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# SET DOWN IN MALICE

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C. Hampton Jones

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## Wellington's Heroes Series Book 2

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Editor: Alex Blackburn

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## Chapter 1: A GRAVE IN ST. GILLES

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June 1809, London, Saint Giles-in-the-Fields.

A fine black calf's-leather bootee tapped on the big grey slab of limestone on the church floor. It hesitated when it felt a slight tilt.

The woman lifted her skirt from her ankles so that she could look more closely at the well-trodden horizontal tombstone. It was lying in the middle of the path which led from the rows of seats for the congregation straight to the exalted, barely adorned altar. No doubt every poor soul that entered the now disreputable church would place at least one dirty foot, probably more, on that slab that covered the rotting corpses beneath the tiles.

Saint Giles-in-the-Field hid the way into the Rookeries, the most feared, criminal neighbourhood in all of London. It was the Cerberus to London's hell that stretched as far as Great Russell Street and lay flanked by another poor man's cursed region called Seven Dials.

Perfect! It was just perfect!

A sardonic smile played around lush lips, hidden behind the black lace of her heavy veil. She felt like gathering the spit in her mouth and dropping it on the stone. She would have performed this disgraceful act if she had not seen

someone praying fervently in the benches at the back.

The woman curved her lips; she had noticed the pious wreck peeping at her through wrinkled dirt-stained hands.

“May you burn in hell, William the Fat,” she whispered. “May your flesh crinkle like lard in a hot pan and may it grow back on your evil body and start your agonies all over again, every single day you’re doomed to stay there!”

She stepped back two paces, gloating as she looked at the place where her elegant black bootees had rested.

“I hope I am standing on your useless dick,” she muttered, careful to keep the venom from her voice.

She heaved her left foot and let the heel come down hard. She almost yelped when the slab of stone moved.

“Ma’am?”

She immediately recognized the eager voice of the young vicar and raised a hand to remove the black widow’s veil which was covering her face. She slid her black wrap from her shoulders with the other.

The Reverend Simon Desmond, newly appointed vicar of the suffering church of Saint Giles-in-the-Field, stood hesitantly before her. She wondered if he had not immediately recognized her as his stare was directed at her

highly indecent neckline, which was decidedly inappropriate for a mourning widow.

He was a handsome man, this young vicar. His crow black hair curled around his ears. His jaw was firm and his eyes shone with what could be easily interpreted as devotion. He lacked height but that gave him the opportunity now to stare directly at her barely covered chest. She wondered if he would be so bold as to put his nose against her cleavage and suppressed a grin.

“Reverend Desmond,” she murmured, “I did not hear you approach.”

Simon Desmond almost fell down on his knees when he acknowledged his latest benefactor at last. Her cleavage had not only been revealing but also very distracting.

“Mrs. Alexander,” he chanced to mumble, almost unable to look up into her lovely face. It was hard to choose between the milky, fleshy, mounds in the black silk bodice or the beautiful heart shaped face that was now surrounded by a mantilla of black lace.

“So this is his final resting place?” Marguerite Alexander’s voice was husky as if she was swallowing tears.

“Yes, yes, I am afraid so,” the vicar confirmed, wringing his hands.

“I explained to you that it would be hard to find a suitable place inside the church...”

Marguerite put a mesmerizing black satin-gloved finger on her almost visible breastbone.

“Don’t you worry, Reverend,” she breathed, “my husband would not have wanted any other place...”

In order to hide her smirk, she turned her head away from the light that fell through the high, coloured windows.

Saint Giles-in-the-Fields, his preferred place of burial, indeed! He would now be turning in his shallow grave if he could. The place was the messiest burial site in all of London. The bodies in the graveyard almost flowed out of the coffins onto the sticky mud whenever it rained in this terrible part of the city. The always present stench of decay was a fierce attack on the senses, and any normal breathing person would hardly be able to stand the smell for more than a few minutes without fainting. She could. She, Marguerite Alexander, formerly the Honourable Miss Marguerite Aurora Ross, the late Baron Halkhead’s daughter, just stood there in this hell of decay, almost dancing on the grave of her tormentor: her so very dead husband, William Alexander. She imagined that his decrepit smell of degeneration was probably in her very nostrils right now.

The Reverend Desmond had initially refused to take her husband in for burial. He had not wanted him inside the church and neither had he wanted

him in the cramped graveyard. Everybody in London knew that the church of Saint Giles-in-the-Fields was overflowing with dead bodies; rotten corpses, everywhere.

Marguerite had offered to pay through her nose to get William Alexander inside the church. And so it happened. The church was a poor man's church and how could a vicar in need of funds refuse to fulfil a dying man's last wish? If Mr. William Alexander had expressed his preference for his last resting place in the picturesque church in the middle of his beloved city of London, who was the humble vicar to refuse?

The grave had been shallow, narrowly accommodating the big coffin. The slab of stone was wobbly because it almost rested on the lid of the coffin. It had been somebody else's grave, because the slab of stone carried the name of a corpse long gone: another William. This one may have died peacefully amongst his beloved family in 1745, instead of perishing on his smelly commode, shitting himself in his last moments of agony, when his black heart and bilious liver deserted their services. His own servants had turned their heads away from his corpse, pinching their noses when he had been carried away for the necessary rites. The corpse had been coloured yellow and green and had reeked worse than a pig's sty full of shit.

Marguerite had to bite her lower lip to keep from smiling at the memory of how her husband's ever-fawning staff had been disgusted with their employer, whose demise had been so undignified.

Smelly Pig William, tucked away under somebody else's stone. The affront! The delight!

Nobody had been there when his heavy coffin had been lifted into the shallow hole of the grave; none of his old cronies, none of the other misers, none of his Scottish family members who had only come out later in full force to get their hands on his fortune. Such loneliness in death! Such sweet revenge!

She had professed to be on the way to the funeral, but her heavy carriage was delayed in the crowded streets. She had meticulously planned a route that took her through the narrowest streets, which she had ordered her unwilling but obedient coachman to take.

At last, the vicar, tired of waiting, had started the service in honour of William's demise without her, exactly as she had intended. In June, one could not delay a burial for too long and it was not right anyway to bury a law-abiding citizen after six o'clock. There were the evening prayers for the parish, and in any case, the body had emanated a smell that sickened the coffin bearers to gasping and heaving and had to be gotten rid of as soon as possible. It was assumed that the widow was having such a bad time parting from



her husband that his fat and fast decomposing corpse had remained a few days too many on this earth. She had insisted he should be buried on a Sunday, the Day of the Good Lord, as she had whispered. A bit scandalous; burials were for the weekdays, but after another sum had parted from her black satin reticule, the needy vicar realized that the Bishop lived far away and would anyhow, most certainly, approve of the extra funds for the poor parish, if not for the vicarage.

No doubt in her sadness, the widow had not realized that the body could be partly embalmed and sprinkled with specific herbs to prevent that awful smell, which was causing everybody who approached the expensive, but curiously dripping coffin within a circle of twenty yards to gag; the stench was unbearable.

“Are you well, Mrs. Alexander?” the vicar asked, still not able to remove his stare from her breasts.

Ah yes, the vicar! It had taken her the loan of a dress from one of the serving wenches and an afternoon near the women’s bathhouse, filthy to the rafters, to find out that yes, the vicar was too good for this world! He just could not say no to the needy, and no, the vicar was not married. Yes, he had his small vices, but didn’t all men of flesh and blood? Especially as he was not blessed with a tall body (snicker), but the face of an angel, nay

make that the boulder Lucifer with his dark good looks and his crow-coloured hair.

One of the younger misses had told her with a giggle that the vicar, although very serious and probably pious, had not been able to keep his sights nor his hands off his generously endowed laundress, suggesting he might marry her, although he had already checked the registers and found out that she was firmly wed to a sailor. That had been a bit of a setback for Marguerite. Such a man could easily become a nuisance to her not very serious intentions.

The next confession had convinced her to try to seduce the man into burying her spouse in the most obnoxious place in London. The girl said he did not “feck”, which meant, within a good translation, that the vicar touched, but did not put his cock inside a woman of his parish. He obviously had narrowed down the biblical idea of “carnal knowledge” to the act of penetration itself, not to the delights of touch and suck.

Marguerite had felt a pang of desire worming its way down her belly to a very sensitive place between her legs. Ah, God, but touch and suck would suit her very well! There would be too much explaining to do around the birth of a child more than ten months after the death of one’s husband nearly in his dotage anyway. Further information had taught her that the vicar preferred abounding mounds of flesh on a woman’s chest

(which Marguerite could amply supply). The girl had giggled profusely, obviously hiding a few more juicy details. She did reveal that he had this thing about women clad in black. It was almost eerie and all too close to the description of a widowed Marguerite, but there it was! As a final insult to her deceased tormentor, she would seduce the vicar who put him in his undignified grave.

She had come to the church this morning, dressed in her inappropriately low-cut widow's weeds to see how to go about that task.

She had known he would come to the church as soon as he had seen her burly coachman, Crowley, holding the leading horse of the carriage in front of the church. Three armed footmen were standing next to her town-carriage to avoid any molestation on the part of the less honourable people that crawled out of London's Rookeries.

She turned to the vicar with a sad face. She had already noticed that "sad" drew more of his attentions than anything else.

"I do feel a bit faint..." she said with a weak gesture of her gloved hands towards her temple. She moved slowly as if she was on the verge of falling to the floor. At that moment she felt his helpful hands high on her waist, his thumbs closely under her high corseted breasts.

Vicar Simon Desmond originally came from a good family; his father was a country-squire in

Kent. He had been the third of seven children and at the time serious enough to be deemed suitable for a religious calling. He was only twenty-six years of age when he had become the vicar of a very small village in Sussex. There he met a wealthy widow who used her sexual wiles on him. They had a somewhat stormy ‘affair’ until she found somebody else to her liking: richer, older, another man of the cloth. Regrettably one that surpassed poor Simon in rank and position. When Simon started to stalk his paramour after a great fit of the mopes and threats to his competitor, word suddenly reached the bishop about his unsuitable behaviour. He was given the choice of a vicarage in another hole in the ground in Northumberland or Saint Giles-in-the-Fields; the disreputable and poor parish in London. He had chosen wisely for the city of London. It was just that Saint Giles-in-the-Fields was possibly the worst place one could be called to. It was dirty, filled with criminals and was the poorest section of London. It was also worldly however. Its inhabitants did not frown if you leered at pretty, fleshy girls, they merely expected you to. His background protected him from the all too ambitious girls who would like to share his bed and the household of the small vicarage by means of a snug golden ring on their finger; his golden ring. The likes of him did not marry the likes of them, and that was final.

His small victories over willing girls were sensibly few within the parish. He did not mix with the abounding Magdalena's of the neighbourhood, who represented about half of the Rookeries population, if not more, except for taking their confessions and tending to their last rites.

The not so few times his mind was overpowered by his overwhelming manly desires, at twenty-seven one still had his baser needs, he had taken off his vicar's garb and disappeared into the anonymity of the crowds near Covent Gardens. He might have to take a paid woman against a wall in an alley, always putting on the French letter his ex-lover, the widow, had provided him with, but it silenced his rampant needs for some time. Being a vicar did not protect one from being human or horny.

Without the clothes of the clergy-man on his back he assumed he could stretch the words of St. Paul to an agreeable extent; that he was only a sinner finding carnal knowledge with somebody outside the boundaries of the parish. To be truthful, his was not a calling but a job.

The almost fainting widow Alexander, although way out of his league, was now resting comfortably on his lower arms. She had been subject to his erotic musings and dreams for many long, shameful and rather hot nights in a row of late.

She could never fool him with her demure behaviour. As a man of the world, he knew she was nurturing lustful feelings for him. After all, this was something he had to cope with on a daily basis.

When he tried to straighten her a bit he rested a hand on the delightful underside of her generous bosom.

Her slight little smile told him all he needed to know, so he convinced her to come into his vicarage for a strengthening cup of tea.

Only when she turned around to peer at her husband's grave did he see the vengeful expression on her exquisite face. Vicar Desmond was well aware of her obvious thoughts of revenge, his widow in Surrey had been full of it as well, and he was not disinclined to be used for the purpose of it. After all, his life had not been a bed of roses either.

He did not mind being 'used' by the poor beautiful Mrs. Alexander, especially now that she was so recently widowed and poor in the way of the spirit, not to mention the deceased husband's fortune that was now hers to spend as she pleased.

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From the diary of M. Aurora Ross

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Third of June 1809

Dear Diary,

Welcome to my life. I never dared to have you when the Fat Man was still alive. I know everybody including him spied on me and I even suspected that poor Mr. Baines, his man of affairs, had strict orders to report every small thing about me that would be of interest to the Fat Man.

Of course, I could have given you into the care of Rose, my wonderful maid, but I had already burdened her enough with my scraps of newspaper about H.A., and I didn't want to make another nuisance of myself. The Fat Man would not have been above punishing poor Rose if he had any inkling that she was hiding my most intimate thoughts put on paper. I know he disliked Rose utterly, and for sure, the feeling was mutual. The only condition I dared pose, before marrying him, was that Rose would come and be allowed to stay until mine or her dying day.

No, Rose was disgusted when she heard I was to marry the Fat One, but who were we to oppose the wish of my grabbing parents?

What I had wanted to put on paper anyway, in those last five years in my prison on Berkeley Street, was his abusive annoyance with me when he found out that I could excite him enough to feel some stirrings in his lower regions, but as soon as he contemplated to do the deed he would go as limp as a lily. (That was not my own expression, but one out of those naughty books

out of the Far East that were lying around in his dressing room.)

I had wanted to write about his unreasonable jealousy if a younger man dared to look at me twice. I was not suffering from leprosy or any such thing and men always stared! So many dinners I had on a tray in my bedroom because he did not wish his customers to gawk at me. I was not aware at the time that he resented their licentious thoughts about me, because I never noticed that they nurtured anything of the kind, which was silly and stupid and naïve of me. Alas, that is what I was when I married the Fat One: silly, naïve and mercenary. Oh Sweet Lord was I mercenary!

Should I have counted the number of days that I was not allowed to leave that miserable house? Because he was scared out of his wits that I would smile at the street sweeper and have him debauch me in a hidden street corner?

Should I have stated the obvious, that I was to be released only those few times, when it could not be helped, like that dinner with the London Mayor because London and the Prince needed money?

Oh Lord, how I hated those invitations. He always took his revenge later by doing those abhorrent things to me as soon as we returned home –back into that prison. He was such a vile



man, that Fat One! I will only be consoled by the fact that he never, never...

But today, I had my day of revenge.

Today I stamped on the stone that covered his stinking fat body. Today I came back to check if he was there, at the most detested place I could think of. Sweet Good Lord- I had the impression I could smell him where his body decayed. Speedy decay: it was just as the Apothecary had promised me when he gave me that powder to throw over his disgusting corpse when it was securely in its gross, leaking coffin.

I had tea with that young vicar who looks like an angel but who had adopted vices that would make even Lucifer himself blush. It was just like that laundress said, but heavens, did he bring me to the gates of Paradise with his tongue and his fumbling! Am I naughty enough to describe it to you? Oh, why not, he is not here to read it, he is dead, dead, dead!

I had seen it in one of those books that the Fat Man kept in his dressing room. I just never guessed it would be such a wonderful thing to experience! To have someone's tongue actually licking your very intimate spot, while he was doing things to that strangely rigid member of his. I call that strangely rigid, but the laundress said that almost all men get to that stage when they are properly 'excited.' I asked her afterwards. She told me all those things for only one sovereign.

She sat with me in the carriage. I had Crowley look for her and she was not very far away. The whole neighbourhood had come out to watch the carriage, imagine! I was sitting in it talking to this girl, who knew everything!

She was not shy at all about it and I was happy to hear an experienced account of those things people normally keep secret from a 'respectable' woman.

I wonder if Rose ever knew about those things. She had been married, you know, although that must have been before I was born. If I remember correctly, there was no husband around when she worked for my stepfather and mother.

We have our own laundress at Berkeley Street but still I offered this one the job, just to have her close to me. I was astonished that she refused to come, but she said she was seeing somebody special and that she hoped he would come to live with her and her mum. She told me her husband never came back from his sea-voyage to the Far East, as the ship was reported to have gone down near Aden, wherever that is.

Imagine preferring a life in the Rookeries with a specific person, to serving in a great house in Mayfair! I had to make her swear to keep silent forever about our conversation; but she only laughed and said that everybody knew about what she was explaining to me. Imagine; everybody, except for me! Well, I knew about that thing

where the Fat Man forced me to take him in my mouth. Good sweet Jesus, he was rank and stale with that terrible pungent odour of his! This must have been because he hardly ever took a bath and that useless old valet of his was not allowed to wash him “there.”

Well, there had been enough punishment for me to last me a lifetime! Yes, punishment, for my mercenary thoughts when my stepfather convinced me to marry the Fat One.

People say I was forced, Rose says so, but I did say ‘yes’ in that chapel four years ago, didn’t I? I wanted all that money and the luxuries at the time and I never once looked back at poor Hengist, who begged me to run away with him after that one kiss.

