

**Seven Spies A-Lurking:**  
*A Lord and Lady Spy Christmas Eve Tale*  
by Shana Galen

**Somewhere in Europe, Christmas Eve**

The spy called Saint curled her hands to keep from itching the tip of her nose. The itch was driving her mad, but if she moved, the man lurking on the other side of the alley might see her. His constant jerks and glances over his shoulder told her he was just nervous enough to panic and flee if he knew he was being watched. That would ruin everything. Besides, the itch was her intuition letting her know this was her man. This was Foncé's turncoat.

She and Wolf had been trying to arrange a meeting with the turncoat for weeks now, but he was reluctant to show himself in public. She didn't blame him. If Foncé's men discovered his identity, they'd kill him.

And not quickly.

Somewhere a clock tower rang out the hour. She counted nine bells and blew out an impatient breath. She hoped this interview didn't take long. Christmas was tomorrow morning, and she still needed to buy her husband, Adrian, a gift.

The turncoat tossed one last look over his shoulder and opened the tavern's door. He disappeared inside, and Saint said a silent *Hallelujah*. She started across the alley then ducked back in the shadows when she saw a shape emerge from the other side. One of Foncé's men? Her fingers caressed the dagger strapped to her thigh.

"I hope you're not thinking to throw that dagger at me," the man said, his breath puffing out like smoke in the cold night air. "And I even brought you a Christmas gift. No gratitude."

Saint sighed and allowed her shoulders to drop. She knew that voice—Blue, one of the agents for the Barbican group. The Barbican was the most elite group of operatives in England. She and Wolf had once been part of its echelons. They were rogue agents at present, but that didn't mean the Barbican didn't take an interest in their activities, especially when said activities related to obtaining information about the leader of the Maîtriser group, a criminal organization responsible for the murder of half a dozen of the Barbican's best.

Saint started across the alley. "I don't have time for games, Blue. I'm meeting Wolf inside."

Blue, who she now realized wore a red cape with white fur, black boots, and a black beaver hat, appeared unimpressed. "I assume you have a meeting with the little mouse of a man who scurried inside. One of Foncé's, I presume."

Saint had long ago ceased wondering how Blue knew everything seemingly even before it happened. Now, conscious of the time, she said, "I'd invite you to come along, but this is a private meeting."

Blue's bright blue eyes shone even in the dim light from the nearby windows, and he raised a brow. "Tsk-tsk. Perhaps I won't give you your gift, after all."

Saint refrained from rolling her eyes. Barely. She needed to go inside before Wolf concluded the interview. More importantly, she needed to go to Bartholomew's Antiquities and Trinkets before ten, or the shop would be closed, and she'd have no gift for Adrian in the morning.

And she'd finally found the perfect gift.

"But I feel so awful, Blue," she said. "I didn't get you anything."

"How typical. I shall give you your gift anyway." And in his white-gloved hands, he held out a small cream-colored card.

Saint frowned. "A letter?"

"Information." Blue flipped the card, and while he read, Saint scanned it. "*Four agents of M group in pursuit. Exercise caution.*"

Saint closed her eyes in frustration. It was obviously a message from Lord Melbourne, the head of the Barbican. She appreciated the information but couldn't stop the flood of annoyance. How had the Maîtriser group found them? Four agents. Counting Blue, that was three against four—a fair match. But could she count on Blue?

"Is information the extent of your gift, or are you here to help Wolf and me?"

"Oh, I have my own mission, Saint," he said with a bow. "You and Wolf are on your own." With a whirl of that ridiculous red cape, he was gone, but she heard his voice float back. "I wouldn't mind a pair of kid gloves—if you're shopping for gifts tonight."

Now Saint did roll her eyes. She turned to the tavern and pulled the heavy wooden door open, Blue's words echoing in her ears. *You and Wolf are on your own.*

That was exactly how they liked it.

