



THE
NUMBER
OF LOVE

THE CODEBREAKERS ♦ 1

ROSEANNA M. WHITE

Books by Roseanna M. White

LADIES OF THE MANOR

The Lost Heiress

The Reluctant Duchess

A Lady Unrivaled

SHADOWS OVER ENGLAND

A Name Unknown

A Song Unheard

An Hour Unspent

THE CODEBREAKERS

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To David,
who always knows the question to ask
to make me see my own heart
and who never lets me get away with the easy answer.



In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord;
My hand was stretched out in the night without
ceasing;
My soul refused to be comforted. . . .

And I said, “This is my anguish;
But I will remember the years of the right hand
of the Most High.”

Psalm 77:2,10 NKJV



There were others—a brilliant confederacy—whose
names even now are better wrapt in mystery.

Winston Churchill
in *The World Crisis*, on Room 40



1



**OLD ADMIRALTY BUILDING
LONDON, ENGLAND
25 SEPTEMBER 1917**

The numbers marched across the page in a glory all their own. Margot De Wilde stared at them for a long moment, looked back at the German telegram sitting on her desk, and then scratched a new number onto the column. Almost there. Almost. She darted a glance out the window.

The sun grew mockingly brighter. When last she'd looked up, it had been only the slightest glimmer beyond the buildings of Whitehall. Now it had cleared them. Soon the day shift would arrive, and if those on night watch hadn't cracked the new codes, there'd be an insufferable amount of jeering.

Her lips twitched. She did her own share of jeering when it was another team that failed to crack the Germans' new codes between midnight and eight in the morning. And her fair share of shoulder slapping and approving nods when she came in of a morning to find the night watch happily asleep at their desks, the new cyphers waiting.

"Come on, come on, come on." At the desk beside her, Nigel de Grey fisted his fingers in his hair. Months ago, he had been the star

of the office, having been the one to hand the Director of the Intelligence Division the telegram from Zimmermann that had brought America into the war. The Germans had thought themselves quite clever, trying to strike a deal with Mexico to bring them into the war on their side. But the Americans hadn't taken too kindly to it when they were informed that *their* territory was to be Mexico's reward.

But that wouldn't matter today, not if their night shift failed to break the daily code for the second night in a row.

"We'll get it." Remington Culbreth indulged in a long stretch, squeezing his eyes shut. "We're too close not to." He'd grown more serious over the last three years, his smiles less frequent. He'd never said why, but Margot suspected it had something to do with the photograph in his wallet that he didn't take out to look at anymore.

She heaved a sigh and let her eyes slide shut. Let the intercepted telegram that had come zipping up the pneumatic tubes just after midnight play before her eyelids. Let the numbers she assigned to correspond to each word go from marching to jumping.

"That's what we said last time. I'll not go out hanging my head again. Dilly didn't stop mocking me about it all week. I—"

"Got it!" Margot surged forward as those beautiful digits settled at last into her mind in the proper order. Ignoring the rustling of her colleagues as they slid over to look at her work, she picked up her pen again and scratched the final numbers into the column on her paper. Checked it against the telegram. Breathed a laugh as she finally was able to scrawl the decrypt of the intercepted message onto the fresh sheet of paper.

"Ah." De Grey gave her shoulder a friendly *whack*. "Good man."

Were Maman in her usual spot at the desk by the door, her lips would have thinned at that compliment—as they always did every time the other cryptographers seemed to forget she was a young woman and not another of them. But Margot grinned. And took a moment to be grateful that the secretaries weren't obliged to take a night shift once a week like the cryptographers were.

Victory sang through her veins. *Three, nine, twenty-seven, eighty-one, two forty-three . . .*

“You have saved us infinite shame, De Wilde.” Culbreth nodded, almost smiling, and then wilted onto his desk. “Have we time for a nap, do you think?”

“Doesn’t sound like it.” Margot could just make out the first of the morning’s footfalls on the stairs and the *ding* of the lift. The Old Building, or OB as they often called it, was coming to life.

She took a moment to order her desk while her colleagues did the same. To obliterate, as much as possible, the evidence of a night hard at work—empty cups, the stale crust of what had been a sandwich, eraser leavings. They had no cleaning ladies in the hive of Room 40. No girls to wheel in tea carts and wheel out the dishes. What tidying got done, they did themselves. The decrypt she’d just managed in hand, she stood and turned to her mother’s desk. Her eyes skimmed the message again. It was a list of ships, possible targets for the U-boats that day. *Boynton. City Of Swansea. Dinorah.*

Nothing out of the ordinary. She’d long ago given up wishing they could send a warning to each one. They couldn’t—it would mean revealing to Germany that they intercepted their every message. It would compromise Room 40. It was a form of *yosu-miru*, as the terms of the game Go stated it—a move that might require sacrifice, but for a greater purpose.