Oh, my wonderful Hengist! I was only just eighteen and certain that being married to the Fat One would be the right thing to do. Hengist was only a captain at the time, and although he is the second son of the Earl of Loghaire, normally a great catch for a girl like me who was only ‘Honourable’ and just a lady, he would never have the money his brother might inherit (said my stepfather), if any would have been left, of course.

The Old Earl was known to be a terrible gambler and a rogue, until he had that accident and slowly lost his marbles and was at last reduced to live like a plant in a hothouse. Anyway, Mother and my Lord McKenna needed

the money then, or better the day before that yesterday. After I wed the Fat One, Mr. Baines had explained to me that the Fat Man had bought off all their debts. Those debts would have been able to reduce us all to a life on the streets, or worse yet, in a vile Debtor's Prison, if I had not consented to marry the Fat Man. I married him because Father and Mother kept on pleading with me and I truly could not stand their tears and laments.

I had no idea what it would mean to be married to someone. I thought you just said yes, wear an incredibly expensive dress and then depart in a beautiful town-carriage.

Rose tried to warn me, but my mother sent her away on some errand. My mother should then have warned me about my marital duties, but she just told me to lie back, open my legs wide and think of the jewellery I was going to get when I presented my husband with a son and heir.

If only I had talked to the laundress before the Fat One put his dirty hands on me, or even that I had met Simon before everything happened, because when I married the Fat One I did not have a clue about what it meant to be with a man. How nice it is to have the company of a man like Simon! He's only a couple years my senior and, unlike that Fat Old Ape, he smells good, has nice strong arms and a sweet smelling chest with no hair at all on it.

Of course, I didn't have any experience with men at all. My hag-mother took care of that. I was only allowed to go to church or to the lending library when we lived in Edinburgh, but that is all water under the bridge, now.

I must hurry because Mr. Baines will come to explain the accounting to me. He already told me a lot more about Alexander and Stephenson's, even during the time the Fat One was still alive and travelling. I think it is very complicated, all of it, but he insists that I know about these things because I own most of it now. Rose shakes her head about it, but I tell her it is very enlightening and does keep boredom at bay.

Mr. Baines' motives might be a bit less noble, I think, than I'd given him credit for, but I don't care. He teaches me to read the balances of the 'ready investments' but I have never been on any of the Fat One's shipyards in my life. I have the impression he wants me to be happy with my fortune, which is reasonable enough. He is looking for someone to buy the shipyards because I have no inkling as to how to run them. Well, I couldn't care less about those shipyards. Truth be told, the thought of ships gives me a queasy belly, but then, I have never been on a real one except the ferries over the Firth.

Back to happier thoughts. Tomorrow night I will have a rendezvous with Simon. I will take a hackney to St. James Park where he will join me

for a ride. God, but I am a wanton woman  
because I cannot wait to have his... I'd better  
reign in my wanton thoughts, because I am not  
certain Mr. Baines will not guess them otherwise.

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## Chapter 2: A MOLLY HANGING

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London, Newgate, 23 November 1809

The crowd seemed to go berserk when the condemned criminals were finally led through the Debtor's Door outside the Old Bailey. The mass of bodies swayed in front of the portable gallows. They surged and pushed, shouting, shrieking, and cursing in a merge of England's most colourful dialects and accents. Just for a short time the differences in station, race and sex seemed to disappear as everybody chanted in a strange mutuality: gentlemen, potboys, whores, shop-girls, and servants alike.

"Bugger! Bugger!" the mob roared in wild elation, obviously gin-soaked and beer-bellied even at the early hour.

A swat of drunken harlots tried to rush the cordon of soldiers carrying pikes who were placed around the gallows to ensure a neat execution without interference from the mob. The military men just laughed and called out hoarse, raw jokes; pushing the women back with lecherous glee, manhandling them by purposely gripping their sagging breasts, skinny butts, and fishy-smelling mounds. The heavily painted birds of the streets jeered at them, reeking of the night's bad gin, their bodies unwashed after having struggled out

of their dirty cots and pallets just to be in time for the early morning's execution.

They leered at the soldiers in the cordon for after-execution custom; anyone there knew that executions changed men into horny rutting beings and business would be good.

The three prisoners stumbled to the short stairway leading to the platform of the portable gallows; their wrists tied in front of their chests, a rope bound their arms, shoulders, and bellies to diminish any motion of the upper body. They wore white night-caps that hid the hair on their rugged heads--obligatory at the execution--lending them a strange innocent look.

All three were shivering, frightened by the teeming mass of people that surged and moved wildly, shouting the vilest curses, throwing dung and dirt at the convicts who were now visibly white with fear.

"Look at those Harpies," Lord Morvern mumbled, staring at a group of vicious bedraggled women, who shrieked with foulest insults, throwing handfuls of rotten fruit and vegetables at the hapless convicts. It was clear that the main target of their abuse was the sodomite who tried to hide behind the prison's ordinary.

"Would you mind sitting back, sir?" The ungodly reeking fat man next to the Viscount urged.



“We all paid the same money for a good view, mind.”

Philip shifted his chair a bit so that he turned away from the stench of the man. Some people did not understand the meaning of soap and water and this was surely one of them. He got his perfumed handkerchief out of the lace sleeve of his shirt and pushed it against his already long-suffering, offended nose.

He had wanted to do that from the moment he had entered the small, smelly room, but Jefferson had warned him not to appear obnoxious.

Enough was enough, though. Philip inhaled the scent of Bay Rum deeply, his nose hidden in the immaculate linen.

The two men opposite Philip leaned out of the small window as far as they could, as they tried not to listen to the fat man’s new protests.

“Oakden's wet himself,” the one closest to the window-sill said glumly. “Filthy swine! See! There’s piss on the floor right where he stands.”

The fop next to him sniggered, merciless in his glee for the convicted sodomite.

“That will teach him for putting his dick in a boy’s arse!”

Master Jefferson, seated at Philip’s other side, looked very grim. He stared at the three men on the scaffold who were praying with the prison’s ordinary, while in the meantime, the hangman was putting a noose around their necks; tugging

and pulling at them, unmindful of the fact that the three men were having their last worldly conversation with their Maker.

The crowd, impatient with the spiritual support the convicts were seeking, roared, chanted, and threw more rotten objects.

Master Jefferson pursed his lips when a few hardy and filthy hags pelted the praying men with horse dung, trying not to imagine what it must be like to have to die before such a teeming mass of Londoners, wet with one's urine and dirty with unspeakable dreary projectiles.

Although the tickets for the view from this house, directly on the scaffold in front of the Old Bailey, had been arranged by him as soon as it was known that the sodomite would hang, he had hardly uttered a word since they were led to the window with a clear view of the gallows. He simply abhorred London's most favourite pastime: watching public executions and trying to participate in it as much as possible. He had been appalled by his deceased client's request to bring Lord Philip Agnew, Viscount Morvern, to this particular one.

Philip sighed morosely. He truly wondered what he was doing there, watching three convicted criminals who were shortly to be executed. He did have a distinct idea, looking at the elderly Oakden, who had started to shed tears now.

He needed to piss, but he was mortified that the other viewers in the room would condemn him for being a coward if he disappeared behind the screen, now that the convicts were waiting to have a sack pulled over their heads and the dreadful moment when the hatch would open was fast approaching. He folded his legs instead, squeezing his genitals, hoping he would not follow Oakden's example and wet his pants.

It was freezing cold outside, and the opened window did not help to keep the room at an agreeable temperature, although the owner of the house had built a big fire in the fireplace and had placed a simmering hot rum punch awaiting their consumption on their small table. Philip clenched an ice-cold hand around his beaker that had long ago been warm. The handkerchief remained pushed against his nose because the fat man started to move in agitation, wafting his pungent odour into the room.

"He's snivelling, the foul beast!" the young man opposite him said.

Richard Oakden, the sodomite, had clearly started crying after the Ordinary of Newgate had had a word with him; last words of a religious nature, no doubt. Philip wondered how anyone could listen to words of consolation when one was about to be hanged for his so-called unnatural sins of the flesh. Poor bugger indeed.

A roar went up from the crowd when the three criminals had sacks covering their heads and were put on the hatch with the ropes still hanging loosely on their shoulders. “Can’t be long now!” the fop next to the windowsill said excitedly. Philip ground his teeth and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again he saw that the three long ropes were hanging taut and the convicts were dangling waist-deep into the black hole where the hatch had fallen.

“Burnskill has bungled the sodomite!” the young man opposite Philip shouted with glee, “See, the rope is still moving and twisting!”

Philip felt his stomach do a somersault. Christ, Oakden’s neck had not been broken when the hatch opened and now he was slowly being strangled by the rope.

“I gather Burnskill must be hanging at his legs by now so as to hasten the suffocation or stretch his neck,” Master Jefferson said worriedly.

“Serves him right to get Oakden’s shit and piss all over him,” the fop muttered, “No doubt he did it on purpose. He hates sodomites. They heard him say so when they brought them to the executioner’s room yesterday.”

He looked around with pride that he was able to come up with that juicy piece of information.

The fat man next to Philip only belched and took a bite of the shepherd’s pie that no one else

had wanted to touch. He stared at the scaffold with a ferocious gleam in his piggish eyes.

Master Jefferson coughed with dismay, roundly cursing his client for exposing him to the barbaric scene of a man struggling for the breath he would never catch again, leered at by gruelling lechers that found gratification in his slow struggle with death. Of course the hangman had ‘bungled’ the poor man. He had probably been paid to do it by one of the righteous pricks that found it necessary to start another witch-hunt against the men that preferred the company of their own sex to that of a woman.

He peered at the scaffold, noting with abhorrence that Burnskill was standing back, with a mocking sneer, while the unfortunate Oakden still wriggled and struggled. The hangman had not bothered to jump down the box and help the sodomite out of his misery.

Philip gazed at the rope until it was still, clutching his handkerchief against his nose. The crowd in the street had quieted somewhat now that the three men were obviously dead. Some people were staring at the now still bodies; others were turning away from the scaffold. It had been a new day for quite some hours now and work needed to be done.

Only the idlers, the night-workers and the street urchins could afford to wait for the cutting down of the bodies, in about an hour’s time. Whores

and pickpockets started to move about, searching the area for customers or victims. The harlots did not bother now with the armed soldiers around the scaffold: they would have to stay until the bodies could be removed, and surely they could snatch a client or two before they went after the willing men of the cordon.

Philip felt relief now that the anxiety over the execution was clearly wearing off.

“I need to piss,” he mumbled in Jefferson’s direction, not realizing that one did not normally speak that way to one’s family lawyer.

He disappeared behind the screen where a chamber pot was placed on a knee-high stool. No wonder the room smelled like a sewer; the pot was almost overflowing. Nobody had emptied that pot since the night before.

“Better sit down, my lord,” Jefferson said when he returned busily buttoning his fly and trying not to breathe in the stench that permeated the room.

Jefferson reached to close the window, after having conferred with the two men; their fronts were freezing and the choice between stench and warmth seemed an easy one at that moment.

“Must be thousands of onlookers, ’t will be difficult to get to the carriage for some time to come.”

Philip sat down clenching his jaws while looking up at the sky through the dirty glass windows. He felt sick.

“Who set you up to this, Jefferson?” he asked, not caring that the other three people in the room suddenly had grown very quiet and observant since Jefferson had called him “my lord.”

“The late Lady Loghaire,” Jefferson said without a qualm, “in a special addendum of the will, which was not read to you as it was only an instruction to me; thirty pounds for two at this delightful place at the window.”

“Typical of the bitch.” Philip sneered, “Waste of money of course. Is Hengist going to have a similar sort of treat?”

Jefferson smiled and shook his head.

“I dare say he sees enough killings in the Peninsula. Are you appropriately shocked my lord?”

“Inordinately,” Philip drawled. He took one look out of the window where the masses were still teeming. He rose and walked to the fireplace, cursing his dead mother who, of course, had never understood why he could not be ‘normal’ like his damned brother Hengist. He had been removed from her will: she had left all her worldly possessions to his hero-brother, leaving him without a bloody penny. He wondered how she could have been so disgusted with him. It wasn’t fair; he had always adored her for the forceful, handsome countess she had been.

He sighed, wondering what his last night’s conquest, Willy Robson, was at right now. No

doubt in his cot, sleeping deeply after spending Philip's money on a bottle of cheap gin. Or maybe he was outside, sitting on a roof, or a ledge, still hazy and hung-over, joking with his noisy friends about the sodomite that refused to die, not caring to think that Oakden's fate might be his own, one day.

They never hanged lords of the realm like that, did they?

Philip suppressed a shudder. He had not wanted to be impressed by the whole horrid charade that had been played out in front of him, but he was. Oh, the hag had known him so well!

He peered at Jefferson who was stiffly seated near the window, wondering for the umpteenth time that day if the lawyer knew why the countess, now months in her grave, had put him through this demeaning ordeal.

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Diary of Aurora Ross

London 23rd of November 1809

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I am very angry this morning! Rose had told me that all the servants had gone away without even asking me permission. They left some stale bread and a lukewarm pan of tea, and that was supposed to be my breakfast.

I am even more disgusted with myself for not being able to control the Fat Man's servants. I know they do not care a whit about me; they



never did in those years I had to live here, almost like a caged animal. Well, I tell you, this will be the last time I have been treated in such a disrespectful way. I told Mr. Lane that he can go forward and negotiate with whoever wanted to buy the house; that Earl of somewhere behind York, was it Rotherhood? No! I remember now it was of Ham, Rotherham or some such thing. If I remember correctly he has three daughters and wants to bring them out next season, well two of them, the third is still in the schoolroom. He is welcomed to the house. Mr. Lane says it is worth a small fortune because it is built in the heart of Mayfair.

I know now what Mayfair is like, I did not know all the years when the Fat One was alive. He never allowed me to go out. I was not even allowed to sit in the garden when the weather was warm. Now I take strolls in the park with Rose; the park called St. James Park. I only walk there nowadays in the mornings, when it is not supposed to be the fashionable hour. I don't want to meet many people because they always stare at me and seem very curious about me. My problem is that I don't know anybody in that park and I have the feeling 'they' know all about me. Well, there isn't anything of interest to know about me, is there? I am a Scottish lass, born from a gentle Scottish laird who died before I was old enough to remember him. My mother then remarried to

Laird McKenna and we lived either in Kenna or in Edinburgh in my stepfather's town house.

I had governesses until the age of seventeen when my mother started to educate me for my 'coming out.' I am very mediocre with the needle. My governesses always despaired of me, but their complaints about my needlework always fell on deaf ears with my mother because she was not any good at it either. I do have a nice voice though, but the last time I sang was when I still lived in Edinburgh. The Fat Man never invited me to sing for his guests and truth to tell I was glad of that.

When the Fat Man died I was quite filled out myself. The food at his table, I should say our table, was always filling and greasy. He liked it that way. He had a terrible sweet tooth as well; he used to eat heaps of buns and cakes for his breakfast. They were always baked in a soft sippy manner because he had hardly any teeth left in his mouth, and whatever was left was blackish or brown. I supposed I should have pointed out to him that one can make one's teeth last longer if the teeth are brushed with calcium powder every day. Incidentally, his teeth were not so few and bad when I married him.

I was always afraid of him. One could never foretell his reactions to anything; he was impatient and he was a bully, and thought nothing of beating me whenever he felt like it.

Anyway, I told Mr. Lane that I preferred to go and live at the house off Piccadilly which the Fat One bought for me. He actually bought it so that my family could stay there, whenever they were in London. Mr. Baines said it is not half as prestigious as the house I live in right now, but I truly couldn't care less. I hate this house at Berkeley Street!

I feel very much alone of late. Simon went and married in September and I have not heard from him since. It's not that he was such good company. We actually only indulged, well, in the niceties of the flesh, as he would call it, but he was somewhat of a friend, a familiar person.

To my horror, I read in the paper that Hengist was badly wounded in a battle in Portugal last September and now I am fearful of reading the announcements about the deceased. I have Rose go through them, she does not read extremely well, but well enough to tell me if there is bad news.

I asked Rose why all the servants had taken the morning off and she had to ask the girl from next door, who was just going for an errand. She would not tell me at first, she said it was too sensitive information for my ears. That really annoyed me to no end. How can one think I am too fragile to hear why the servants took a morning off? After having been married to the Fat

Man for four years I fear I have become the most cynical person in the world.

Well, I had to eat my words, because I did not understand at first why people would be interested in the hanging of a 'sodomite.' Rose had to explain it to me and even after all the perversities the Fat Man had subjected me to, I had to blush. I could not for the life of me understand why two men would subject themselves to the things Rose was telling me about, until she said what happened to two men like that was similar to whatever happened between Simon and me in a way. Ah, that shut me down good.