She spotted Wolf across the room. His gray eyes were already on her, and she felt the rush of heat she always associated with him. Whether he was Agent Wolf or her husband Adrian, one glance from him could make her breathless. He looked particularly handsome tonight in his blue coat, white cravat, and polished boots. His usually short, cropped hair had grown a little since they'd been away and fell over his forehead giving him a boyish look.

She remembered how he'd appeared a few hours before, staring down at her, that rebellious lock of hair teasing her as he moved inside her. A fire had roared in the hearth before them to keep out the winter chill, but their naked bodies had been warm enough clothed in the fine sheen of perspiration. She could all but feel his muscular shoulders beneath her fingers, feel his thighs against her legs, feel...

She closed her eyes and willed herself back to the present.

She had a turncoat to question, four spies to evade, and a Christmas gift to purchase. There was no time to allow her thoughts to wander, even if the territory was rather delicious.

The tavern was quiet tonight, only a few patrons, speaking in low voices, occupied the scarred tables. Wolf—Adrian—and the mousy turncoat sat in the far corner. Adrian's back was to the wall. She started for him and a moment too late sensed the assassin.

Damn it! Now she would never have time to shop!

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Adrian spotted his wife the moment she entered the dingy tavern. Anyone who looked closely at her, looked beyond the tattered mantle, the scuffed boots, and the fingerless gloves of her disguise would know she didn't belong in a place like this. She was too beautiful, too regal, too deadly.

He saw the assassin a split second before she did. Adrian sprang to his feet but not before she dropped into a roll, neatly evading the man's knife, and kicked the man's feet out from under him. He went down, heavily, and she bounced into a crouch. Her dagger was in her hand and then at the man's throat. "Tell me who you work for," she said in the local dialect.

"Never," the man spat. He put the unarmed hand to his mouth.

Adrian shouted, "No!" But it was too late. The spy had swallowed the poison.

"Devil take it," Sophia was shouting. She'd pulled him to his knees and was pounding him on the back. "Spit it out. Spit it out!"

Adrian was beside her when the man began to convulse. He grabbed her arm and tugged her away. Just for a moment, he held her. He felt her soft body relax into his, felt her quick breaths slow, felt her cold hands warm against his chest. And then he released her and pulled her away. "It was too late. He's gone."

"Well, that's one down," she muttered under her breath. Adrian would have asked what she meant, but he had to tackle the turncoat as the man attempted to sneak out the back of the tavern.

"Not so fast," he said, yanking the man back by the collar. "We're not done chatting."

"I'm done," the turncoat said. "I'm getting out of here before it's too late."

"And do you think they're not waiting for you outside? Your only chance is to stay with Saint and me."

Sophia took a seat at the table they'd vacated and nodded as Adrian pushed the turncoat back into his chair. The rest of the tavern's occupants, momentarily interested in the attack and the man convulsing on the floor, went back to their conversations and their drinks, and one of the barkeeps hauled the dead man out the back.

Just another night in this shady, decrepit zone of the old city. Except tonight was Christmas Eve, and he had yet to purchase a gift for Sophia. This was not like him. Sophia was the impulsive one. He always bought her gift weeks, if not months, in advance. But now that he knew her secrets—knew she was a spy like him—he had trouble finding the right gift. What did one give a spy who was also one's wife?

Diamonds? Poison? Silks? A pistol?

Good God, not a pistol. He wanted to survive until next Christmas.

Finally, yesterday afternoon he'd stumbled into Bartholomew's Antiquities and Trinkets and found the perfect item. But it had not been ready, and now he had to return before ten or the shop would be closed, and he'd have nothing.

"I'm getting out of here," the turncoat said. "I don't owe you anything." He rose, but Sophia put a hand on his arm. Somehow that small gesture stayed him. Adrian could have punched him in the nose, and the man would have still scrambled away. But Sophia had a way of charming those they interrogated.