Besides, all the ships in all the world knew the dangers, with unrestricted submarine warfare declared in January. They would be on their guard. They would travel in convoys.

But still, an average of fifteen per day would still sink. Margot dropped the list of U-boat targets into the basket and tried not to do that math. *Fifteen a day, average of thirty days in a month, four hundred fifty ships every month for the nine months since the declaration, equaled four thousand fifty ships lost.*

The door opened, and Margot looked over to see Admiral Blinker Hall stick his head in. “How did the night go, chaps?”

De Grey motioned to Margot and, presumably, the decrypt she’d just carried over. “De Wilde cracked the cypher. Haven’t had time yet to apply it to whatever has come in since.”

The Director of the Intelligence Division—fondly referred to as DID by everyone under his command—sent her an approving smile. “Well done, Margot.” He blinked a few times and moved his gaze to take in de Grey and Culbreth. “Will you be leaving, then? Knox was just behind me, and Adcock too.”

Culbreth nodded and stood, placing his hat over his blond hair in the same motion. De Grey smoothed his tormented locks back down to hide the hours of frustration his fingers had left in them. “I need to speak to Dilly first, but then I shall, yes.”

Hall arched his brows her way. “Margot?”

“I’ll wait until my mother arrives before I go.” Otherwise she might miss her on the walk to their flat, and then Maman would worry all day. No matter how many times she’d made the trek on her own, no matter how old she got, still her mother worried.

Her prerogative, Maman claimed.

A useless argument, Margot knew.

“Very good.” Hall moved away a step, then pivoted back again. “I have an appointment first thing this morning with Lady Hambro and a new recruit. If by chance they arrive before the secretaries, could you direct them to my office?”

“Of course.” Margot smiled at her superior and then kept it in place as her colleagues followed him out—Culbreth apparently aimed at the stairs, de Grey turning the opposite direction, toward Room 53, which Dilly Knox had claimed as his domain. Among the first cryptographers to be recruited to Room 40, Knox had already been firmly established here when Margot arrived. Though absent-minded about practical things, he had a head for mathematics. Margot had liked him from the start.

Silence fell. Crystalline, perfect, and soon gone as the pneumatic tubes delivered another passel of papers with a *thunk*. Pulling in a long breath, Margot took a moment to wish they’d finished the codebreaking an hour earlier. She would have let herself into Knox’s chambers and made use of the bath he’d had installed. The very thought of gallons of warm water surrounding her was enough to make her shoulders sag. The flat she shared with her mother had a

private bath, but the room was always frigid, and there was never sufficient hot water.

She fished the papers out of the tube and sent the holder back down to the basement, where a team was constantly at work typing up the intercepted telegrams from Germany and sending them wherever in the intelligence department they needed to go. A glance at the latest collection told her that if she sat down to get started on it, she'd still be at it come noon.

Tossing them instead onto another desk, Margot stood, stretching as she did so, and wandered to the window. She was more accustomed to this view than any other in London—the familiar rooflines of Whitehall's buildings, the street that led to Charing Cross Hospital with its banner demanding *Silence for the Wounded*. A twenty-minute walk would lead her to her flat, and another twenty would take her to where her brother Lukas lived with his wife and their little daughter. A short tube ride and she'd be in Hammersmith, where said wife's extended family always welcomed her, any time of day or night.

She leaned into the window frame and touched the tips of her fingers to the glass, still cool from the night. Sometimes it was hard to remember that this hadn't always been her world. Even harder to contemplate was that it wouldn't *always* be her world.

Not once this war was over. The war she spent her entire focus on trying to end.

She let her fingers fall from the glass. It *had* to end. The Central Powers must be stopped. And with the United States now fighting on the side of the Allies, with their fresh soldiers and virtually limitless resources, surely it would happen soon. The war would be over. And then . . .

And then . . .

What? Maman would want to go back to Belgium. The longer they were here, the more wistful she became about the house in Brussels that was no doubt currently occupied by some faceless German officer. Lukas and Willa had already decided to split their time between London, Brussels, and whatever cities wanted to host the two renowned violinists on tour.

But Margot? She drew in a long breath and held it while her mind churned out a prayer. *Nine, eighteen, twenty-seven, thirty-six, forty-five, fifty-four* . . . What would be left for her in Belgium? There was her childhood friend Claudette—assuming they would even still like each other, after living such different lives since the De Wildes sought refuge in England. Would a university welcome her there? As a student—or as a professor, eventually? Or would the world expect her to be a typical girl, too busy thinking about needlepoint and knitting and finding a husband to care about academic degrees?

