

INTRODUCING MATTHEW GRAHAM

Date of Birth: March 31 in the year of our Lord 1630.

Astrological sign: Aries (but he scoffs at such nonsense)

Education: None from a formal perspective, but he knows his letters, has a knack for ciphering and has most of the Catechism down by heart. (He grins and mimes an aching backside as he explains his Da was most insistent on this.) An intuitive horseman (said with pride), an excellent swordsman – no choice, had he not learnt to wield the sword he'd have died well before his twentieth birthday given the unrest of the times. Quite the marksman with a musket – pistols, he says, are unreliable things. Has gone unbeaten in chess since his Da died, enjoys singing and has a secret passion for John Donne's poetry – not something he talks all that much about.

Favourite dish: Food, he says with something of a frown. As long as there's something to eat on a daily basis what does it matter what it is? When I push he admits to a fondness for pork cracklings – and for Alex' spice cake.

Favourite pastime: Long winter mornings spent in bed. (He winks)

He is most reluctant. Matthew ducks his head as he enters the room but remains by the door, hat in hand. Outlined against the square of light that is the open door he stands tall – inordinately tall given the times – and with a pleasing width to chest and shoulders. A strong man – a man accustomed to physical work, as can be seen from his forearms and hands, at present rather dirty after a full day out in the fields.

"I don't see the point," he mutters, slapping his hat against his thigh.

"It's called PR," I say.

Matthew rolls his eyes. I've tried to explain this concept to him over and over again, but as far as he's concerned this is all a waste of time.

"I just want to introduce you to my readers," I say.

"Hmm." Someone laughs in the yard and he turns towards the sound, exposing a strong jaw and straight nose. As he turns back towards me, sunlight strikes him full in the face, and those hazel eyes of his lighten into golden green.

"Some background, no more," I wheedle.

With a sigh he comes over to join me by the table, sitting down on one of the stools. He leans back against the wall, extends his long legs and crosses them at the ankle. His thighs bunch and relax under the coarse homespun of his breeches. Too tight, these breeches, too worn – not that I mind, not at all. I pour him some beer, leaning close enough to catch his scent, a fragrance of morning dew on a mossy moor, overlaid by the riper tones of wood smoke and male sweat. He needs a shave, his cheeks covered by dark stubble that is highlighted by the odd streak of deep red. Matthew clears his throat and I retake my eyes. It makes him smile.

“Background, aye?” And with that he begins to talk.

Okay, so I’m not going to bore you with his detailed description of his childhood. At times I think he forgets I’m sitting there, so sunk is he in his memories of his Mam. He describes a very religious home, a place where having regular conversations with God about just about everything was the norm. But his mother laughs and sings, she berates God loudly when he’s inconsiderate enough to let it rain on her drying laundry, blows kisses to the heavens when the harvest is bountiful. His father is another matter; Malcolm Graham practices a stern faith, and as a consequence so do his children – and in particular his eldest son.

“As it should be, no?” Matthew shrugs. He shifts on his stool, drumming his fingers against the table top.

His speech slows when he tells me of his years in the Commonwealth Army. A boy growing to a man amongst so much violence ... It makes me shudder, but he speaks of his comrades and officers with warmth and respect, and I come to realise just how much these men have shaped him into what he is today, a man with a deep seated belief in every man’s right to have a say in how he’s governed.

He breezes over the details of the battles he took part in, is equally brief as he recounts his courtship of Margaret, his first wife. He says her name carefully, as if his mouth fills with thorns when he pronounces it. And as to Luke ... Matthew refuses to say a word about his brother – well, beyond cursing him for being the misbegotten treacherous pup that he is.

“Three years,” he says. “That’s what yon miscreant has cost me. Three years of non-life, of one endless day after the other, so alike there was no way of knowing if it was Sunday or Thursday, March or October. Well, mayhap the Sunday part is not correct; there’d be a minister come to visit us every now and then, long sermons about our duty to the Realm and it’s Lord Protector, very little about Our Lord’s mercy.” Matthew smiles crookedly and fiddles with his belt. “It wasn’t as if I had betrayed the Commonwealth, but no matter what I said no one believed me. So I stopped talking – beyond the necessities.” He has twisted his hands together and spends some minutes studying the way his fingers braid around each other.