Simon and I had gone as far as to, well, I was doing it in the way he liked to do it with me, and that is to say, he wanted me to rub his interesting part with my mouth instead of my hand. At first I thought it a bit distasteful, but when I knew he'd washed himself before we had our rendezvous in the hackney I even came to like it in a way, although I always needed to keep a handkerchief ready because I found the white stuff that would emerge at the end quite unsavoury. Rose does not know of those details of course. She merely asked me if I needed her help if I wanted to prevent unwanted pregnancy. I told her I would not need any help from her there, thank you very much, as we did not indulge in the sort of thing that made prevention necessary. Rose just smiled and said that whenever I needed anything she would ask

the Scottish apothecary near Covent Gardens.  
Sometimes I think she nurtures a 'tendre' toward  
the man there. I understand he is in his late fifties  
just like she is. Well, I hope she finds some  
compassion there; life was hard for Rose until  
now. Truthfully, so was mine.

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### Chapter 3: A TENT NEAR LISBON

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Lisbon, January 1810

While shaving, Hengist almost cut his own throat when he felt a hand touching one of his big hairy thighs.

With a curse, he threw down the shaving knife and swivelled around, his dark green and black battle kilt swishing around his knees.

“For God’s sake Lily, what are you doing here?” he growled at the giggling woman who was crouching down on the mat in front of him.

She was not impressed with the dark glare he shot at her.

She rose to her full height, reached out and clutched his soapy chin, shushing him prettily at the same time.

“You’d better be quiet, Major," she whispered, “do you want the whole camp to hear I’m with you in your tent?”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Lily,” he grumbled. “I never knew you to be shy of anything.”

She teasingly spread the soap from her fingers to his forehead, giggling again when he tried to pry her hand away with an agitated move.

“You like it better here?” she asked coyly, shoving her hand under his kilt again.

Hengist jumped, trying to evade her touch, and bumped his big leonine head into the tent's sail. He cursed. He was so bloody tall, there was no way he could take a step sideways without getting his head tangled in the cloth of his bloody housing. Damn the Peer for putting him in a tent anyway, but with all the new troops arriving there was no way they could be billeted in a house at the fleshpots of Lisbon. At least the tent proved to be reasonably warm in the Atlantic winter.

Lily stood, pouting her fleshy red lips, stepped closer, and put a very enticing cleavage from her half-opened bodice under his nose, firmly lodging her hard nipples against his naked chest.

Hengist stood stock-still. His body had already responded to Lily's bold ministrations, but he realized that it was an impossible time for that sort of play. He clenched his teeth trying to force his arousal down, but dammit, he was only human and Lily was one of the most experienced women in the world.

"Lily," he said pleadingly, "I must finish my shave. I'm due at a staff meeting with your husband in a quarter of an hour."

He reached for a towel to wipe off the foam that was still on his big, handsomely rugged face. He cursed himself for letting his batman go ahead to take out his horse because he professed he was well able to shave himself. Lily had no doubt seen her chance when Portman had left his tent.

“Let me do you,” she smiled, noticing a slight hesitation when she dimpled at him. “Knowing you it won’t take five minutes.”

“Lily,” he pleaded half-heartedly, but she had already gone down on her knees in front of him, lifting his kilt to the waist tucking it expertly in his belt after having shifted his sporran to his left hip. Her smile was saucy on her fleshy knowing lips.

“Ah, Hengist,” she murmured with delight, “I knew you would not let me down. It’s been too long, my love.”

Hengist leaned against the pole, closing his eyes, enjoying her moist mouth around the crown of his stiff cock.

Why, it had been too long ago for him not to be hard as a rock, even if it was only Lily.

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Later, when he wended his horse through the large British camp, curtly greeting the men he recognized or that hailed him, he knew for certain that this time he would file for leave.

He had given in to Lily’s seduction again, going all the way, not being able to just let her use only her mouth on him. The fuck had been great, too satisfying for words. Now his lustful elation fought with his sense of decency and honour: Lily was his commanding colonel’s wife, there was no future in that and a future was what he wanted now.



He frowned at that thought.

Idiot! Why seek a future when he was in the middle of a war again? But then... he never had been rich before. His soldier's pay and his mother's allowance had always been all he'd had to his name. His father, although a Scottish Earl, had always struggled to keep his finances on the straight and narrow path of survivability and everything his father still owned in infertile lands and crumbling properties would one day be owned by Philip.

He cursed in silence. Bloody, deviating, Philip; his brother, the degenerate.

He pursed his lips, giving his horse free rein on the path that led alongside the long rows of tents.

He shifted in the saddle, his dick grinding against the rough wool of his kilt. There had not been time for a wash; he had already been late when Lily had interrupted him. He felt a slight itch, knowing it was caused by the wetness of her eager mound mixed with his seed. He bit his lip, trying not to scratch his genitals when he was sitting on his horse and touring the encampment with the eyes of more than a few privates and fairly many of the camp followers watching him.

Damnation! He was fed up with one-night stands with the likes of Lily; even if he had just fucked her as if it would be his last time on Earth. He had been driven by his perpetual slumbering

lusts, again. What he truly wanted now was peace and quiet and a lovely, loving woman.

An image hovered in his brain before his very eyes, an image of the most beautiful creature in the world. The creature that had lived there for more than eleven years, the girl who had heated his nights when he felt lonesome and depressed, the girl whose face was glued on the blurring visages of the camp-followers and the whores with whom he had spent his restless mating on their dirty cots or wherever the fancy had taken him. The girl who had led him a merry dance in his erotic fantasies, the girl whose name had always been on his lips when he came, not caring whether the whore or the slut, or in Lily's case the mistress, could hear.

Hengist clamped his jaws and shook his head with weariness. She was a married woman now. God only knows she probably had a batch of children with the old lecher who had taken her into his bed and household.

His horse almost walked into a group of people laughing and joking, who were standing in the middle of the road.

"Still asleep, Major?" an amused mocking voice called out to him.

He steered his horse grumpily away from the laughing men. No acknowledging smiles from him there. The men seemed to feel his mood and fell silent, gaping with the unexpectedness of it.

Major Hengist Agnew was a cherished war-hero and not a sour military man!

Uncharacteristically he shrugged. So let his mood be foul.

To dream of something that could never be was enough to shrivel any man's mind.

He strengthened the hold on the reins. Walking into a crowd of people had been Jason's cry for attention. Bloody horse.

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## Chapter 4: PHILIP'S PREDICAMENT

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London, January 1810

Philip scowled when he looked at Stevie Mac, who was throwing his legs over the arm of the big easy chair.

“That was a damn close call!” he muttered, brushing clots of old spider webs from his normally immaculate breeches.

“I didn't think I could ever go home again with that mob in front of my door.”

Stevie swallowed and nodded. He had never been so afraid in his life. Mobs were something one heard of, or read about in the journals, about angry farmers or under-paid miners. Mobs certainly never threatened a young pampered lording, such as him.

He peered at Philip through his long black lashes, trying to gulp back tears that were readily forming in his throat. Nerves, he thought with contempt. Damn nerves, damn stupid afflictions of on-coming melancholia!

His friend had no such compunctions.

Philip plucked at the cobwebs on his shoulders and collar, muttering in disgust. Lord Morvern was always perfectly clothed. Cobwebs and dirt were just inconceivable. After some futile

attempts to remove the undesired spots, he shrugged. Little Stevie Mac would no doubt offer his valet to see to the abject cleaning of Philip's coat and breeches. The lordling was certain to have one, as nobody but an accomplished valet could knot a waterfall tie like the one he wore last night. He had supposed Stevie was not able to knot it into that creative fashion himself, so he had helped Stevie to make a passable knot after their little bout of intimacy. He had not dared to wake his own valet John Row. John was the only fixture left to him in the house; all his other staff had been made redundant or had left in a huff during the last few months.

John bedded a parlour maid next door, so she would help him once in a while to clean some parts of the house during her spare hours. He was also not averse to physically consoling his handsome employer in his periods of need, which had been many, as of late.

Philip had not been certain of John's reaction to Stevie in the house. He never brought his flings home any more: that would be too dangerous, what with the new witch-hunt for sodomites these days. No use leaving them a trail to his residence. If he had learned anything from the bugger's hanging he had endured watching last autumn, it was to be more circumspect about his lovers. It was incredible to what length he would go now to

hide his unnatural inclinations toward juicy muscled men.

His mother had been wrong when she had tried to reach him from beyond the grave. Witnessing a sodomite swing had not put him on the righteous path of the attraction between the male and female species of the kind; on the contrary, the lurking danger of discovery seemed to give his trysts an exciting depth, just like forcing his shaft into Stevie's willing butt had done while he listened to hear whether John would wake up and hear them. Realizing that John Row could enter the drawing room at any time while he was pumping his latest amour had given him a surprising extra dimension to his explosive gratification.

Of course, John Row had been sprawled on his bed after having indulged in a whole bottle of cheap gin. One even doubted whether the creditors shouting in front of the house would be enough to wake John out of his stupor. That had been just as well, as both he and Stevie had fallen asleep on the rug in front of the fireplace, which Philip had lit that morning with probably the last pieces of wood from the woodpile. Lighting his own fire, he mused, was another deep low in his already degenerate style of living.

He wondered if there would be anything left in his life that could cheer him.

He had looked down at the Honourable Stephen Mackenzie, son of a Scottish country laird, the small stalker he had not really fancied at all. Stevie Mac was too pretty and small for his tastes; almost as dainty as a girl. The boy had muffled a squeal when Philip had entered him and only then had his half-arousal gone to its full stretch. He liked them to be a bit terrified of him. He had not bothered to repeat the act the next morning. He could not get it up again, not with a group of creditors in front of his house shouting for money or his hide.

After a panicky conversation with his lover, Philip had raced to the kitchen, pointing out the now empty wine cellar and its hidden corridor into the neighbouring garden. No doubt one of the house's former owners had lived dangerously as well, and had foreseen future possibilities of escape. Philip had promised to light a candle for him in St. George's as soon as he was able to show his face there; whoever he was and whether he was alive or pushing up daisies.

He rose elegantly from the couch to help himself to a large whiskey from the sideboard, although it was only eleven o'clock in the morning. At least the good side of ordeals was that one could indulge in stiff liquor at all hours. He sniffed at the decanter. Not bad. He had not tasted such good stuff for some time now.

Stevie watched his handsome friend while he poured and tasted. He stood slightly bent in front of the sideboard that carried the different flasks with alcoholic beverages, his buff breeches tightening around his sleek butt and muscled thighs.

Something shifted in Stevie's mind and a sharp longing for the elegant man made its way through his young body.

Philip suddenly looked up, as if he was aware of Stevie's changing mood. His piercing blue eyes flashed on a flushed Stevie and he smiled.

"Don't worry, love," he whispered. "Things are never as bad as they seem, you know."

He came forward to ruffle Stevie's lanky hair, which was supposedly cut in the fashionable Brutus, but as there had been no chance that morning to ask Macy the maid to use the curling iron on them he looked quite like a street urchin now. Stevie was almost a foot smaller than Philip, but then Philip was blessed with the most gorgeous tall body: broad shouldered with a lean waist and standing about 6ft 4 tall. Philip was not only a giant of a man, he must be one of the handsomest men in the world, reflected Stevie, for the hundredth time that day. His long blond hair hung in small waves on his neck. Not quite adopting the new style that had become fashionable due to Wellington's latest demands in the army, short hair and no moustaches, he liked



to wear his hair in short curls, easy when he was at his favourite sports: fencing and wrestling.

“I’m sorry I had to ask you to hide from that mob, but there was no other way,” Philip said apologetically, sucking his lips in a way that had proven to be characteristic of him.

He must have the whitest teeth this side of the equator, Stevie pondered lovingly, wondering how he did it. If Stevie could ever get close enough to Philip’s valet, he would ask. He looked longingly at Philip’s buff beige breeches. After last night, he knew what power they hid and he could hardly suppress a dreamy, longing sigh.

“I don’t know where to go from here, just yet.” Philip mumbled morosely. This mood swing alerted Stevie out of his state of longing.

Philip gazed unseeing in his tumbler. After the excitement of this morning’s adventures the reality of creditors beleaguering his house came to him at full tilt.

He had once been the owner of fifteen-thousand pounds; his inheritance from his grandfather, the Earl of Loghaire, plus the yield of the Morvern lands that had been his viscounty, since grandpa’s other son, the heir, conveniently died, but it had all gone up in thin air in no time.

Last night he had been at one of the most miserable gaming hells in London, and after the losses of his ready money, he had not been able to come up with forty-five pounds. Young Stevie

McKenna had been watching him and offered him a loan. The young boy had refused to take an I.O.U. but had been content to have Philip take him to his house at Upper Brook Street later on, after all the clubs had closed or started to serve breakfast.

Philip had known Stevie to be following him around like a lovesick puppy, acting nonchalant every time they set eyes upon each other. Philip had not been very happy with the stalking until the boy seemed capable of bailing him out of a nasty situation.

Stevie shrugged.

“My parents are not yet due back from Scotland,” he said. “My mother will probably only want to return in April, so you’re welcome to stay here, if you like. We’ll pick up your clothes at midnight. I gather your debtors will be gone by then.”

Philip looked intently at Stevie. He seemed a lot younger than his twenty years, especially now that the damp and filth of the secret tunnel made his clothes cling to his small and lanky frame.

“Biggles never told me we had company, Stephen,” a voice said behind them. It was young, melodious, and very feminine.

Stevie gasped.

Not Marguerite, not now, she would see his and Philip’s dirty clothes and no doubt would start asking questions!

She was dressed entirely in black and the darkness of her hair set off the big luminous brown eyes in the pale porcelain face. Stevie knew that if Philip were one of the most beautiful persons in the world, his own half-sister would be a worthy addition to such company. She might not be deemed very fashionable with her black shiny and curly hair--Polite Society preferred blondes--but her face had the classical beauty that had forced poets through the ages to write long and gushy verses about ‘unparalleled incomparable.’

Stevie had always been jealous of his dainty but proportioned stepsister because she had always been closer to the ideal of a woman than he had been to the requisites of the perfect male. He resembled her like two eggs in a basket, but that made it only worse for Stevie; he wanted to look male and not like the spitting image of his sister.

He glanced a bit fearfully at Philip who was scooting up from the couch, almost spilling whiskey out of his tumbler when he plunked his glass onto a side table.

The Viscount strolled in a fashionable way to the apparition at the door of the library, lifting her hand to his mouth for a kiss above her knuckles, because the lady was not wearing gloves and to kiss her naked skin would be unpardonable.

“Mrs. Alexander, I presume?” he gushed in a foppish way that was entirely a la mode.

“Forgive me my presumptions, but do I remember you from a court event in Edinburgh?”

“Lord Morvern?” she asked in amazement, looking with a pleasantly surprised smile at her stepbrother, “I did not know you and Stephen were acquainted?”

More than you’d ever guess, Stevie thought darkly, feeling envious when Philip was all over his stepsister. For once, he was glad she was still in mourning for that nut of a husband of hers. Although Philip’s real inclinations had at last been revealed to him last night in an amorous fashion, he was jealous of all the attention that was not forwarded to him by the glamorous Viscount. He realized at that same moment he was not only in love with his new paramour but that he felt hot envy if Philip only looked at someone else. He hated to recognize it: jealousy had always been the bane of Stevie’s short life.

“Er... yes, it must have been Edinburgh shortly after I came out. How have you two befriended each other?”

“We met about a week ago at Lady Tottenham's rout,” Philip lied politely, faking to lap up her beauty and definitely noticing the resemblance between Stevie and her.

Stevie blushed and nodded. He could hardly tell her that it had been at The Cockpit where he had first seen Philip. The Viscount had been heavily betting on cocks he could hardly

distinguish due to his apparent state of drunkenness.

Marguerite's eyes fell on the mud and cobwebs on Philip's coat and breeches.

He bowed at her with a charming smile.

"Your brother and I had a small accident in the street, nothing to worry your poor... yourself about. A carriage passed us close by when we were just hopping over a puddle. We were both thrown against a wall. We came here to freshen up. It is closer than my residence at Upper Brook Street," he said suavely.

Stevie could not help but admire Philip's quick wit in finding an explanation for his dirtied clothes. Of course, he could hardly tell her they had been crawling through a secret passage leading from Philip's house to the neighbouring garden to avoid a mob of furious creditors.

Thinking of the event only made him shiver and he longed to crawl back to his chair. Alas, he could not sit when his sister was still standing. In normal life he did not give a damn about such politeness towards her, she was merely his sister, but now that Philip was behaving according to Society's etiquette rules, he could hardly do any less.

Still at the door, Marguerite watched him from her position.

"You look ill, brother," she said with worry in her voice, "is there something I can do for you?"

Yes, go away and come back in April, Stevie thought furiously.

He shook his head.

“No, thank you. What brings you here?”

Her eyes widened.

“I live here,” she said pointedly. “I sold my husband’s Berkeley Street house in December, and I had to move out. I’ve been here for two days now. If you’d bother to rise at a more Christian hour than you are wont to do, and if you ate at home at night instead of heaven knows where, you would have known we are actually sharing quarters.”

Stevie flushed with apprehension at her obvious snub and felt at the same time a wave of disappointment at his sister’s explanation. If she had come to live here, it would mean that Philip could not stay in the house. It would be uncalled for to have a bachelor living here without his parents chaperoning, even when his sister was already twenty-five and a widow.