The numbers came to a screeching halt in her head, as they always did when she contemplated a future like that. No, domestic “bliss” would be torture. She’d be a dunce of a housewife. What she needed was something intellectually stimulating with which to fill her days after the war was over. Something in academia, most likely. In mathematics.

Here. In London, if they would let her stay after the war was over. Here, where she’d first tasted the freedom of being who she was.

Muffled voices came from the hallway. One male, one female. Margot tilted her head to better hear them. Lady Hambro and DID? No, it wasn’t Hall’s voice that said, “Just *knock*, Dot.”

Nor, for that matter, was the head of the secretaries called *Dot*. And she certainly never sounded as uncertain as the voice that replied, “But the sign says to ring the bell. . . .”

Margot’s lips twitched up. Yes, each and every door along this hallway had a sign that said NO ADMITTANCE. RING BELL. But not a single door actually *had* a bell. One of their little jokes, meant to dissuade anyone who didn’t belong from interrupting them.

But it was probably Hall’s appointment. Margot strode to the door and pulled it open, noting that it made the girl jump. The man did nothing but turn to look at her.

Siblings, she’d bet. They shared rich brown hair and striking silver-blue eyes ringed by dark lashes. The man, probably mid-twenties, had a knot on his nose that all but shouted that he’d exchanged a few fisticuffs in his day. He wore a naval uniform. The

girl, probably around nineteen, took a step back and cast her eyes down at the floor.

Given that she'd been up for twenty-four hours, the smile Margot managed to summon was small. "Are you here to see DID and Lady Hambro?"

The girl seemed to be trying to vanish into the polished wood floor. Her brother cleared his throat and nudged her forward. "Yes, she is. Miss Dorothea Elton. Applying for the position of secretary."

Three years ago, Maman had been the only secretary in the department, and she'd been hired more as a means of getting Margot here than because the then-boss wanted anyone from the outside coming in. Now there were nearly twenty other females employed by Room 40. They were full of giggling and gossip and tips for keeping one's dress fashionable even with the shortages.

Margot found the lot of them baffling—and new hires nearly intolerable. New ones always thought she was one of them, to be chatted with.

She despised chatting as much as she despised knitting.

She nodded to the man—Lieutenant Elton, if her guess on their relationship was correct and her glance at his uniform accurate. After stepping out into the hallway, she motioned the two to follow her to Admiral Hall's office. "Lady Hambro is not in yet, but the admiral asked me to show you to him." That news delivered, she set off at a brisk pace. Once she delivered them to Hall, she'd go downstairs. Maman should be here any moment. If they didn't pass in the halls, Margot would wait at the front door for her.

"Oh . . . well . . . thank you. I mean . . ." Miss Elton's voice shook. Nerves, no doubt. Though she'd better get a handle on them, or she'd never survive the interview.

For that matter, who had recommended this girl? The secretaries' names were all submitted by other Room 40 staff, and then they were vetted and interviewed by Lady Hambro. Perhaps someone here knew the brother, the lieutenant. It was as likely as anything.

And none of Margot's concern. Having reached the admiral's door, she rapped her knuckles on it twice. After Hall's "Enter" sounded, she opened it and motioned Miss Elton in.

The admiral offered a smile, but he aimed it at Margot rather than the new recruit. “Thank you, my dear.”

“Certainly.” Duty done, Margot spun away.

And nearly collided with Lieutenant Elton, who was, inexplicably, right behind her rather than where he’d been a moment before, two steps to the left. She sucked in a breath and sidestepped him. “Excuse me.”

He slid in front of her again. “Belgian?”

She lifted her brows. Her accent was scarcely noticeable anymore, she’d thought. Not nearly so pronounced as Lukas’s or Maman’s. Her English was as fluent as her French had ever been. She even dreamed in it, most of the time.

And what business was it of his? “Antarctican.” She prepared herself to stalk away . . . but there was something about the grin he gave her. Something that said he appreciated her answer.

Margot sighed. She’d always been drawn to anyone who actually enjoyed her sense of humor. She supposed she could stand to be friendly. For a minute, before her exhaustion fully caught up with her.

He held out a hand. “I’m Drake Elton. Have you a name?”

She blinked. It was a question stupid enough that it should have made her itchy. But he’d smiled at her Antarctica quip, so she’d keep playing along. “No, my parents forgot to give me one. It’s a great tragedy. I’ve been answering to ‘you, girl’ all my life.” She extended her hand too, but not with a limp wrist, as women usually did. She held it out to shake.