I wait. Talking about the years spent in prison due to the false testimony of his younger brother comes difficult to Matthew.

“Sometimes ... nay.”

“Sometimes what?” I say.

“I ... they had me flogged, aye? For being obstructive. But I wasn’t – no more than all of us were.” He spits to the side. “It was Luke, I reckon.”

“You think?”

“Gold buys you favours everywhere,” Matthew says. “And he paid them well enough that they found reason to flog me on a regular basis, aye? Hoped I’d die of it, I reckon.” His shoulders tense under the linen of his shirt. His back is decorated with scars courtesy of those floggings, and he’s terribly self-conscious about his broken skin.

“But you didn’t die,” I say.

“I would have –had I not escaped.” A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. “Took them some time to realise I’d run – if not they’d have caught me before I made it over the Trent. As it was, I was well away by dark. But the next day ...”

“What?”

“Persistent man, yon commander. He’d had his men out looking for me all night, and at dawn they had me neatly cornered.” Matthew laughs, and his eyes crinkle together for an instant or two. “It makes you right weak livered to sit on a roof and watch your pursuers come closer and closer. I had no choice; it was either leap off the roof and run for it or ...”

“Or what?”

“The chimney.” He shakes his head. “Near on falling down it was, and with so many rooks’ nests crammed down inside it it’s a marvel it hadn’t caught fire before. Part of the upper ledge crumbled when I clambered inside, and when I hunched down, well ...”

The roof had given way with a rending sound and he’d fallen to land in a bed, atop a woman - an old crone of a woman with no teeth and a grimy, oversized nightcap crammed down on her head. Fortunately she’d been alone in the bed that took up most of the space in the little garret room.

“I’m not sure who was the most frightened, me or her, but she kept her wits about her, and when the guards came storming up the stairs she shoved me under the quilts to lie with my face squished against her bosom.”

“Ah.” I can imagine that hadn’t been too much of a sacrifice. A man like Matthew Graham in your bed ... I waggle my brows.

“She was old! Like Methuselah! And she stank, aye? The whole bed stank, and it sagged so badly in the middle her arse must have been resting on the floor, with me on top.” He makes a face. “She wiggled her hips, the dirty old trollop, and all the while the men were in the room she had me pressed so close to her chest I near on swooned with lack of air.”

“Ah,” I repeat.

He looks at me from under his lashes – long dark lashes – and smiles, his long lips curving in a way that makes me feel a ridiculous urge to giggle. I don’t.

“So why did she hide you?” I ask.

“A royalist helping another royalist, I reckon. And I saw no reason to correct her perception of me. Not even when she gave me her late son’s shirt, saying that he’d died at Naseby. She saved my life,” he says, sounding serious. “Had that old lady handed me over, I’d have been dead and buried long since, and Alex ...”

“...would never have met you – or you her.”

“Nay.” He looks away at absolutely nothing. “That would have been a great loss.”

“For her or for you?” I ask, somewhat touched by his tone.

“For us both.” He grins and stands up. “But mostly for her, no? How would that daft lass have survived had I not found her?”

By the door he turns to look at me. “She’s made it all worthwhile again.”

“Made what worthwhile?”

“Life,” he says, covering his dark, wavy hair with his hat. “Alex?” he shouts as he steps into the yard.

“Over here,” I hear her call back.

I rise to peek at them through the little window. Two people walking off towards the moor, so synchronized they walk like one. By the time they’ve crossed the yard she is fused to his side, her arm round his waist, his arm round her shoulders.

“Lucky girl,” I say out loud. Or is she? After all, I haven’t quite made up my mind as to how this story will end. I chew on my pencil and watch them out of sight.