Philip had watched their strained dialogue with a thin smile on his lips. Back to Upper Brook Street and his creditors it was then!

A shiver ran down his spine. He had visited the occasional unlucky acquaintance in Debtor’s prison and had a good idea what it would be like to be a permanent resident there. God knew he was in a bloody snitch!

Marguerite looked at him with something that seemed like longing in her face. Philip almost stepped back from her. He had come to fear that look; it was on most of the Ton's matchmaking mama's faces and on as many of their husband-seeking daughters. He had always cursed the plight that would be put on his shoulders one day. He was the heir and although his father of late seemed forced into a grey world of his own due to his slowly approaching dementia, he could never hope to escape his parents' wish and social obligation that he would marry one day and produce an heir and a spare of his own. The thought was always enough to make him puke.

At least his financial problems would make any matchmaking mama think twice, he thought cynically. It was just that Debtor's prison was a damn daunting prospect.

He bowed again, hoping that Marguerite would take the hint.

She did. She reddened, then curtsied and turned around to the stairs.

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Marguerite walked slowly back to her rooms on the second floor. She wondered if she was coming down with some illness or another as she felt very tired and slightly sick. Even the meeting with the handsome Lord Morvern had not succeeded to wrench her out of her blue feelings.

She heaved a deep sigh. It was not easy to be a twenty-five year old widow, albeit a very rich one. Her disgusting deceased husband William Alexander had been dead for eight months now and she still had to wear deep mourning. Society's rules decreed public sorrow for a dead husband was to last two years. Deep mourning would deprive her of all the gaieties of life. She would be allowed to go to sober teas in the daytime, with bossy matrons if she knew any, or if they wanted to know her, but her days stretched ahead every day like gloomy black vaults. She was yearning for the day that her first year of mourning would be over; she might wear grey colours instead of the constant black she was obliged to put on every day and she would be allowed to watch serious dramas and opera at the theatres. She might even go to musicales, as long as the music was not too worldly. Accompanied by the right people, she was allowed to attend the balls of immaculate reputation, without being able to dance of course, until another year of mourning had passed.

At least she was glad to have gotten rid of her husband's gloomy town house. She had been the stray duck there since the day she had come to marry the rich and fat William Alexander. All the staff, except her own maid, Rose, had been in his pay and confidence, and she had lived to know it. They had been suspicious of her youth and beauty and had done little if anything to make her



comfortable as the young innocent bride she was when she was first brought into his unwelcoming house. It was only due to Rose's care that she had not been forgotten when taking her lonely meals in her rooms, when her husband did not deign to bring her on his business-trips or ask her to come to join him for a meal in the dining room.

Marguerite had never been so elated than when she was finally able to avenge herself by firing all William's staff after the sale of the house; putting them onto the cobblestones without a reference to their names. Well, except for Crowley of course, the coachman who was not half as bad as the rest and who knew a bit more than she cared to admit about a certain young vicar.

She put her fingers to her forehead noticing the throb of an upcoming headache.

Darn, but she had been quite hard to poor Stevie, piling her own widow's frustrations on him. He could not help it that five years ago she'd married the forty years older William just to help her parents out of the claws of debt and maybe even Debtor's prison. Although she herself had been a frugal and modest girl all her life, it was certain that her mother and stepfather, Lord McKenna, had never heard of the words 'economizing' and 'saving' or, if they had heard of them, they had discarded them as nothing to do with them.

She opened the door of her sparsely furnished bedroom. It was almost Spartan, with only the high old-fashioned bed with the thin mattress, a chest for blankets and a table with a chair. Stevie did not know she owned the house and just lent it to her parents when they were in London. William had known very well why her parents had agreed to marry her off to him and had deeded her the house on their wedding-day. He did not want his wife's nosy and bossy mother visiting his own house when she would be staying in London, so he bought another one, taking care not to furnish it with anything of value because he expected such luxurious objects to disappear in due course; to find their way to the pawn-shops, in order to pay for the McKenna family's foolish spending. The house had been an expensive enough gift, although such an investment to his own wife was nothing but a nice gesture that would only bring him more money in the end, once he could sell it again when the market was up.

William and Marguerite had lived the four years of their marriage in the posh house at Berkeley Street. They had lived between the Peers of the realm there, but they had hardly been able to mix with that uppity part of society. Although Marguerite had been the only daughter of John Ross, late and last Laird of Halkhead, William had just been a disgusting common cit whose

father had become extremely rich in the Glasgow and London shipping industry.

She sighed again. Marriage to William had not been a bed of roses. At least she had not nurtured any illusions about their relationship. A more than forty-year-old bridegroom did not do much to the daydreams of an eighteen-year-old girl, accustomed to devouring romantic novels of the most deplorable kind. She had longed for a knight in shining armour, until her illusions were shattered by her parents' greed and her own compliance and sense of duty.

Although their married life had been a wasteland, William had turned out to be an extraordinarily jealous man and her years with him had been like being a captive in a harsh prison with an unresponsive and heartless staff.

They had entertained many an important merchant or investor but William had distrusted the aristocrats and other high flyers around them, calling them wastrels, so that her experiences with the parties, routs and weekends with the people of her class had been nil during their relatively short and very unhappy marriage.

Marguerite had had a modest coming out at the time. Her parents had felt obliged to have her presented to the Queen, but before her come-out, William Alexander had already been discussing marriage settlements with her stepfather and greedy mother and they had glumly taken William

Alexander of Stephens and Alexander's Shipping Company's bid for her hand; they were certain no one else was to offer the ultimate bounty like he did. Thus, Marguerite's honourable bloodlines were sacrificed on the altar of a wealthy, albeit ancient, despicable, fat son-in-law.

Marguerite sniffed. Her mother's motives had been too mercenary to, at the very least, stop and think about what she did to her daughter. Anyone could imagine how frightening it must have been to be eighteen and to have to marry a man of fifty-six. A very fat, smelly man of fifty-six, because William Alexander indulged in two things only: lots of food and even greater quantities of drink. He had been married before, but his poor first wife had gone to an early grave leaving him without a most needed heir for the Alexander fortune.

Marguerite had not wanted to hear about his first wife or their life together before she went to the house at Berkeley Street, as marriage to William Alexander had been mind-robbing enough. She thanked God on her knees that there had not been stepsons or –daughters. After a week of a honeymoon spent entirely at Berkeley Street, she in the confines of her bedchamber, with him entering her privacy whenever he pleased, she understood why stepchildren had not been forthcoming. At the time she had gone down on her knees again in extreme thankfulness, with the

sudden knowledge that money could not buy the Fat One everything he wanted.

Marguerite turned down the blankets of her bed and rang her old maid Rose to get her out of her black dress. She would sleep for a while, maybe that would get her out of her feelings of depression.

When she was lying down on her pillow, she thought of that handsome guest her stepbrother had brought home; Philip Agnew, Lord Morvern. It was earth shattering how he resembled his brother Hengist.

For a second, when she had looked into the library, she had thought Hengist had come to visit her at last; coming to rescue her as he had done once before.

She dug her head into her cushion.

Hengist. It had been more than five years since it had happened. Those strong-arms, that innocent but oh so wanted kiss when he had saved her from the robbers who had gotten hold of her carriage when she was travelling to London, to marry old William.

She closed her eyes and laid a hand on her breast where Hengist had put his for just a split second.

Hengist. She knew he had gone back to war. First to Denmark and then he had been shipped to Portugal together with one of the famous Highland Regiments called the Black Guard. She

had secretly followed the Black Guard's progress through Portugal, to Spain and back again, always searching for Hengist's name in the newspapers that were brought to William's study every day.

She had often enviously thought about him and... women; army followers, officer's wives who followed the drum, their pretty daughters, beautiful signoras; so many opportunities for him to fall in love and marry one. Her hand sought the hem of her night shift on her knee, sliding up her thigh.

At least thinking of him made her happy for a few moments. She knew her thoughts of Hengist Agnew were close to an obsession and she realized that the secret dreams about him had carried her through the horrors of her marriage.

She licked her lips, her face in a secret smile.

She could always dream, couldn't she?

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## DIARY OF M. AURORA ROSS

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January 31, 1810

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It was very strange indeed to see Lord Philip Morvern in the house today. It's just that I am still not used to visitors, neither in the Fat One's house nor in my own, off Piccadilly.

Mr. Lane found somebody to buy the house on Berkeley Street fast enough. An indecent rich Earl

whom I've never heard of before: a Cyril Fairfax, Earl of Rotherham. It seems he has three daughters who need to have their come-out in the next years to come. I should look up his name in a Debrett's, but as the Fat One never believed in bowing to the aristocracy we never had a copy, and of course I did not think of buying my own. We never knew our neighbours on Berkeley Street either, which was not unsurprising under the circumstances. The few times I descended the stairs at the front door I was quickly hidden away in the town-carriage while people stared at me and then pretended not to see me. I am a despicable gentry-miss who has put her higher birth on the gold altar of a rich old cit.

The only persons I did know, although to 'know' is a bit exaggerated under the circumstances, were the footmen that worked in the house almost opposite ours. Rose told me they were Lady Elton's footmen and every time they hurried outside to receive visitors, I would hide behind my curtains in my room on the second floor and watch them. Yes, watch them like an urchin watches a freak show, because that Lady Elton has a very special taste in footmen. They are all very tall, much muscled and extremely handsome. I know it is not fashionable for a gentleman to have bulging muscles like a farm-hand but truth be told: give me a man like that any

day! Don't ask me why, but only to look at them makes me a bit weak in the knees.

Now I understand those feelings better, since I had my fling with Simon Desmond, God bless him. Simon was neither muscled nor tall, but when I watched his mouth, and a very sensual mouth it was, I would have that same feeling of faintness and excitement as when I looked at those footmen.

Rose said that I had been 'awakened' and giggled about it.

I don't really know about being awakened, Simon never ever went 'all the way' as Meg the Laundress called it, and I never truly wanted him to, because... well, because we were not married and I am not some sort of a Covent Garden strumpet who just lifts her skirts to some horny vicar. (What do you say about that new part of my 'worldly' knowledge? I had a few more conversations with Meg, the laundress.)

I always told Rose I never did that thing with Simon and she told me that was just as well, as she did not fancy explaining to her Apothecary that her mistress had erroneously conceived and could he please find her some means to get rid of it.

I like to think Rose is quite naughty there, if I ever conceive a child I am going to keep it tight in my belly and close to my heart. At first I did not want a baby when I was with the Fat One, but



strangely enough that changed when I knew he was never going to give me one.

Simon actually once wondered if a marriage between the two of us would be possible, but I was not so stupid that I was not able to see that I had to get myself on the higher rungs of the ladder in any marriage market. With all the money the Fat One left me through his own negligence (as our lawyer liked to explain, he did not think of himself dying at any inconvenient time), I may aim for a certain second son of a certain Scottish earl.

Anyhow, after somebody had blabbered about Simon's amoral and amorous secret meetings with a certain rich and very unsuitable young widow, Simon's family found him a sweet and somewhat moneyed bride and got him a nice cosy vicarage in Sussex. I must confess that I do miss him at times, especially that very smart tongue of his. It is not easy to live on memories and my own shameful fumbling alone, but the Simon Desmonds of this world are not easy to trace when one is a widow and does not know a soul in all of London.

So yes, it was very nice to see Lord Philip Morvern in the library of my house and I liked the attention he bestowed on me.

I am sorry that Stevie was not at all happy to see me. He has changed a lot since he came to London in autumn, after turning twenty-one and

preferring to live far away from his father's wiles. Well, that I can understand! Lord McKenna is a bully and has a vicious temper.

Anyway, that Lord Philip is the spitting image of Hengist, at least that is what I think. They are both tall, blond and very attractive. I hope he will come back soon. I would like to ask him about Hengist. It has been more than five years since I last saw him and now that Simon initiated me in the passions of the body, I wonder how it would be to experience them with somebody like Hengist. I am most curious as to how Hengist would feel when in that hard and rigid state that Simon would get into when he got all excited.

Meg says the man can only do the deed if he is in such a state. I understand only now the Fat One's frustration; he could never get into such a state with me. I wonder if he would have been able to get into 'the state,' if he had had somebody experienced enough just like Meg. Oh, don't get me wrong, I would never have a friend like Meg be forced into 'the state' with the Fat One; I just mean it was not very handy of the Fat Man to take me as a bride because nobody ever told me what to do, so he never got what he bargained for.

I wonder very often now, how Hengist would be 'in the state.' I mean as part of amorous pleasure like I had with Simon. I do remember the first time Simon pushed himself against me when

we were fully clothed and it felt a bit peculiar, hard, as if he had put his walking stick between the both of us. Since I became aware of the ‘walking-stick,’ I do remember a sort of similar feeling when Hengist kissed me. Good grief! I was such an innocent girl, then!

I’m afraid it won’t do me a lot of good to start to contemplate things like that. According to the Morning Post the Scottish Black Guard is somewhere in Portugal, close to Lisbon. Moreover, I have not seen anything about Hengist in ages. He was listed with the heavily wounded last September and I hardly dared to watch the lists of the deceased since then. Lord Morvern was not wearing any signs of mourning, bless him, so I can still hope that Hengist still wanders this side of the world.

I wish I knew if he’d ever spent some time thinking of me. Rose says that things are different with men in that respect and forbade me to try to write a letter to him. She said it was not done for a lady to draw attention upon herself by stalking a man. It is very depressing to know that she is probably right.

Yesterday Mr. Baines told me that due to an extremely good year and the sale of the Scottish wharves I am eighty thousand pounds the richer. He has found a buyer from Boston who would like to take over the London and Bristol wharves, which will be fine with me. I know Mr. Baines is

not doing this without some self-interest, but I am happy enough to see things going fine for him as well, as he receives a percentage. I seem to be one of the richest girls in the country but I would gladly give some of my money if I could have a man with Simon's soft mouth and... Oh well, I have to stay in mourning until the end of April 1811. The chances that I will come upon a nice young man who is able to get himself into the state and knows what to do with his mouth and tongue is almost nil. Maybe I should do something like Lady Elton and install a few very good looking footmen in my house. Or start a fling with the handsome Lord Morvern, or travel to Portugal... but that would not be wise, would it? There's a war going on there.

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## Chapter 5: STEVIE'S RUSE

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Stevie had succumbed nicely to Philip's urgent pleas and had called for Marguerite's town-carriage to drive him to Philip's house in Upper Brook Street.

He opened the hatch in the cab to the big coach-driver, instructing him nervously to wait for him and to stay alert. He peered at the house. It was not very big, but then Philip had hinted to him that he did not need a lot of space as he was always away, out and about, not even bothering to come home to sleep there if the fancy took him, or supposedly, Stevie contemplated with pain in his heart, if someone else's fancy took him.

The house was entirely dark. No doubt Philip's valet was somewhere in the house, snoring away a hangover as he, according to his lover, had the habit of drinking lots of cheap gin when his master was not around. Stevie had wondered why the valet had bothered to stay with Philip as the rest of the household either had fled or had been dismissed. Philip had told him laughingly that John Row was having an affair with the second parlour maid in the house next door and so secured himself a hot meal every night, and she would help him keep the house clean on her days off as long as he took advantage of her on the

floor or on the old couch in the drawing room now and then.

Philip had sniggered that he could not ask for a better arrangement, but Stevie had not been amused. He had not seen John Row on that early morning when he had been allowed inside Philips' house but his instincts had sent a warning shiver over his back and into his head: why indeed would anyone stay with a heavily indebted employer unless...?

He looked nervously from the front door of the house to his coachman, who had not bothered to come down from his high perch. Just a well, if a fast flight out of the neighbourhood was needed. There were no nearby-lit lanterns in the street or in the portico. Stevie could smell the nearness of the Thames, because Philip's house was on the far Western part of Upper Brook Street that ended near the warehouses of the docks.

He approached the front door with a hesitant step, trying to decide if the creditors had left the premises at last. He knew all about creditors, what with his parents with holes in their hands as big as their palms. He had cause to know that creditors never gave up easily on their prey.

A big hand suddenly grasped his neck and he started in horror, looking up into the broad face of a giant of a man.

"I've got him!" the man cried triumphantly to the jeers of a lot more voices.

Stevie tried to wriggle out of the man's grasp, using his new fashionable cane to poke him in the belly. The man howled and let go of him, but Stevie was immediately grabbed again at his upper arms by fast hard hands and his cane was wrestled away from him.

A smelly thin man held a torch to his face.

"That's not 'im, men!" he hollered, "Better let go of 'im!"

The rough hands that clasped him retreated at once, and Stevie stood in the unfriendly bleary light of the torch, looking around him in a terrible fright.

"I'm the Honourable Stephen Mackenzie, son of Lord McKenna," he bit at them, conquering his fear through his arrogance. "What are you up to here?"

A few of the men touched their forelocks and somebody put his cane back into his hand.

"We're here to cash in on Lord Morvern's debts," one of them said gruffly. "We heard he lost his last penny at the Cockpit last week and we want our pound of flesh before he's sent to Debtor's prison."