He breathed a laugh and shook her hand. “All right, You Girl. I’ll simply astound you with my powers of deduction.” He made a show of concentration—pursed lips, narrowed eyes, and fingers pressed to his temples. “Given that lovely hint of an accent, I would guess Wallonia or Brussels.”

Apparently Drake Elton wasn’t a complete idiot. A corner of her mouth pulled up. “*And*, actually. Not *or*.”

“Two homes, or did you move?”

She tilted her head to the side. A clever question. The answer would tell him quite a bit about her family’s station. “Two.”

Elton leaned against the wall, exaggerated concentration fading into an easy smile. “Which one did you prefer?”

Not the question she would have expected, exactly. But an easy one to answer. “The one in Louvain.”

Being not-an-idiot, he would be familiar with the name *Louvain*—the place that had become synonymous with the German army’s brutality. The place that was now more pile of rubble than actual town.

But his face didn’t settle into lines of horror. Acknowledgment flickered through his eyes, and his smile lost a single degree of its ease, but he held it in place. “What do you miss most about it?”

She drew up straighter. Occasionally people asked her about her former home—what it had been like, how they escaped the destruction, whether the German occupation had been as cruel as the papers reported. But no one had ever asked her *that*, and she didn’t have a ready answer—a strange state, for her.

Memories crowded, shouting to be recalled above the others.

The pastries from the bakery down the street. The library at Papa’s university. The old schoolroom where tutor after tutor had fled in exasperation when she’d insisted—and proven—that she knew just as much already as they did. The mountain of books and newspapers and articles they’d lost in the fire when the soldiers invaded.

Strange. Just a few minutes ago, she was thinking of how she didn’t want to go back. Now, in her mind, she had done just that. And her lips curved up. “The tree in our back garden. There was a bench under it—the best place in the world to read.”

His smile brightened again, went warm, invited her to say more.

Maybe she would have, had voices not been echoing down the corridor. But the last thing she wanted was the secretaries to see her talking with a smiling young man and mistake it for something inane, like flirtation. She’d be drilled by them for weeks. So she nodded and stepped away. “If you’ll excuse me. It seems everyone is arriving for the day.”

He pushed off the wall. “Aren’t you going to tell me your name before you go?”

Perhaps her smile was a bit impish. And perhaps she took a bit

too much joy from saying, “No.” Perhaps she would if he actually ever asked her for it. . . . “But you’re a clever man. You’ll work it out.”

If she’d been too impish, he apparently didn’t mind. His laugh followed her down the corridor.

It took her only a moment to dart back into Room 40 and gather her things. By the time she exited again, though, the lift had opened and spilled out a veritable sea of codebreakers and secretaries, all chattering.

Margot aimed for the stairs, jogging down them with more of a bounce than she usually had after her once-weekly night shift. The energy would fade soon, but with a bit of luck she could ride it through the walk home.

Maman was just gliding through the doors, her beautiful face lighting in a smile upon spotting her. “*Bonjour, ma petite.*”

Margot smiled. She returned the greeting in French, let her mother enclose her in a quick embrace, and then pulled her chin out of Maman’s hand when she tried to examine her face far too closely.

“You have shadows under your eyes,” Maman said, still in French.

Margot shook her head. “I’m tired,” she answered in English. “But I am well. Do you need me to run any errands this afternoon?”

Maman shook her head too, but it looked far different than Margot’s mechanical motion would have. All smooth elegance and grace, her every movement. Even dressed in a simple cotton blouse and grey wool skirt, Sophie De Wilde looked exactly like what she was—a gentlewoman, the beauty of her day, a lady to make heads turn wherever she went. One of refinement and elegance that war shortages and a menial job couldn’t hide.

“I left a meal on the table for you. Eat it before you go to bed, *ma puce.*”

Margot pressed her lips against another smile. Her mother still seemed to think that she’d let herself starve if she didn’t issue that command. As if Margot were not the one to prepare half the meals—sparse as they were. “I will.” She leaned over to kiss her mother’s satiny cheek. “Have a good day. I’ll see what’s to be found in the shops this afternoon.”

Maman gave her a pointed look. “We both know you will be right back here by two o’clock. But we are dining at your brother’s tonight, do not forget. We must leave at a decent hour.”

“*Oui*, Maman.” Her bed calling all the louder from down here, she stepped away. “I’ll see you later.”

“Rest well.”

Margot slid her hand into her pocket to reassure herself that her key was still there and set off for their flat. A meal, some sleep, a chilly bath. Then she’d be back here, where she belonged.