"You don't owe us anything, that's true," she said softly, "but I have it on good authority that man who just died was one of four of Foncé's men looking for you. If I were you, I'd ask where the other three are lurking."

"And if I talk, if I tell you where Foncé is..."

Adrian withdrew a ticket from his coat. "This is a ticket on a ship that leaves in two hours. It's sailing far, far away. You could be on it. You could start over somewhere Foncé will never find you."

The turncoat reached for it with one of his thin hands, but Adrian slid it out of reach. "Talk, and it's yours."

"I don't know where he is."

Sophia sighed. "And you call yourself an informant?" She rose, giving a convincing impression of someone about to walk away. "Wolf put the ticket away—"

"Wait!" the turncoat all but yelled. "I know what he wants. *Who* he wants."

Sophia sat again, and Adrian nodded for the man to continue.

"He wants someone called *Reaper*."

"Who's Reaper?" Adrian asked.

"One of yours. An assassin. That's all I know."

"The Barbican group is comprised of spies, not assassins," Sophia said.

The turncoat shook his head. "I know what I heard. Foncé wants Reaper, and he knows the man's secrets. Knows how to make him cooperate. May I have the ticket now?"

Adrian slid the ticket over but kept his fingers on it when the turncoat reached across the table. "If you're lying to us..."

The turncoat swallowed. "I'm not. I swear."

"Get out of here." Adrian released the ticket.

When the man was gone, Adrian looked at Sophia. "That's not a bad suggestion, actually." He took her arm, his attention on the room's patrons. "We should leave before someone comes to investigate that dead man. Did you fabricate that story about three other spies?"

"I wish I had." They strolled for the exit, both moving warily, eyes on the other patrons. "I saw Blue before I came in. Melbourne sent us a note." She fished it out of the folds of her mantle and handed it to him. He read it, swore, and shoved it in his pocket.

"Three left. What are the odds they decided to take a holiday on Christmas Eve?"

Sophia opened the tavern's door and knocked the pistol out of the hand of the bald man standing on the other side. "Slim to none," she answered, but Adrian was already ducking a knife attack by another assailant.

"Watch out!" he yelled as the bald man drew a knife on Sophia. But he shouldn't have wasted his breath. She had her own dagger in her hand and hurled it at her assailant with frightening accuracy. The man went down, the dagger protruding from his eye.

Now Adrian's attacker, a burly man with long black hair, took a cautious step back. "She's pretty good, isn't she?" Adrian said.

"*Pretty* good?" Saint frowned at him. "Are you going to dispatch him, or do I have to do everything?"

Adrian ducked as the large man took a swing at him. "You have a pressing appointment?"

"No," she said quickly enough for him to wonder. The attacker took another swing, and Adrian sidestepped, stuck his foot out, and swept the attacker's legs. The man went down with a thud, and Adrian hit him on the back of the head with his pistol. Sophia handed him a length of rope, and he took it, frowning.

"Where did this come from?"

She held up her reticule.

He nodded, binding the man's arms behind his back, as he did so. "I always wondered what ladies carried in those things."

"Now you know. That's three down. One to go."

Adrian gestured to the end of the alley where a man was sprinting away. "I have a feeling that's our last man. Perhaps he decided to take a holiday, after all."

"Perhaps. What are we going to do with this one?"

Adrian hauled the unconscious man to his knees. "I thought I'd pay the tavern owner to store him in the cellar until tomorrow morning. We can interrogate him after breakfast."

She smiled. "What a lovely Christmas gift. You know how I adore interrogations. Would you mind?" She gestured to her attacker, and with a grimace, Adrian pulled the knife free of the man's eye and wiped the blade on a handkerchief.

"It must be true love. Do you want me to wait for you?" she asked.

"No. I'll meet you back at the hotel."

She nodded and began to walk away, but he caught her arm, turned her, and kissed her. "Be careful, and I love you."

"My words exactly."