Stevie blanched at the suggestion of a warrant of arrest for his new friend. If somebody had gotten a magistrate to bring out a warrant, all would be lost for Philip. The image of his new lover in the stinking cells of Debtor's prison horrified him. He knew he had to do something to

help his friend out of his predicament. Money, money, Philip needed money and fast. His mind started to whirl. Money; who had enough money? Suddenly the thought struck him.

He swallowed, and then said: "Lord Morvern will be affianced to my sister, Mrs. Marguerite Alexander, the wealthy William Alexander's widow, as soon as she comes out of mourning this year. I'd dare say all the debts will be paid within short notice. My sister is a very rich woman, you see."

The group of men peered suspiciously at him, then their looks went to the luxurious solid town-carriage with the two matched pairs of horseflesh in front. William Alexander had only been stingy on things that could not be seen. The carriage was as superb as the widow who used it in the daytime. The absence of any heraldic suggestion of nobility cried out that the carriage was a wealthy cit's possession.

One of the men stared at Stevie.

"You'd better tell us the truth," he said menacingly. He did not add the "or else..."

Stevie could only swallow his upcoming bile and nod.

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"You did what?"

Philip towered over Stevie in his shirtsleeves. He had thrown his stock, jacket, and waistcoat over the only chair in the small bedroom that



Stevie had acquired for him in the busy coaching inn.

Stevie had thought long and hard on his way to the inn where he had settled his friend the day before.

It had required some deep thinking on his part to find the right solution for Philip's lodgings and in the end, the big coaching inn at the Northern road into London had seemed the best place to hide his lover. The coaching inn was always bustling with people, coaches, and carriages. No one stayed long at the inn because it was only a place to change horses, to have a quick meal, to catch one of the many coaches heading for different places in England or to spend a singular night before the continuation of a journey. People of the Ton that would be able to recognize Lord Morvern would normally not stay long at the inn. If they rode their own coaches, the inn was too close to London for a stop or a meal, let alone for a night's stay. As long as Philip did not show his face in the big public taproom, Stevie did not expect him to be in danger of recognition.

After his encounter with the creditors' men, he dared not enter Philip's house. He had gone home to his own house to sleep. The next morning he had sent a boy with a message to John Row, with the strict warning that it was for John's eyes only, requesting him to bring his master's necessary things for his toilet and his clothes. It had seemed

best to await John Row at his own place, not to put any disgruntled creditors on Philip's trail at the coaching inn.

He had paid for the inn in advance, so that Philip could stay there for a week before returning to his own house.

Now he looked longingly at the small bed.

"I knew that it would be the only way to quiet them down and send them back to whichever holes they crept from."

It had helped his family years ago when they were in a similar situation. Only then, his sister would marry the wealthy Mr. Alexander from Stephens and Alexander Shipyards.

Philip suddenly gave a shout of laughter.

"Do you think she would have me?"

Stevie shrugged.

"I don't know," he said, peering at Philip's muscled legs in the very snug breeches.

"You'd say a viscount and an Earl's heir would wet any girl's appetite," Philip mused, looking down on Stevie.

Stevie frowned, suddenly doubting his whole scheme.

"She had a terrible marriage with that fat pig. It might take some persuasion to get her to ever go down the road of matrimony again. Would you be prepared to court her?"

“Would she want me to? She’s still in deep mourning, isn’t she? She seems a prim and very correct person to me.”

“Could you court her?” Stevie asked innocently. He had not known Philip for a long time, but something told him his lovers tastes were miles away from any person wearing a petticoat.

“I’ve been brought up in the Ton,” Philip drawled, “I know how to behave towards a woman of our class. Especially when my freedom for the rest of my life is at stake, I might say.”

Philip took his coat from the chair and quickly put it on.

“Let’s go down and discuss this further over a drink. You still have money, don’t you?”

He strode out of the door, forcing Stevie to hop off the enticing bed to follow him quickly down three stairs.

Philip noticed a mutinous look on Stevie’s face when he sat down in the taproom. He smiled broadly at the boy, pulling him next to him on the bench, his hands lingering near Stevie’s crotch.

“Later...” he whispered.

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“Bad news,” he said, putting on his breeches and then clambering back on the bed next to a drowsy Philip.

Philip looked at the ceiling. He was bored to death and therefore he had indulged in a little tryst

with Stevie, although it was the middle of the day and therefore not without danger. His little room at the inn did boast a lock that had been used for the purpose, but his little lover was a mewler and a screamer and anybody with a working brain and ears could have put the mewling and the screaming together about the two men of the gentry that happened to be in the same room. On the other hand, Philip had noticed a quite forthright business conducted by a few of the maids who worked in the inn, headed by a busty woman who worked conveniently in the taproom. Mewling and screaming went on at times in a specific part of the inn. Philip understood that the innkeeper did not mind a little business on the side, as long as it did not interfere with the inn's reputation. Having in-house whores always attracted travellers who were in need of gratification, but did not want to go through the moves of finding a whore and then to do their business somewhere.

The inn boasted two taprooms, one for the upright travellers, families and gentry and one for the less scrupulous amongst them, the servants, the coachmen, and the locals coming in for a meal or a drink. Philip preferred to stay in the last one, nobody would recognize him there, and after telling the whores there off, he would have nothing to fear. He wondered if they knew his secret preference for his own sex right now, but

did not worry about eventual blabbering about it from their part: more than one of the whores preferred the members of their own sex over the men that sought them out for some quick pleasure. He had actually seen that with his own eyes on a quiet evening.

He had not yet been able to go back to his house or even so much as to show his face outside the inn. It was really and truly bad this time; his debts amounted to twenty thousand pounds at least, at his last ineffective count, and he had been worrying his head off as to how to get himself out of London and out of his creditors' clutches.

He turned his head slowly to the boy who was as smart as he was clingy nowadays. He hated clingers, calling them creepers and keeping out of their way. Stevie's ways amused and irritated him at the same time, but now that there was no chance for him to prowl the streets and his usual haunts, he preferred to swallow his aversion and turn to the dainty boy instead for his abundant sexual needs.

"What's so bad, my sweet prince?" he asked, raking the boy's tight breeches with his eyes. The boy fell for it like a log.

Philip reasoned that was a good thing, the boy had shown initiative and spunk and for safety reasons he would hold on to his little friend until it was no longer necessary.

“I did as you told me to. I searched her room for secrets or flaws.”

Philip nodded without seeming interest.

He had promised to go along with Stevie’s plan to try to marry the rich half-sister, asking Stevie to get to know as much as possible about her. It would not be easy to snatch the rich widow, especially not such a pretty one. It was a good thing she now probably only had boring teas with frightening dowagers in the day-time and was not allowed to go out at night. The ever needy peers of the realm would gobble her up without so much as a by-your-leave if she could be out in Polite Society: she was rich, beautiful and her father had been a baron. Christ, she was a blooming catch!

He mused that he would only be able to appreciate her wealth and was slightly worried about what marriage entailed after one left the altar. He had never been able to get it up for a woman and however much she resembled his beloved little prince, her stepbrother, the basics would definitely not be the same.

“I found out she has a secret crush on another man.”

Philip sighed at the pathetic remark.

“Tell me more, little one.”

“I could not find anything of note at first so I took her old maid Rose in my confidence. Rose said the marriage with old William was a disaster

and that she really wanted Cherie to be happy  
blah blah...”

Philip signalled with his hand for the boy to go on. It was all too boring for words.

“So she showed me a box Cherie kept hidden in her maid’s room. It was full of clippings and newspaper articles about some guy called Henry Agnew. I understand he is some major in Portugal who serves with one of the Highland Regiments.”

Philip sat up with a start.

“Hengist? She’s in love with Hengist?”

Stevie shook his head.

“No, he’s called Henry.”

“Oh, shut up and let me think,” Philip said irritably, burying his handsome head in his hands.

“What is it, my lord?” Stevie laid a surprised hand on Philip’s muscled thigh.

“That Henry Agnew, Major Henry Agnew of the 42nd, or 78th, or God knows what regiment he’s in now, my bed-prince, happens to be my brother, my younger brother by a year. It’s true his birth name is Henry but we changed that into Hengist when he beat the shit out of two bullying cronies nearly twice his age when he was only twelve years old. He started his army career about eleven years ago and has been on and off in England and Scotland, but mostly abroad. How in hell could he have met your sister?”

Stevie hoisted himself against the bed board.

“Some of the Highland Regiments were housed in Edinburgh. We have lived there for years as my mother refused to live in Kenna. She might have seen him there?”

“Yeah, quite possibly,” Philip drawled.

“Does this Hengist resemble you very much?” Stevie asked suddenly excited.

Philip yawned. He wanted a drink.

“Very. At least the last time I saw him. That was five years ago.”

Stevie pulled at his hair. He always did that when he was thinking.

“We should use that to our advantage,” he said slowly. “We could make her fond of you because he resembles you. On the other hand, we have to invent something to take her thoughts off him. Could we say he died and then whenever he shows up we claim it a dreadful mistake?”

“And make me wear black for a year and delay the wedding because I’m in mourning?” Philip sneered, “I don’t think so.”

Stevie leaned his head against the white chalked wall.

“We could spread the rumour that he got married in Spain to a general’s daughter or something,” he suddenly said with fervour. “I’m sure that would put her off him. We just have to get that news to her making sure it cannot be traced back to us.”



“Like an ad in a paper?” Philip grinned sceptically.

Stevie’s answer was a huge hug.

“You’re absolutely brilliant, my lord.”

“An advertisement?” Philip asked, “You must be daft, little prince.”

Stevie shook his black hot-ironed curls. It cost him a pretty penny every time he had to ask Macy to use her art on him, but he wanted it because it did give him a certain modish sophistication.

“War correspondents! We’ll tip one and if needed we pay him handsomely for the news. It would not be the first time they invented a good story. As far as I know, nothing has happened in ages with the army in the Peninsula. I understand they were suggesting in the House to bring the army back home, it’s over budget already and no one is lifting a finger in Portugal.”

Philip turned to the bright-eyed boy, taking him in a bear hug.

“It’s you who’s brilliant,” he whispered, fumbling at the boy’s recently fastened flies.

“Yes,” he said excitedly, biting into the soft flesh of the boy’s long neck, “come to Daddy, my sweet, brilliant prince! Such a brain you are!”

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## Chapter 6: DEVASTATION AT LADY ELTON'S TEA

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Marguerite sat stiffly in Lady Elton's lavish salon. It was the first time that she had received an invitation for tea at the house of the Lady who had lived opposite to her in William's Berkeley Street residence. She had felt awkward enough when she entered Lady Elton's opulent house, understanding very well why she suddenly had been interesting enough to get an invitation for tea. Even after lowering herself to marry that notorious cit nobody had forgotten her lineage and her husband's riches.

She found herself a seat facing the high windows, noticing only too late that she had a straight view of that hated old place where she had spent those horrible marriage years with the disgusting fat ship owner. She suppressed a shudder and reached for a thin watercress and ham sandwich; anything, as long as she could avoid the view of the big stone construction that had been her private prison and hell for years.

She stirred her teacup listlessly only listening with half an ear to the chattering ladies around her. She was in truly high company, she guessed. Next to her sat Lady Sophia Grey, sister to the notorious Duke of Lindley. Lady Sophia was unmarried and firmly on the shelf by her own

designs, according to the many sheets that followed the Quality and that Marguerite had started to read with enormous interest.

Marguerite estimated that the Duke's sister would be in her late thirties. She looked like a bluestocking, wearing a dark-blue nondescript dress and spectacles. Her hair, although of a spectacular ash-blond colour, was straight and knotted in a bun. Yes, the epitome of a spinster.

On the other hand, one could wonder if Lady Sophia did her utmost to seem as unattractive as possible, which was quite a feat; her mother had been a notorious beauty, first married to the old Duke of Lindley and after his demise due to a bad liver disease, marrying the handsomest man in the Realm: Jonathan Montgomery, at the time sole heir to the Duke of Rothford. She stared at the Lady again. There was something strange about the glasses, as if the spectacles were made of normal glass; as if the lady wanted everybody to think that she was a bluestocking. It was not an abnormal thing. Some spinsters were proud of the fact that they were intelligent and they purposefully looked down on beautiful and seemingly empty-headed girls. It was a strange phenomenon to realize that a woman actually wanted to seem ugly, Marguerite mused. All Lady Sophia's efforts did not hide the fact that her face was a beautiful oval, her features very regular and her teeth were very white. Anyone who took the

trouble should be able to see that Lady Sophia had been on the receiving end of her fabulous mother's beauty.

She wondered about Lady Sophia's companion, Miss Nora Martin, from somewhere up North, who seemed the opposite of her employer. She had an interesting face, lively and smiling. Her way of dress was less simple and demure than Lady Sophia's clothes. That was strange; the Lindleys were far from destitute those days. Richard Grey, Duke of Lindley since his second year on God's Earth, had turned out to be the opposite of his wastrel of a father, who had been a drinker, a gambler and a rake. After Richard Grey came of age he dismissed his guardians and started taking care of business matters in order to pay back his father's debts and bring back prosperity in the dukedom. He could definitely afford to buy his sister the most expensive clothes now. Marguerite wondered again if the Duke's sister was playing down her appearance and fleetingly asked herself why anyone would want to do that.

She almost dropped her teacup when she saw Lady Sophia looking straight back at her with furrowed brows and a glint of humour in her eyes. Oh, well!

"I don't think we've formally had the pleasure, Mrs. Alexander," the Duke's sister said to her, "I don't tend to go out a lot anymore, but I do not

remember having seen you before in London. Am I remiss in my supposition?”

Marguerite swallowed and then decided that telling the truth may be the best choice under the circumstances.

“You are almost right in that you may not have seen me before, because my deceased husband did not entertain inside the Ton. This is the very first time I have been invited for tea within Lady Elton’s circles.”

She stopped to put her cup on the table in front of her. She knew she must be trembling because the fine bone china made a soft rattling sound.

“Your deceased husband...” Lady Sophia wondered, “You mean you never entertained during your marriage?”

Oh, right to the heart of it! This Lady Sophia was a very astute woman.

“My husband was adamant on that point, I’m afraid,” she answered with some desperation in her voice. “He was thirty years my senior and one may very well presume that he was not quite used to the needs of a far younger wife.”

That was putting it mildly.

Her spoon tinkled against the gold-rimmed bone china she had picked up again and a colour rose on her cheeks. Marguerite felt as if she was just entering a schoolroom under the gaze of a lot of cynical onlookers and she bit her lip.

Lady Sophia's silver grey eyes showed amused understanding.

"Ah, yes," Sophia nodded, "exactly why I never entertained the reality of a marriage myself. Those men get too much power over us women as soon as that ring is slid onto our finger."

Marguerite could not help smiling at her.

"Quite so," she admitted, "but for some alliances there is no help."

Lady Sophia cocked her head.

"One would be hard put to see the blessing of marriage in such a light, Mrs. Alexander. Tell me what your parents sold you for? It must have been the money as your husband never bore a title, although I do seem to remember he tried to buy one, before his demise."

Marguerite coloured a deep red. That was one of the most direct remarks ever made on that issue.

Lady Sophia put her hand on Marguerite's wrist.

"Don't get me wrong, my dear," she said almost in a half-whisper, "everybody knows that when you marry at eighteen with one of the wealthiest old cits in the country it cannot be the young lady's choice. I am truly sympathizing. My father died when I was still a toddler but he'd already managed to arrange to have me affianced to a widower marques, who fortunately did me the utmost favour of tipping up his toes after one of

his debaucheries with a known courtesan, while I was still diligently learning stitches. At least I had my wondrous escape. The heartless Fates did not bestow that miracle on you, apparently. Mind, I am not criticizing you, as a matter of fact, I feel deep sympathy for you.

“I had the mischance to meet your husband at a banquet at our house. Oh, it must have been six or seven years ago. He was a plain old rotter, excusez-le-mot. He was married to your predecessor and it was clear she was suffering. No wonder she walked into the waters of the Thames. One must admire you for your rock steadiness that you didn’t.”

Lady Sophia looked about the drawing room, as if realizing they were far from alone in this altogether too frank conversation. She looked a bit relieved when she saw that only Nora Martin had followed their talk. Marguerite stared wide eyed at Lady Sophia.

“I never knew that his wife...”

“Of course you did not,” Lady Sophia interrupted her quickly, “why would anyone bother his young bride with such small details of his former relationship? At least you survived him and I am immensely delighted with that.”

She looked up at the parlour-maid who offered newly baked almond cakes on a heavy silver platter.

Marguerite looked around to see if any of Lady Elton's famous footmen was hovering close.

Lady Elton obviously hid her hobbyhorses from her exalted tea circle because only an elderly butler was supervising the parlour-maids.

“She hides them,” Lady Sophia whispered from the side of her mouth.

“There has been a rather naughty article about them in one of those rags and since then she keeps them away from her visitors.”

She bit a piece of her newly acquired almond cake, daintily and expertly using the silver fork left for her convenience.

Marguerite laughed softly.

“I use to admire them from the window over there.”

She pointed at the window of her former own room in the house opposite Lady Elton's.

“I bet you would,” Lady Sophia said drily, pondering that anyone could comprehend that the muscled backside of a handsome footman would rise very high in the esteem of a lonely, more or less imprisoned, and bullied wife.

