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LOVE'S REASONS

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C. HAMPTON JONES

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PROLOGUE: A BAD DAY FOR ELLEN BURROUGHS

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Port of Rotherham, 1794

“Milord?”

Cyril Fairfax, Earl of Rotherham, looked up with a frown. One of his grooms had just brought his favorite horse to the quay.

“Captain Bouchier?” he asked when he saw the captain of the ‘Countess Anna’ descend the gangway.

“This young man here,” Bouchier pointed at a boy of about eight years that was following him, “says someone would like to see you at the inn.”

Cyril’s frown deepened, but the boy had already gone ahead, right into the only inn Rotherham possessed.

She was waiting for him in a private parlor. When she turned around he could not help but gasp with shock.

“Ellen? My, God, who has done that to you? Not...?”

He was not even aware that he had taken her into his arms until a very young voice shouted: “Unhand my mother, sir!”

He slowly let go of a disheveled Ellen to turn around.

A boy stood there, his hands clenched into fists. Cyril had a déjà-vu of his long-dead brother Perry about to punch him in the nose.

“Make a leg to the Earl, Jeffrey!” Ellen commanded him with an imperious voice.

The boy threw his mother an uncertain look, but then bowed at Cyril in an impeccable leg.

“Jeffrey?” he asked Ellen.

Ellen Burroughs, Baroness of Caversham, nodded at him with a frown and sat down on a high-backed chair.

“My youngest boy,” she said, “I apologize for inconveniencing you, Cyril, but I heard your ship was to deliver you here. I... I need...”

“Caversham has beaten you?”

His hand went to her jaw that looked black and blue.

Ellen peered at her sons. The three of them were standing silently near the window of the parlor. Silent and knowing.

“He went into a rage after I asked him for money for food. Cook has deserted us. He went for her with a whip. She did not want to work for a madman, she said. I only have young Gareth left in the house, although he went without pay for months. He drove us here.”

Cyril felt his temperature rise to steaming rage.

“Where is he?”

Ellen shook her shoulders. She was wearing an old fashioned cotton dress that must have seen

about all of the nine years of her marriage to Guy Burroughs, Baron of Caversham.

“York, probably. Worst is that he took all the money that I kept in the house.”

“You only have one footman left and no money?” he asked in amazement.

That produced another shrug of her delectable shoulders.

“Did you eat today?”

“That’s why mother took us here!” her youngest son interfered in the conversation.

Without answering the boy, Cyril walked to the door, threw it open and shouted for the innkeeper.

“How were you to pay for it, if not ask for credit?” he asked her later when they had all had a big bowl of stew, cheese and bread.

“I was going to pawn my pearls. I’d have asked the goodman’s assistance with it. He’s an honest man.”

She was referring to the innkeeper.

“Your pearls?”

Not the ones he had given her a few years ago?

She bent her head.

“I’m sorry, Cyril.”

She was damned sorry?

He felt the old pain creep into his chest.

Damnation, he should have married her all those years ago! Then she would not be in this dreadful situation with a wife-beater, a gambler and a crook.

He looked at the young boy again, the one that had been brash enough to tell him to keep his hands from his mother. Damnation, the boy was Perry incarnated!

He lifted his brows at her and then sent a look at the boy. He was only five years old, but very tall for his age. Ellen just shrugged again. True, one could never guess the parentage of a child, even if he looked so much like Perry. Caversham was also big and blond.

“Listen,” he said, “this is what we’re going to do...”

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PROLOGUE: ELLEN'S FLASHBACK

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Rotherham, 1789

She opened her eyes slowly when he started to stroke her fleshy hip again.

“Cyril?”

Her smile became wanton when he kissed her full, soft lips.

“You were falling asleep, darling, but I want you once more...”

She lifted her hand to her honey blond hair that spilled around her oval face.

“Cyril,” she whispered, “What, again? We just... you only...”

“Well...”

He hesitated.

“Maybe you’re right, and I should go home?”

He contemplated hurrying off to Annette who was going to have the child probably today. Her pains had started in the morning, but according to his still inexperienced opinion, he had decided that Annette might wait a bit longer to bring his heir into the world. The midwife was not going to allow him close to his wife, anyway.

He guessed he had been too eager to steal this hour with Ellen, but now that they were both still here, why not take them both for another ride into bliss? Ellen was the best when it came to it. She had always been the best.