He watched her disappear down the dark alley then hauled the spy inside the tavern. A few moments later Adrian emerged alone and headed down the alley himself. Sophia had gone. He wanted to make sure to avoid her, so he turned right where she had arrowed left. He'd circle back to Bartholomew's Antiquities and Trinkets, buy her gift, then meet her back at the hotel. She'd be none the wiser.

He'd walked about half a block before he heard the footsteps behind him. The man was a poor spy indeed if he couldn't even muffle his footsteps. Adrian always liked to give another man a fighting chance, but Bartholomew's closed in a quarter hour. He didn't have time for sport.

Without warning, he shot into the recessed doorway of a nearby shop. He had his pistol in his hand, primed it, and then pressed his back against the dark door.

The other man's footsteps ceased, but the spy would come, Adrian knew. The man had no other choice. His leader wouldn't accept defeat. Adrian held his breath and closed his eyes.

There. The faintest footfall. There. The scrape of a boot. He positioned his finger on the trigger, opened his eyes, and stared into the darkness of the doorway. A new shadow crept into his vision, but Adrian did not move. He did not breathe. He heard the quick draw of breath, the faltering step, the sound of a man swallowing fear. And then the attacker stepped into range and Adrian fired. The shot echoed as a tower clock began to chime the hour.

On the second bell, Adrian bent over the man. He recognized this as one of Foncé's men who'd been in London. If Sophia's information was correct, this was his last problem of the night. The clock chimed four.

Except the shop with Sophia's gift was closing right now. The clock chimed five, and Adrian took off at a run, dodging a lonely carriage, jumping over a bench in a park, and skidding around a corner. He reached the block where the shop was located on the ninth bell and ran with everything he had. From the opposite direction a small figure in a worn mantle raced toward him. Wary, he slowed to a walk. The figure did the same, and as the last bell chimed, he realized it was Sophia. They reached Bartholomew's Antiquities and Trinkets together. He stared at her. "What are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?"

"Shopping for Christmas."

Her chocolate brown eyes widened. "You? Shopping this late?"

"Too late apparently." He gestured to the *closed* sign on the door.

"Don't tell me you were buying my gift here. I was buying your gift here."

"My gift?"

Someone inside the store—probably Bartholomew himself—yelled, "Go home. We open again the day after Christmas."

"Wait!" Sophia called. "I just need one small item!"

"Come back after Christmas!" the man called, and the shop window went dark.

Adrian frowned. "Want me to break in?"

"No," she laughed. "And out of curiosity, what were you going to get me?"

He took her arm, pulling her close against the chill of the night. "A parasol—rather the handle of a parasol. Inside was a secret blade. I figured I'd attach a parasol, and you'd have a weapon no one suspected."

They'd been walking, but now she stopped and turned to him. "Was this handle ebony with gold filigree etched on it?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Surely you weren't going to buy me a parasol."

"No. Walking stick. I thought I could put a wolf's head on the end."

Adrian nodded. "It would have been a good gift."

"Yours too." She looked up, frowned, then broke into a huge childlike grin. "Adrian, it's snowing!"

He held out a hand, studied the small white flakes falling on his gloves and slowly melting. "We'll have a white Christmas."

"With no gifts to open."

He pulled her into his arms. "We have each other." He kissed the tip of her cold nose.

"And a man to interrogate in the morning." The giddiness in her voice made him laugh.

"How could I forget?"

He wrapped his arms around her, lowered his head, and pressed his lips to hers. He savored her warm lips and the feel of the powdery snow on his cheeks. When she finally broke away, her dark hair sparkled with white snowflakes.

"You truly do look like a saint," he said, touching her pale cheek just below the spot where ivory flakes clung to her long, dark lashes.

"My thoughts aren't saintly. Let's go back to the hotel and climb into a warm bed." She took his hand.

"There's nothing I'd like better, and Saint—Sophia?"

She turned to him.

"Happy Christmas."