“What did he die of?”

“What?” Marguerite asked aghast, totally forgetting her manners. She had been wondering how she could have been so uncouth as to admit to admire tall footmen's backsides in the recent past.

“What happened?” Lady Sophia persisted.



Marguerite's deep red colour came flushing back.

"I am not sure. They say his liver gave out."

"Ah, nasty!" Lady Sophia exclaimed, "That must have caused quite a stink!"

Marguerite suppressed a grin.

"They found him dead on his... on his..."

"Privy? In that case he must have over-eaten. I remember the same happened to my uncle Gordon. They say his wife still cannot bear to live in his apartments because of the smell," Lady Sophia told her chattily.

They were interrupted by a smiling Lady Elton who sat down on a chair near their settee.

"Well," she beamed at Lady Sophia, "we have not had the pleasure of your company for a while!"

While Lady Sophia was answering Lady Elton's deferential questions Marguerite looked around her.

A bit further away on an embroidered couch the Ladies Wharton and Eastbourne conducted in loud voices a most confidential conversation. They were both grandmothers, interfering with their children and grandchildren at every turn. Marguerite's eyes widened in surprise. The two women were gobbling up cakes and cookies as if they had not eaten in three days and not bothering to use any cutlery.

“I told Joan it was a disgrace that she has not yet conceived!” she heard Lady Wharton of the rich Wharton’s exclaim, “Imagine, she’s been married for five years now.”

Ah! Marguerite shifted a bit towards the source of indignation. One thing was for certain, when you were seventeen and preparing for your come-out, no one, absolutely no-one, would ever mention one word about things like marital relationships. As soon as you were married or better still widowed, the conversation between the Ladies of Polite Society would suddenly only go on about the interesting topic on conjugal or not so conjugal relations. You would think there was nothing else in the world to talk about apart from the exciting subjects of babies and upcoming nuptials.

The elderly Lady Marsh stirred her tea as if she was brewing a magic potion in it.

“If you want offspring you have to do it, Brenda,” she said with a disinterested voice. “I warned you John was not in the petticoat line, he’s never been one for the skirts.”

“Oh, pff,” Lady Wharton protested, “I dare say it is Joan’s fault. Did you know she moved to the West wing of their house? The poor boy has to walk for half an hour before he gets to her room. Cold feet are never a good start for romantic love, you know.”

“Romantic, my backside!” interferred a slightly drunk Lady Bromley, “He only needs to spread her legs for a few weeks to get her with child, at least that’s what my dear Harvey did, God bless his sweet soul.”

Marguerite was now sure that Lady Bromley’s teacup contained a good amount of brandy.

She had to force a smile from her face when Lady Wharton hissed in a stage whisper to her neighbour Lady Allen; “Her legs and about a hundred others. Wasn’t he once sweet on you too, Paula?”

Paula Allen sniggered and only nodded. It was not the time to make Lady Bromley any wiser about her straying husband. Only when he was good and truly in his grave would it be a nice time to whisper a few words about his unfaithfulness in her ear. Harvey Bromley was an old but still vigorous debaucher who did not mind finding his inamoratas between the lonely elderly women of the Ton; it did not cost him a penny and they could not be gotten with child. And of course there was the advantage that they were normally not disease-ridden. The poxed never normally got that old.

Lady Sophia fumbled with her reticule, her mouth suddenly in a prim pout.

She rose from the couch.

“I dare say we have been here long enough, Miss Martin,” she announced pointedly, throwing a defying glance at Lady Elton.

The hostess reddened, cursing her friends silently. How could they have forgotten that Lady Sophia was a spinster and such free talk about scoundrels of husbands, or talk about the Earl of Wharton’s capabilities of impregnating his wife, was not suitable for her ears? Drat! Sophia Grey was such a catch at a tea party. She hardly went to any of the glamorous parties that abounded during the Season. Only a musicale with known performers (that did not include the marriage-hopeful misses of the Ton, whose undiscerning and equally hopeful mamas insisted that they were inordinately accomplished on either pianoforte or at mixed duets, whilst they murdered operas, scores, and ears) could attract her in some cases.

She often appeared at the Opera, or at the Bard’s more serious theatre plays, such as Othello or Macbeth. Everybody knew that Lady Sophia was literate, educated, very high in the instep and a stickler for manners, just as she should be.

Lady Elton threw a worried look at the recently widowed Mrs. Alexander. Marguerite Alexander had been a Lord’s daughter, although the title had disappeared after his death. Nobody could guess the extent of her wealth right now but the stories had abounded and the knowledgeable bankers’

wives had confirmed its astronomical height. The beautiful Mrs. Alexander was the catch of the season in more than a few ways.

Lady Elton had seen her talking to the normally taciturn and haughty Lady Sophia and they had even shared a laugh, if not a... giggle! Well, that had been fortunate, Mrs. Alexander did not mind a few racy remarks it seemed. Lady Elton's teas had the reputation of being entirely fascinating because of all the eccentric and talkative highborn hags. Lady Elton tended to approve of such friends, it made her teas interesting instead of dull, but today with the ducal spinster in attendance she wondered if she should have cut short the too free conversation.

Her teas were on strict invitation only, and her invitation to Lady Sophia had been as much as a standing one, one might never know, and thank the Lord she had come this time. She could now only pray that the Lady had not been insulted!

Mrs. Alexander was a bit of a strange duck in this pond as a very wealthy but very young woman, although there were enough reasons to invite her anyway. About a few hundred thousand reasons, if Lady Elton's information was on the dot.

Lady Bromley rose and seated herself next to Marguerite.

"Don't mind that one," she whispered at Lady Sophia's disappearing back. "If Lord Wharton is

not in the petticoat line, she is definitely not into men's boots."

"I heard that, Olivia," Lady Wharton said sharply.

"Well, it's true, aint it?" Lady Bromley grumbled with a slight slur.

Marguerite looked wide-eyed at her neighbour.

"Out of which hole did they pull you, girl?"

Lady Bromley asked irreverently, "Everybody knows the poor Miss Martin is being tumbled both ways. If she does not sleep in Sophia's bed she is wont to be found in the Duke's. And dammed if I know which one she prefers."

Lady Wharton looked indignant but kept silent. Even she knew that her beloved Johnny was sooner to be found in the cot of a well-shaped naked footman still wearing his boots than in her daughter-in-law's bedroom. It was a sure thing that hope kept her longing for a grandson while she was alive. Johnny had indulged in girls when he was younger, it was just that after his days in Cambridge...

Marguerite blushed but could not prevent a giggle burbling from her lips. The conversation was scandalous but very enlightening. She had lived in a cage for years and was actually still as innocent as a chick when it came to the Ton's scandals.

"Lindley is one heck of a promiscuous fellow," Lady Bromley went on with glowing eyes. She

liked nothing better than to shock young prim women, “what with all those parties going on in his summer house.”

“You don’t know if those rumours are true, Olivia,” Lady Elton warned, aghast.

“My Harvey was invited to one, Sara, I swear,” Lady Bromley said with glee, “and he saw our little Miss Martin there as well, together with Lindley’s birds of paradise. He confessed it all to me.”

Lady Elton turned stiffly to an improperly amused Marguerite.

“How much longer will your mourning last, my dear?” she asked in a nasal voice; anything to shut up the tipsy Olivia Bromley.

Marguerite blushed. She knew by now that every biddy in this room must have a needy cousin or son of marriageable age who would jump at the chance to snatch a rich and appetizing widow.

“May,” she nodded, in a clear voice. “My husband died on the twentieth of April.”

When she saw the expectant glances of a few of the other ladies she hastily added; “I will go into half-mourning then, of course.”

“Oh, what rot!” Lady Bromley growled, wiping the crumbs of a pound of quickly savoured almond cookies from her huge cleavage, “The year of mourning is only to ensure that the child you breed will get the right father’s name and

inheritance. You don't look eight months pregnant to me. You'll be just fine going into the last part of the Season, believe you me."

Marguerite just smiled thinly. She had heard the whispers about forty year old Arthur Bromley, Lady Bromley's one and only pampered son. To avoid Debtor's prison he would have to sell his lovely estate in the Cotswolds, unless he landed the likes of Marguerite as a wife.

She had seen Arthur Bromley at Hookham's Bookshop and Lending Library only a few weeks ago. He had wide ears, a prominent nose, a bad complexion and she supposed he must suffer from a bad bones illness because he was bent as if he was eighty years old instead of forty. She had wondered what he'd spent his money on to be caught in the debtor's trap, but then reflected one could never tell. Her own experience had taught her that some vices were more visible than others, but the invisible ones could be equally as expensive.

She was pondering whether she should get up and take her leave as she had been sitting in Lady Elton's drawing room for nearly hour when she heard Mrs. Canning, the rich Colonel's wife, mention a very well-known name; Major Henry Agnew.

"I'm not surprised Lillian agreed to the marriage," Mrs Canning said with an envious tone in her voice, "she was always so hell-bent on Tina



marrying into the nobility. An earl's second son and an army man to boot! Although I'm sure he does not own a penny, unless he has been able to loot his fortune together."

She tooted at that last remark and shook her head. Most hopeful mamas did not approve of second sons. They were untitled, if not for worthless courtesy titles, mostly penniless and, because of that, became inordinate wastrels and rakes. An earl's second son and a war-hero was of course an entirely different matter.

"Must be real love," Lady Bromley boomed from the other side of the room. "That yummy Hengist has always been a looker, just like his naughty brother Philip. At least our handsome Lord Morvern is still on the market. Can you imagine landing that one? Last time he appeared at Fanny Bell's ball half of the debs swooned when they saw him in his evening wear."

"They whispered he'd lost a fortune at gambling," Lady Marsh piped up.

Lady Bromley shrugged.

"He'll get over it. I tell you that one has saved himself for the best."

All the ladies peered at Marguerite. It must have been all over London that his Lordship had frequently been seen in the youthful company of her half-brother Stephen McKenna. Surely that could only mean he was after the beautiful and wealthy sister?

Marguerite did not notice the ladies' meaningful stares. She sat frozen on her chair while her heart slowly broke.

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“He was only a dream, sweetie,” Rose whispered while she folded the blanket against Marguerite's lace-clad shoulders.

Marguerite just buried her head deeper into her pillow.

“Don't say that, Rose,” she sniffed with a tearful voice, “I was sure there was something special between us, he's been after me for years! And when he saved us from those robbers... I know he felt for me!”

“Maybe so,” Rose murmured soothingly, “but he has never come back to you, you never heard from him since. He did not so much as write a jot to you.”

Marguerite started to sob softly.

“He couldn't. I was on my way to marry William. And I'm glad he never did. You know how sickly jealous William turned out to be.”

Rose only nodded. It was best to indulge her little mistress now, because, if anything, she saw an attack of melancholia heading in Marguerite's direction. It would not be the first time. Sometime during her disastrous marriage she had decided to give up hope. Rose reflected that nobody could really blame her. For such a young woman, her life had been drenched in misery and she had

always been so patient and quiet. Rose had helped her little mistress indulge in the lovesick dream which at least had gotten her through the horrible years of her marriage as the sole ray of hope in her gloomy horizon.

Now it all had come crashing down and Rose felt very sorry about that.

She wondered if the young master had something to do with the devastating news for Cherie. He had asked her about Cherie's secrets as he wanted his friend Lord Morvern to marry his rich sister. Rose had decided to help him. After the William Alexander disaster she wanted nothing more than to have a nice strong young man share Cherie's bed and make lovely babies with her. Lord Morvern was just the type. It was true that there was a rumour that he had squandered his money, but then Cherie would have enough for the both of them. The girl was so serious; she would definitely be a good influence and live a happy and joyful life with him. Yes, a bed full of roses, she decided with hidden elation.

Cherie had fallen asleep, her hands clutching the sheets.

Rose went to the door and beckoned a jumpy Master Mackenzie who had been a witness to Marguerite's devastated homecoming.

"She's very upset, the poor dear," she said regretfully, "but she'll get over it in the end."

Stevie tried not to look glum. It had been such good luck that this Colonel Canning's wife had been at Lady Elton's tea. He knew by now that Colonel Canning had been forced to retire due to his age and rheumatic fevers that had wrecked him while he had been campaigning in the North Americas at the end of last century. Since then he and Mrs. Canning kept track of all the battles and gossips of the war in the Peninsula.

It had needed some prodding to find someone believable to 'marry' Hengist, and after an afternoon of studying about thirty papers on the war near Lisbon, Stevie had come up with the right person. There was this gossip about the sinfully beautiful Lillian Clinton, wife of the elderly Colonel Clinton who had a sixteen-year-old daughter Bettina, for whom whole regiments were vying, if one could believe the gossip mills. Hengist would be thirty soon and no doubt eager to become a colonel himself and betrothing a famous colonel's daughter, whose uncle was the very famous General Clinton, would be the right road to take if he did not wish to fork out the money for a colonel's commission. Yes, it was all very plausible and to make it all seem much more realistic he had Philip scribble a letter, supposedly from Hengist to his noble brother, copying army news from other letters and proclaiming the news of his marriage soon to come. They had dated the

letter three months backward so that it seemed as if the marriage would already have taken place.

A bored war correspondent had been happy to use the copy for the Times. The war in Portugal had been at a standstill since September last year to everybody's regret; war should be fought and not sat, as it was only eating up the Treasury's money for nothing.

One down, and good riddance, Stevie thought moodily. He truly disliked the eventual outcome of the project, his sister marrying his lover, but he would cheer up with the thought that they would be able to live together in the same house and see each other every day.

He slowly went down the stairs to the library. It was the only room in the house that was decently furnished. He should remind his parents to do something about the house's shabbiness. He shrank back from receiving any of his latest cronies; they'd think him desolate for money if they saw the state of the house. Only Philip's house looked worse, as far as he knew.

Philip was thinking of selling his house at Upper Brook so that he would have some money to make a splendid impression on the Ton and his sister, but the question was; where would he live until he got himself safely married?

At least the rumours about his upcoming nuptials had reduced the hardy creditors to a dwindling few in front of his house. Creditors

preferred possible prospects rather than a man fading away in Debtor's prison who would never be able to come up with a penny.

Stevie nibbled on a thumbnail and pulled at his hair.

'His little brain' Philip had called him tenderly yesterday night, before giving him his rightful reward, and he had loved the implication behind Philip's remark. Philip needed him and had implied he had a talent for intrigue, which his lover seemed to lack entirely. But then Philip had always been busy keeping his glorious body in shape.

Stevie bit his nails even harder. Behind the inn which he'd paid for Philip's lodgings was a lot of wasteland where Philip practised his wrestling and fencing skills with his hastily drummed up cronies. Stevie had watched him wrestle with the young Lord Nicholas Bradbury and had been almost sick with jealousy. He had never practised any of the bodily arts, as his small stature was his undoing in every fight or competition. He had never been remotely interested in riding, hunting or horseflesh, everything Philip practised with a passion, and now Stevie felt his shortcomings sorely.

Stevie tried to swallow away his unease. There were things to do, things Philip could not achieve without his help and interference.

He needed support, he decided. Marguerite was not going to marry Philip without a battle, unless... unless he could secure himself the help of his ambitious mother. He was certain she would agree with the choice of Philip, especially when he would exaggerate Philip's value on the marriage market. Exaggerate? He had heard about debutantes swooning whenever Philip entered a ballroom in his finest clothes.

He made a beeline for the desk and sat down to write.

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Aurora Ross' Diary

It cannot be true. Mrs. Canning must have been wrong. He cannot have married. I am certain he loved ME.

My heart is broken.

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## Chapter 7: HENGIST'S DECISION

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Lisbon, March 1810

Hengist held his horse Jason by the bit where he stood watching the last ship sail out of the port. A curse lingered on his lips. Damn, another convoy going back to London without him on board!

He squeezed his eyes to slits against the harsh sunlight. Even in spring the sun glared, he scoffed. It was supposed to be a lot better than the Scottish weather, but he had had his fill of it. Four long years of service had taken the charm out of the Portuguese sunlight.

He had fought bloody battles in it, and the last scar of the Battle at Oceana still hurt his back. He had taken a sabre wound there and had been ill for two months until it had slowly closed without much infection but with a nasty scar.

His mouth curled into an involuntary smile. Lillian Clinton had made a huge fuss over him at the time, assuring his recovery so that she could climb between the sheets with him in his isolated tent when he was well enough to get his dick into position again. She had been a keen and lush lover, implying her husband had stopped bedding her for ages. Hengist had doubted that. Clinton was elderly but not doddering. Lillian was just a



man-eater and fancied him because he was young and high-ranked. He was certain she would never stoop to anything lower than a major and a six-inch dick.

Alas, like the Portuguese weather, the joys of Lillian wore thin. Hengist knew he had lost his cheerfulness and congeniality a long time ago. He had stopped appreciating the camaraderie amongst his peers; it was empty and practically non-existent with all the abounding pettiness and big jealousies. The men of similar rank were--almost without an exception--ten years older and most had wives that followed the drum, took care of their needs, and kept their beds filled all night.

