where Sam rented a room, there was another townhouse with a small, brass sign. *Second Sons, Discreet Inquires*. Sam passed that building every day, morning and night, barely glancing at it.

The townhouse itself was unremarkable, built out of plain red brick with neat white window frames and black shutters. A narrow walkway abutted a black, wrought-iron fence embedded in a three-foot tall wall to keep the passersby at bay. The black door seemed almost invisible in the shadows of the entryway, but a brass knocker and door handle glittered in the dimness.

If Sam stopped to consider it overmuch, she would have passed the building by and returned home for supper, served at nine sharp. Her fellow lodgers were all working men who left at sun-up and returned at dark. With the spring days lengthening, supper moved along with the sunset to a later hour.

Sam's stomach growled, but she ignored it. She stared at the building, torn between her need to know why Pickering was murdered and her cowardly desire to ignore the entire matter.

But she would lose her job if she missed work investigating on her own, and she had to know—the knowledge might mean her life. So, she had to have help, even if it meant spending a few of her carefully hoarded coins.

Indecision made her step back from the narrow walkway between the black iron railings.

What if she foolishly spent her pay and learned nothing?

She had little enough to live on as it was. Her hand gripped the cold iron as she tried to weigh her decision. She could hold back the rent a few times—let Mrs. Pochard complain—and make it up to her *The Bricklayer's Helper* 17 later.

And she could do without a few meals.

Mouth tight, she pushed open the gate and let it clang shut behind her. She mounted the four brick steps to the front door and eyed the well-polished knocker.

Doubt stayed her hand as her heart fluttered in her chest.

She took one last deep breath and lifted the brass knocker. Her fingers shook so much she slammed the brass knocker down not once, but twice. She winced at the sound and nearly turned to run away.

A butler, formally dressed in dark blue coat and black breeches, opened the door. He stared down his long nose at her before moving to stolidly block the entrance.

“What do you want?” he asked coldly. His eyes moved from the top of her head down her smock to her dusty shoes. “Tradesmen use the back entrance.” With that remark, he started to close the door.

She shoved her foot in the crack. “I'm here on business.”

“If it's a bill, you may leave it with me.”

From the depths of her past, she pulled forth a tattered memory of the manners of those who did not work for a living. She raised her chin and stared down the length of her sun-burned nose.

In the richest tenor she could managed, she replied, “It's a *private* matter. Announce me.”

The butler eyed her another moment before opening the door a foot or so and standing aside. “You are?”

“Mr. Samuel Sanderson.”

“Very good. Wait here.”

Without deigning to glance at him again, Sam entered. She stopped a few feet beyond the door and stood still, hat bunched between her hands. Small clouds of reddish brick-dust gently settled on the black-and-white marble of the hallway, surrounding her in a rust-colored pool that looked very much like dried blood.