Hengist licked his lips. He had never expected to become such a domestic person as to want a woman in his bed all night, even only to sleep with, just for the company, but there it was. He did not want to be alone any more, he wanted someone to care for, and who would care for him.

His trysts with Lillian ranged from five minutes to one hour at the most, leaving him satisfied for the next quarter of an hour and then it suddenly turned sour. He wanted the sex with her as eagerly as she wanted him, he was probably at the height of his sexual needs, but it was just not enough.

Lillian did not waste her time talking; she used to grab him as if he were one of the whores of the followers' camp and just leave him after she had

moaned her satisfaction, between clenched teeth because tents did not provide a lot of privacy, especially when you were fucking the Colonel's wife on your portable writing desk.

To his dismay his dreams of Marguerite, Cherie as she once was called by her close friends, were increasing with the heightened state of his sexual affair with Lillian.

Thank God Marguerite's nickname was similar to the French word for 'darling,' so the few times the name had sprung to his lips when he was doing Lillian it had only managed to enrapture his eager lover. His own secret embarrassment, however, had annoyed him more than he could ever admit.

His eyes held a tender expression when he thought of the first time he had seen her. It had been a hot day in Edinburgh and he had just come back from another boring errand - sixteen year old ensigns were ill-used by all the higher ranking officers, which meant just about every officer in the contingent. She had passed him by on her pony, unescorted and dreamily holding a bouquet of meadow-flowers.

He had been a big, remarkably innocent boy in the short kilt of the 42nd Highlanders and he felt as if he had been hit by a thunderbolt when he saw the twelve-year-old girl lazily urging her sturdy Scottish pony along the path where he was

hiding in the blackberry bushes, after having complied with a call of nature.

At twelve, she was already maturing into the womanly forms of the young adolescent. She wore a flowery short-sleeved dress that was quite tight around her rump and only accentuated the apple-like contours of her young breasts. She had done up her shiny black hair in a high pony-tail and the fact that she showed quite some leg from the side where he was gazing confirmed to him that she must have slipped out of the house for an illicit ride. The leg was appealingly soft with flesh at the right places, her unsuitable slipper ornamenting it rather than distracting. From that magical moment she had been a prominent apparition in his young boy's lustful thoughts, whether at waking or at the time he laid his tired head on the coarse pillow of his bunk.

At seventeen he had his first full sexual experience with the daughter of a local wine supplier only because she resembled his beloved Cherie, at least in the dark, and thus Cherie had settled herself in his mind never to disappear again. Most young officers of his age bragged of early experiences with housemaids and farm-helps, but in his father's household the secret humping had been done by his lecherous father himself, who took care to have more pretty faces there than he could play the two-backed beast within a week.

Hengist had known his mother did not care a whit about her husband's sexual encounters. She had firmly closed the door of her bedroom on her husband the moment she had given birth to her spare heir: Hengist.

Young Hengist had always wondered about the marriage of his parents. They seemed barely able to bear each other's company, yet his mother had always stayed in the same house as the Earl. Later on, he understood that there was more than one way to control a despised husband. His mother was a rich Lindley, niece to the Scottish duke. The young duke's representative had only allowed the marriage because the heir to the Earl of Loghaire, Andrew Agnew's uncle at the time, tended to be rather chummy with the Duke of Rothford, Lindley's so-called Nemesis in Scotland, although his beloved stepfather as well. Hengist's father's marriage with Lady Lindley, whose mother was a Wharton, had brought a true hoard of gold into the family and did not differ from all the other aristocratic marriages of those days: lineage, titles and money was all. It had helped that Loghaire had been a sight for sore eyes unlike his merely handsome bride, but as usual things had turned definitely sour when Hengist's father could not keep his breeches on, or his kilt down, when other women were around.

Hengist had always loved his wonderfully sociable and intelligent mother and was quick to

take her side whenever a bad situation occurred in the house. He had been her knight in shining armour and thus showed a talent for gentleness and gentlemanliness. His father had despised him for it, calling him a bloody molly to his face. That is why Hengist grew up in a divided household: Philip could not do wrong by Andrew Agnew, who had become the Earl of Loghaire when his sons were fairly young, while Hengist was secretly spoilt by his gentle mother. She did love Philip as well, but was quick to see the numerous failures and faults in his character. She always used to complain to Hengist that although the brothers looked similar in every way, Philip had the bad taste to resemble his father in character.

When Hengist became a first lieutenant, he had pledged his hope to marry his beloved Cherie one day. He knew all about her at that time. After all, a day of soldiering in Edinburgh did not offer a lot of enjoyment to a young officer who hardly drank, and who deplored going to the brothels. He used his obsession for the girl to spy on her; the house where she lived or the few places she went to, which amounted to church-goings and visits to the lending library. Alas, he was asked to join the 78th Foot for a mission to Ireland, after he earned himself a captaincy due to his leadership and background. When he came back to Edinburgh Cherie was ‘recovering’ from a simple Season in London and was betrothed to the wealthy but old

Mr. Alexander from Stephens and Alexander's Shipping and Ship Yards.

Hengist had been devastated and appalled. The only thing he had been able to do was to schedule the long trip of the 42nd for embarkation in Southend to some unknown far away destination at about the same time as when Cherie was to travel to London to marry the unsavoury William Alexander.

His heroic role to save her and her company from the wandering group of highway robbers was easy enough to achieve as he had been with two platoons of the 42nd and the robbers were only five men. He would have begged Cherie to abandon her marriage plans and to elope with him if it had not been for the impressive presence of Lord McKenna and the equally bossy mother. So he had clenched his jaws and accompanied them as far as North London, hiding his love and his perpetual hard-on.

She had never known about his obsession with her. He had only kissed her once, when he drew her away from the miscreant that surely had his dirty designs on her, not being able to help himself, while one of his soldiers shot her attacker in the head.

His hand had touched her full breast for only a second, but he knew now it must be the longest stretched second in all eternity. That second had helped him through his miserable nights in his

lonely tent and the lurid moments of his existence when he was not drinking away his longing or paying for comely enough streetwalkers. Hengist had found out to his shame that he had inherited his father's despised lecherous nature; he started craving the relief between the legs of a woman more than the comfort of bottles or his friends.

Women had come and gone, quite a few whores and camp followers, and they had all worn one face; hers.

One could wonder why he wanted to go home; objectively Portugal could be as good a place as anywhere else because the woman of his heart was married. But all reason concerning Cherie had left him a long time ago. He would go to London to study the situation and if necessary he would beg her to leave her despicable husband and ask her to elope with him. Something had changed the situation for him, or more accurately; someone. He was a rich man now, inheriting the bigger part of the Wharton fortune as his mother had refused to donate to Philip's bottomless money pits in her will.

He turned to face the horizon where the ships were still silhouetted in the light of the slowly setting sun and swore he would be on one of them the next time they sailed once more from Lisbon to London.

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## Chapter 8: LADY MACKENNA'S PERSUASIONS

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Lady McKenna was terrifying when she was angry and this time she was absolutely ablaze.

“What the hell are you doing in that ghastly black dress?” she shouted at her daughter.

She had only just descended from the ugly old-fashioned McKenna travelling coach, her carriage dress crumpled, but very becoming on her still very appetizing form. It was clear to see where the beauty of both Stevie and Marguerite had come from.

Marguerite felt like shrinking back behind one of the heavy oak pillars of the stairway. Her ambitious mother had been her nightmare incarnate since she started growing breasts and even now, widowed and fully of age, she still could not hide her fear of her mother's often unjust and uncalled for accusations.

She swallowed and managed to come forward for a curtsy.

“Mother,” she gasped, not adding how she had not expected her mother to appear until late April. If there was something her mother hated most it was uncomfortable travel and in mid-March the roads from Edinburgh to London must have been quagmires of mud.



“Don’t you all just stand there!” Lady McKenna cried out cattily to the hastily and frightened assembled staff, “Bring refreshments to the drawing room, and have my luggage brought up. And you, young lady...” she pointed an accusing finger at a shocked Marguerite, “You come with me, and explain why the house is still in such a deplorable state and why you are wearing those ugly rags!”

Marguerite followed her mother into the drawing room with a heavy heart, peeping at Biggles who was wearing his no-nonsense polite butler face.

Her mother always had a knack of insulting her in front of her staff and now, in her recent state of mourning for a despicable man, she could not bear a repetition of what had happened in her dead husband’s household; disrespectful staff members. They could quietly turn your world into a hell of small but nevertheless important occurrences such as cold bathwater; piss in the soup, fleas in your bed, tea that tasted like dishwater, the appalling list was endless and unfortunately she had seen and experienced it all in the house on Berkeley Street.

Her only hope of surviving her mother’s open disrespect towards her was that Biggles could maintain his grip on her not yet unruly household, and the certainty that he had a profound disliking for Lady McKenna because he knew from five

years' experience that, apart from the sumptuous title, she was not a lady at all.

That knowledge could give Marguerite some comfort.

It was true that the staff would not dare to put fleas in her mother's bed or some such abhorrent thing because that was almost similar to volunteering for an old-fashioned whipping or an immediate post on the cobbles of London's irregular streets. It kept the servants on their toes and with the vicious lady in the house they would not dare to indulge in the small pestering that could make life in a house practically intolerable.

It had only been a few weeks since she had heard about Hengist's marriage and the wound of her sorrow was still raw. Stevie had pestered her in the meantime with requests to allow Lord Morvern to come and see her, court her more like, and she had only been able to come up with the excuse of her mourning for her late beloved husband. She had wallowed in her loneliness, taking to her bed in the afternoons and before the Ton even thought of having dinner in the evening she would be hiding under her blankets once more. She had refrained from putting in any appearances in the dining room, taking trays in her bedroom that returned untouched to the kitchen. She knew the appearance of her mother would put an end to all that wallowing in self-pity. For one, her mother was a night animal who

abhorred everything that seemed remotely dull and had anything to do with going to bed early, unless it was with a tasty lover.

Her mother sat down in the drawing room's best chair frowning at the fireplace where a few measly flames pretended to heat the room.

"Call Biggles, right now!" she snapped at her daughter, and when the alarmed butler came in, she rattled off to him whom he had to summon to the house:

Miss Germaine, the French dressmaker, Mr. Boodle from the largest furnishing shop in town, François Toussaint, London's most famous hairdresser, haberdashers, boot makers, shoemakers; the list seemed endless.

"That will teach you what money is for," her mother bitched at her. "How dare you become so rich and not use a penny on any of us! How dare you keep such a shaggy household! Look at the rags you are wearing! If I had not seen you born myself I would not believe you are my daughter!"

She took a quick swallow of her lemonade that was obviously laced with a large percentage of brandy or rum.

Marguerite said nothing, but remembered clearly the four hundred pounds per month that she paid for her parents' upkeep in Scotland. It was true, she had not yet spent a lot on herself, but frankly how many black dresses did one need? Simon had a penchant for black, true, but it

had been half a year since her last farewell to him, on that occasion in a coaching inn South of London. They had rented separate rooms but they had shared hers with a finicky Simon, while Rose had stayed in his, and where he had almost been persuaded to do the deed with her at last, on a real bed instead of a smelly hackney, which had been the most seductive to induce real coupling. Alas, Simon had been able to summon his religious conscience and the fact that he was due to meet his new wife persuaded him to restrict his fumbling and ministrations and he had spilt in her hand instead.

She had only come to live in the house in the beginning of January, after having touched an indecent sum on the house in Berkeley Street. William had known the ins-and-outs of his investments and the London house had surely been one of his best. She had sold the house with furniture and all. She had not wanted to be reminded of the years of her incarceration, so she had refused to bring even one chair out of that house to her recent residence.

The mattress in her bedroom upstairs was lumpy and thin, but she would prefer to throw herself from the roof of the house rather than sleep on the one silent witness of her humiliations; the big feather mattress of her marriage bed. The mere memory made her shudder. She clenched her teeth and shook her

head trying to suppress the memories of William coming to her bed again and again. She was again reminded of the sour and slightly rotten sweaty smell of her old husband, who ordered her to give him his due with her mouth and would then lock her furiously in her bedroom. The years had taught her one thing- there was only one thing worse than an old lecherous husband; an impotent lecherous husband. After all his futile attempts he had feared that she would look for her bodily satisfaction elsewhere so he had dismissed all the servants younger than fifty, had her followed everywhere by two hateful old footmen whenever she was permitted outside the house. He only allowed her at his dinner table when the rich visitors were near their dotage. The musty years, she called the time after her wedding vows, the dreary, horrifying, musty years.

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The dressmaker was first to glide into the house and while she discussed fashions and colours with Lady McKenna, Marguerite was measured from head to toe by her assistants.

Four servants brought in rolls and rolls of cloth and Lady McKenna just pointed at the ones she deemed well enough for herself and Marguerite, without even once consulting her daughter. After she had ordered at least twenty dresses in all, she flashed a grin at a roll of pearl white Chinese silk.

“We’ll use that one for my daughter’s wedding dress,” she said coyly.

The room became suddenly quiet.

“Well, congratulations, Madame, I did not know!” beamed Miss Germaine at Marguerite, “I am sorry to have missed the announcement in the morning papers, but who is to be the lucky bridegroom?”

Lady McKenna looked nonchalantly at her nails when she said: “Why, Lord Philip Morvern of course, heir to the Earl of Loghaire. I’m appalled you are not up to snuff, Miss Germaine.”

When everybody started to chatter at the same time a pale and breathless Marguerite, who had not eaten a crumb all that day, fell in a dead faint on the floor.

Lady McKenna shook her head when a hastily called Rose tried to coax Marguerite back to the world of the conscious.

“I have not come back a moment too soon,” she drawled, “I knew that rascal would get to her when I was not there to prevent it. Now they’ll have to marry by special license.”

That evening it was all over the Ton that Marguerite Alexander Ross, rich widow of that cit Alexander, was already receiving Lord Morvern’s attentions and that the baby would be due at the end of December.

“I’d say your lovely mother has done miracles with the place,” drawled an expensively dressed Lord Morvern.

It had only been a week, but the morning room in which he was having a whiskey-laced coffee was crammed with new furniture, Aubusson rugs, and mass produced paintings. Evidently the last ones were bought more for their ability to hide the ugly spots on the old wallpaper, than for their artistic addition to a rather gaudy interior.

“Expensive but tasteless,” a mocking Lord Morvern had muttered when he first saw the change to the place. At the least, he appreciated the fact that good taste would take years to acquire, so that he himself would be able to refurnish the house, where he was to live for such a long time to come. He could always get rid of Lady McKenna’s horrible monsters in the future, but for now they were accepted, as they only needed some luxury to sit on, so to speak.

Nobody ever wasted a word on Marguerite’s poor deceased husband, but then he was only paying for the whole affair; the upkeep of Philip’s future household, the few debts the bridegroom had incurred, only amounting to the measly sum of twenty-three thousand eight hundred and sixty-five pounds at his own last count, the new additions to the stables of the houses in London and Edinburgh and two racing horses to add to Philip’s and Stevie’s importance and pleasure.

Although the future bride was in residence, she was hardly to be seen outside her room, but the fashionable people only thought that very sensible considering the delicate situation she was in.

Philip was even less comfortable than Stevie today. The cause was the special license he had obtained for the marriage within a week that was burning a hole in his breast pocket.

Although he had been swaggering confidently between the ladies at the ball of the Courtenay's, last night, kissing his future wife's hand at almost every opportunity to show his love and devotion, even daring to kiss her on the mouth when the carriage had stopped shortly when it was filing out of the party, his heart had not been in it at all. Truth to say, it was easy enough to imagine that it was Stevie he was bestowing his attentions on, the chit he was to marry was well able to remind him of his recent paramour, but the thought of the approaching wedding night turned his guts into water. He knew he just could not do it.

He had never been able to make love to a woman and God knew he had tried when he had discovered his true nature, or better: his affliction to bestow 'unnatural love' on the persons of his own sex, which was a hanging offence.

Philip had always been a practical man and after his discovery that he preferred men to women for his sexual pleasure he did not want to spend a long time on the why and how of it. For



some reason it had been quite easy to find similar thinking souls and now that he was almost thirty years old his amorous conquests added up far into the hundreds. He had always favoured first helpings only and would normally not come back for seconds, but was lusty enough to have a full bed, figuratively speaking, as he hardly took his lovers home.

It was so easy to think of marriage in the abstract way, only pondering on what it would bring him; release of his debts, a good house filled with servants to cater to his every need, and a wife to take care of all his domestic needs except that specific one... and someone to tackle the boring details of financial management.

His only worry until now had been the clinging creeper called Stephen Mackenzie, only son to Lord McKenna and most definitely too madly in love with him to allow him any space for play with the competition.

Stevie's competition was a lot fiercer than he suspected. John Row, now settled cosily on a small bed behind a screen in Philip's new dressing room was planning to push the manipulative Stevie out of Philip's affection, which would prove to be a job of Herculean proportions. This morning when he decided to wake up his master with a well-earned blow job he had already found Stevie at the task, his master lazily laying back on the bed, his muscular arms

behind his head, his belly trusted up, humming with content. John Row had sworn that his time would come again. He had to agree that his bread was now thickly buttered thanks to the efforts of little Stevie Mackenzie. It would be very hard to give him away to the bride-to-be, as there was no saying how little rich Miss Prim would react to the news that the bridegroom shagged Stevie, while until now his affections towards her did not extend to more than kissing the bride's hand.

At least John Row had profited from his duality in taste, when he had found the chance to indulge in a swive with an oversexed Lady McKenna. The lady had imbibed far too much Champagne and Brandy at a Ton party and had been too late to secure herself an intermezzo with one of the younger stags, who were always on the prowl for an easy lay with the lady herself, which usually came without any expenses. She had staggered boldly into Philip's dressing room, most assuredly in the hope of finding her future son-in-law there, and was too deep in her cups to notice that it was not her daughter's prospective bridegroom who had taken advantage of her Champagne and liquor heightened libido.

In short, the house off Piccadilly had been in an unparalleled promiscuous uproar of late, with the exception of Marguerite, if one didn't count erotic, but very lonely, dreams about a certain handsome major.

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Philip had been utterly dismayed when his bride-to-be had entered the morning room with a glad smile hovering upon her lips. The impossible had happened at last; she had accepted her future fate with a husband who closely resembled the man of her dreams.

After he had shown his fondness of her in the critical eye of Polite Society she had at last relented and decided to close him into her arms and her heart. This morning she had convinced herself she was in love with him and as a result she seemed to bloom before his very eyes.

Philip, normally never at a loss for words found himself speechless with terror and annoyance. The last thing he wanted was her to be in love with him.

The next person to walk into the morning room was a slightly hung over but very satisfied Lady McKenna, who could not remember exactly who had done her last night until she had screamed, but knew that it had been an utterly satisfying experience, definitely worth the repetition.

Stevie still had his head in the clouds after giving head to his great love and hummed a tune he had heard at an intimate party last night. The conclusion could be that with the exception of a worried Philip, that morning Marguerite's house was at last a happy house.

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“You must help me!” Philip had whispered to an adoring Stevie who languished in a low chair, lazily sipping his brandy laced tea.

Life really had changed for the best for Stevie since he had written his mother that pleading letter about being disregarded by the Ton due to his lack of title and money, and all that because his sister refused to be courted by a madly in love Lord Morvern. Of course, he had not forgotten to include what a social catch the very handsome Lord Morvern was, being heir to the Earl of Loghaire and all, and please would his mother not come to London and sort things out here as poor Marguerite was still hiding in her rooms, mourning her beloved dead husband.

Stevie had known his plea would not fall on deaf ears; his mother loathed her confinement to the backward town of Edinburgh, a social backwater compared to London in her opinion. It was just that Lord McKenna, Scotsman through and through, had a profound dislike for the English capital and only came to town when there was no other option left to him, which was luckily not often the case.

The beautiful Lady Georgina McKenna, originally the daughter of a Scottish-English impoverished country squire, had first landed a marriage with the noble but almost equally poor Gareth Ross, Lord Halkhead who had, due to a hunting accident, only been able to enjoy two

years of marriage with the wily but very sensual Georgina.

Lady Halkhead had only birthed him a daughter, so upon his death his title was referred back to the English Crown to possibly be gobbled up by one of the Scottish dukes who were always eager for more lands and honours. It had not taken the very ravishing widow Ross a long time to hook the elderly, but far from doddering, Lord McKenna. It took her only a year with the help of the handsome young doctor Morris, whom amazingly resembled the deceased Gareth Ross, in Edinburgh to conceive Stevie, who became the first to inherit Lord McKenna's barony as the death of his first wife had left him without issue.

Georgina Mackenzie, Lady McKenna, well into her forties but pretending to be not just yet thirty-five, was a shrewd and ambitious woman. She had been the one to orchestrate Marguerite's first marriage with the obese but utterly wealthy William Alexander. It was true, it had pained her that he was not at all noble, but as titles could be bought nowadays, she had set her regrets aside in favour of William's bank account. She had never had second thoughts about delivering her exquisite daughter into the hands of that despicable man. Georgina might have some muscle beating in her breast to keep her alive but it definitely was not a heart.

She had taken over from Stevie the moment she stormed into Marguerite's house, ordering all the servants around and lashing her poor daughter with every unsympathetic word that could leave her scolding mouth.

Marguerite had always been defenceless against her mother's wiles, and even now as a rich widow of twenty-five she was powerless to her mother's ambitious machinations and manipulations.

Lord Morvern had been invited to diner at the house off Piccadilly on the same night of Lady McKenna's arrival and already at pre-dinner drinks the betrothal was a fact.

Stevie was discomfited to notice that his mother obviously fancied Lord Morvern more than his half-sister did, but knowing the true nature of his secret paramour he tried to overcome his second thoughts and put a happy face to that evening's affair, not for the first time disregarding his sister's dazed astonishment that she had been talked into an unwanted marriage for the second time in her life.

When he told his satisfied mother that having his Lordship in the house would prove infinitely more rewarding, she could not want the couple to live elsewhere. Thus a happy self-congratulatory Lord Morvern secretly moved into the house off Piccadilly within twenty-four hours of his betrothal.

When Stevie applied to his sister to pay for his new wardrobe, it was a logical move to include the bills for Lord Morvern's clothes. This way Philip was fed, clothed, and housed without even having to foot the bill for a single stocking.

The only thing that was still a problem was the absence of an allowance and Stevie could not stretch his for the two of them. So the only thing Philip could do was to put his house up for sale and borrow against the prospect of future money.

Of course Philip proved to be a model betrothed, accompanying a blushing Marguerite to every occasion Lady McKenna could cram into their schedule. He had always been a party animal and his father, under the severe orders of his sociable mother, had sent him to Harrow and Cambridge. Although this ensured him a posh education, his academic achievements had never equalled his successes on the sports fields and at fencing classes, but it did give him a place among the peers of the realm of which he profited now that he had to face the Ton in London with his brand new fiancée.

Lady McKenna bathed in the envious attentions of Polite Society and quickly found her way into the good circles, with the exception of the royal ones. It was so amazing what money and a titled handsome future son-in-law could accomplish in Polite Society.

When Philip pleaded for help, Stevie could only lend him an eager ear.

“I’m worried about the wedding,” Philip growled.

Stevie cocked a brow. He loved it when Philip showed how much he depended on him.

“Maybe we can find somebody to do the deed for you,” he proposed.

Philip broke out in a smile.

“Christ, you’re a genius, little one, why did I not think about that myself?”

Stevie sucked his lip.

“The problem is: whom can we ask? We can hardly advertise that you don’t want to perform. And the few we know that like both sides are far and few and not very trustworthy.”

Philip played a tattoo on the table with his recently manicured hand. The closest one that was a two-way lover to his knowledge was John Row, but to send a valet to his future wife’s bed was unthinkable, what if she conceived? He shuddered inwardly. He peered at his little paramour who had given his life such a boost lately. Stevie was most definitely never to know about John Row. It would not be beyond him to sack John Row on the spot if he as much as suspected Philip’s and John’s true relationship. Stevie was the worst for jealousy; there had been a few near misses in the past with Stevie when he encountered Philip’s other lovers. Philip was addicted to more than one



tryst with others on a daily basis as he needed the thrill of conquests and he was rather over-sexed. The thought of being faithful to one person had never entered his head. Why should he? The institution of faithfulness only applied to women; one had to be certain that the baby in the cradle was the husband's, that was all.

“Can't we postpone the wedding?” Philip asked urgently, “We could use the excuse that your father is not here...”

Stevie clenched his teeth. The less he saw his father the better. Lord McKenna was a big, domineering man, who would probably shoot him if he found out about his only son's ‘true preferences regarding physical love.’

“I'm sure my mother wants him to stay in Edinburgh,” he mused, thinking of the few strategic attacks his mother had launched on a few very tasty ‘lords’ of the Ton. She had been devastated to find out that they did not come cheap or easily, so now she concentrated on the rakes of the Ton who were not bothered by age or scruples if it considered a quick swive at a hidden place.

“Marguerite's period,” he suddenly said.

“Her what?” Philip cried out, wrinkling his nose in disgust

“I'll ask Rose when it's due so that we can do a decent planning for the wedding. With some luck we may delay it for two or three weeks.”

Philip shot out of his chair to embrace a flustered Stevie.

“Christ,” he murmured, “you’re truly a genius, little one.”

Three weeks may not be much, but who was to say which solution to their dilemma would show up in the meantime?

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“Delayed?” asked Marguerite, “but why?”

“Because you are having your monthlies in a few days,” Rose said soothingly, whisking away brushes and combs, “Lord Morvern would be terribly inconvenienced if you were still, well, if you were...”

“Oh, I understand,” Marguerite replied blushing. Monthlies were indeed an inconvenient thing. She wondered how she would be able to cope with that obstacle once she was married. Now that she thought about it, how on earth was she going to cope with a young husband who might come to her bed every night? Memories of her old husband demanding his rights with regularity even when he could not bring himself to the desired conclusion were still too fresh in her mind. She picked up her brush with a distracted face.

“Do you think I should tell him about William? I mean before we...”

Rose shook her head ferociously.

“He’ll find out what he needs to know in due course.”

Marguerite wondered why her old maid was so resolute about it.

“But I...”

“Out of the question,” Rose said. As a future bride you are only allowed to discuss books, poetry, and the weather with him. What would it all come to if you discussed the unmentionable things with a man before he has given you his hand in marriage?”

“At least I hardly have to speak with him then,” Marguerite pointed out with a pout. “He did not give me the impression he ever read a whole book in his life and I dare say his knowledge of poetry may be well limited to bawdy songs.”

Rose smiled at last.

“So it will be the 3rd of May then? Might be auspicious; your mother’s last marriage was in May and look where it got her.”

Marguerite suppressed a giggle. Her mother’s efforts to get into the good graces of the young Earl of Oxbridge, the biggest rake in London, had not gone unnoticed. She wondered fleetingly if she would do the same in about twenty years’ time. She shook her head. It was just not in her. Even with an ever hovering husband, young merchants had managed to get close to her, obviously out on a tryst or even more serious affairs, but she had never even as much as dared

to talk to them, let alone arrange a rendezvous with them. William had been too possessive and mistrusting, anyway, shouting warnings and insults at her if she so much as smiled to the eleven-year-old potboy.

He had caught her one day gazing at the handsome footmen at the other side of the street, who were helping guests out of their carriages, admiring their manly height and their tight breeches whenever they made a deep bow for the important guests, parting their frog coats and showing their tantalizing behinds. What saved her when William caught her was that he thought she was watching the guests and longing to be one of them.

She had only been nineteen years old then, still remembering vividly the kiss of a strong mouth with clean regular teeth and a nice manly breath. He had been tall and muscular, just like Lady Elton's prime footmen, with that big, slightly rough hand touching her breast through her muslin dress, pushing his strong thigh against hers, rubbing an interesting, very hard ridge against her belly. Ah, she could live on that memory forever, especially as Lady Elton's head-footman resembled him from afar. It was a bit mortifying that the same head-footman had once caught her staring at him.

If only I could have been more like my mother, she thought with regret, life would have been a lot more joyful.

On the other hand, the mere thought of putting the horns on her terrifying husband had made her shiver with fear. She still wondered if her husband would have killed her if she had cheated on him. She knew for a fact that William had been ruthless in business and the frustration of having his wife cheating on him on top of everything might easily have made him turn into a wife-slaughterer.

Her thoughts went to Philip, her husband-to-be. She realized she hardly knew him. Oh, he was ever so sweet and gallant, but she was realistic enough to perceive that things might turn in a different direction as soon as she wore his wedding ring on her finger. For the last two weeks he had only tried to kiss her once. Kisses on gloved hands did not count, Ton manners dictated lots of such kisses, and he seemed to be tremendously good at it. On the other hand, etiquette demanded that they did not touch until the night of their marriage...

She sighed deeply.

She knew she was Philip's golden hen. She was not as daft as her mother liked to pretend. When Philip had showed his interest in her she had summoned Master Baines, one of the managers of her deceased husband's Shipping Agency--of

which she owned eighty percent of the shares--to inquire after the eager Lord Morvern.

It had only taken Master Baines two days to unearth the exact height of his debts and his tendency to play deeper than he could obviously afford.

The only reason why she had complied to her mother's wishes that she should marry him was the fact that there were no women of note in his life; no mistresses and no brothels he was known to visit on a regular basis. And of course the fact that he was such a nice friend to poor Stevie.

Marguerite had always loved Stevie from the moment he was born and she was forced to share the nursery with him. She was never certain he reciprocated her love, but she had decided that it did not matter.

They were brought up in Scotland, either in Edinburgh or in the small mansion in Kenna. Her stepfather was not rich, merely well off, and so Stevie had not been given a gentlemen's upbringing at one of the fashionable schools in England. He had to suffice with cheaper tutors and governors. In the end Marguerite considered that as an advantage because Stevie had not at all turned out to be the brash, bragging, and forward boy one would have expected him to become, especially if one considered his blustering father.

Stevie was only allowed to come to London after William died and as he had not gone to posh

schools where he could have accumulated friends and thus a straight ticket into Polite Society he had a hell of a time finding his way into the Ton jungle. He first had befriended Lord John Wharton. Marguerite could not guess where they'd met, the same John Wharton whose wife, Joan, had annoyed his mother by not being in the family way after more than five years of marriage. Stevie's friendship with the exalted lord had seemed quite short-lived however.

It had obviously taken Stevie months before he could infiltrate into the circle of friends hosted by the marvellous Lord Morvern. That they were such good friends had filled Marguerite with gratitude; she knew how hard it was to find suitable aristocratic friends in London when you had no one to sponsor you.

Now that the wedding had been delayed Marguerite gladly contacted William's shrewd lawyer Master Geoffrey Lane. She was worried about Philip's gambling habits and was not prepared to hand over William's inheritance to her new husband so that Philip could pauper them within a year's time. She was sure he was not going to like it, but his marriage with Marguerite Ross was to be governed by stringent prenuptial agreements.

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M. Aurora Ross' diary  
London 21st of April, 1810

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Rose told me the wedding has to be postponed until the 3rd of May because Lord Morvern cannot be inconvenienced by a bleeding wife on his wedding night. She did not put it that way exactly, but that is what it meant. Well, if I think about it clearly it seems that it will be an inconvenience to me as well.

Men don't like it when women bleed, it was the one reason that I had used to keep the Fat Man from coming into my bed. The one time I had a romantic hackney rendezvous with Simon when I had my flow the encounter did not last more than five minutes, chasing Simon back into the maw of Spitalfields.

Lord Morvern strikes me as a prudish and fastidious man, he only kissed me once during the weeks of our betrothal, and that was more a peck on my lips than a true kiss. I know about true kisses because Simon adored long kisses on my mouth and sticking his tongue deep inside it. I am afraid I like kissing as well; I've liked it since that first time when Hengist kissed me during the racket when the soldiers were fighting the robbers off my coach. That was not a mere fast peck; that was Hengist using those nice lips and his insistent tongue. He had raced inside the coach, giving Rose the fright of her life, taking advantage of the distraction of the robbers. Ah, Hengist my love. Oh, I should not write this down. I am to marry



his brother who is a very worthy person. I am sometimes a bit afraid that he will be entirely the opposite of the Fat Man. I truly think that fastidiousness is his second name and truth be told, I hope for a happy life with him where he will be as eager as Simon to please me. So he must discard with his... we'll call it his "good manners".

We hardly speak, Lord Morvern and me. Sometimes I have the feeling that he does not know how to talk to a woman at all. Oh, he seems good enough at the superficial 'Ton' talk that is so fashionable nowadays, but as I said to Rose I have the impression he never finished reading a book in his life, not to say that he ever even started one. Mother likes to be naughty when she talks to him, but the only reaction that incurs is a panicky look on his face.

So yes, I understand why he would prefer the wedding to be postponed, although I am afraid that some blood on the wedding night cannot be avoided. Rose said that with losing one's virginity blood occurs. I wish I had insisted that Simon and I had gone all the way at least once but since his discovery in the refectory that 'I had remained unmarked by any man' as he put it, I have never been able to convince him that it would be a good thing to take me 'into his bed.' Simon believed that taking a woman was similar to taking a wife. A bit strange if you ask me, as Meg told me that

Simon was seen by her neighbour with a woman of bad repute coming out of an alley close to Covent Gardens and anyone knows what that means! I do after Meg explained it to me.

On the other hand, they can hardly be called virgins, can they, those women, so that must have made it all right for him? Oh dear, I cannot believe I am writing these things about Simon, but on the other hand what we did together made me often try to imagine what ‘going all the way’ would be like.

I was never in love with Simon, of that I am certain. It is just so shocking that I felt, well, something like lust for him. I sometimes wanted to beg him to put that specific part of his body inside me, which I truly still don’t understand. And the worst is that I am looking forward to marrying Lord Morvern so that it will all happen after all. I must remember to ask Rose if there will be a way to avoid that blood flow on our wedding night.

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## Chapter 9: OUTSMARTING WELLINGTON

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Marques General Wellington peered