He looked down at his body that for some reason was losing its enthusiasm rapidly.

Ellen sat up, purposely showing off her lush assets.

“What is it? Ah, you are suddenly impatient to go home to your countess, is that it? Don’t worry, darling, first babies are never in a hurry to come into this world, not even yours.”

She drew herself against him, moving her hands slowly over his broad, bare chest, down to his muscled hips.

“Christ,” he murmured, “you are my goddess, Ellen. See how I worship your body! I’m so ready for you!”

Ellen worried her lip with her teeth. God, the man was always so easily aroused!

Her hand wavered above his arousal, which had come alive anew.

She peered at the strikingly handsome man, who had been her lover and her childhood sweetheart for years now.

Her eyes seemed to change from their usual grey of a quiet sea to the dark slate of a thunderstorm.

“Tell me about it, Cyril,” she whispered, “tell me why you allowed Guy to marry me! Tell me why you have a pregnant French slut awaiting you now in that very fancy house of yours!”

He did not want to hear those spiteful words. God, he hated it when women made a scene or

nagged him. He only wanted her expert hand to touch him. It wasn't like Ellen at all to nag him!

"Christ, Ellen, touch me and I promise to tell you why. Come on, Ellen...! Do it now! I need you!"

She clasped him tightly and he fell backwards on the rough cot with a moan. Ah, but he had been very happy that his clinging wife had become too big with child to care where he spent his afternoons.

Ellen moved to cradle his lap and sat leisurely over his thighs. He felt her sweetness on his leg and moved his hips to shift her closer to him, but Ellen just smiled a wan smile, refusing to budge.

"Tell me now, Cyril. Why did you marry that chit instead of me?"

Oh God, the dreaded question! Why were women not like men and happy with the pleasant tumble now and then?

He looked into her indignant face.

"I married her for her money, of course; what else, Ellen? Don't nag me, I had to marry one day, and you were married to Burroughs for over three years when I decided to do the honorable thing, at last."

Ellen pleased him with short rapid strokes.

"Ellen, darling, please," he pleaded, "let me get inside of you!"

She smiled broadly, and then put her lips on him, grazing him with her teeth.

“What is it, my beautiful love? You would not want to hurt me, would you? You know you do not have to be upset about Annette! Ouch, darling, easy, easy!”

She suddenly launched herself on top of him, taking him inside her in one swift movement.

His hands roamed over her lovely, pendulous breasts.

“God, Ellen Fitzhenry,” he breathed, “you’ll be the death of me one day!”

”What money?” she asked harshly, “Annette did not have a penny!”

He groaned, turning his head in the hard, straw-filled pillow. His hands stopped to cradle her breasts and his hips moved upward with abandon.

“She was dirt rich, don’t you know? She cashed every penny she could get her hands on in France. She sold everything; her father’s castles and lands, everything. She bought me, my precious, and that...is...a...bloody...fact!”

The last frantic move of his hips brought Ellen over the edge and they climaxed almost at the same time, crying out with abandon, enhanced by the fact that they knew they were all by themselves in a distant hovel.

He slowly lay back on the pillow, breathing heavily, pulling Ellen’s head onto his chest.

“Now,” he croaked, still speaking with an effort, “what was that all about?”

His hand started to caress her long blond tresses.

Ellen hid her face in his chest.

“I’m bloody breeding again, Cyril.”

His hand stilled. He moved his head to look at her.

“Is it mine?”

She let out a slow, resigned sigh.

“How am I to tell? My husband still comes to my bed. He’s only thirty-one and as horny as they come, remember?”

Cyril muttered an oath and pushed her away from him.

“I thought you despised the man!”

She sat up beside him.

“Do you think that keeps him away from my bed? Think again, Cyril. He likes it when I loathe him while he gets the better of me.”

Cyril got up with an exclamation of disgust.

“Let’s go,” he growled, his voice heavy with unspoken anger, “the Tanners are due to come back anytime.”

She moved to the edge of the bed.

“When will I see you again?” she asked quietly.

He pulled on his breeches and tugged his boots on.

“Tomorrow!” he promised.

He could never stay away from her. She had always been his very first desire and would

probably be his last. He never understood why. The world was full of willing women, but Ellen Fitzhenry had been stuck in his head, and another place, for a long, long time.

He kissed her neck before putting on his shirt.

“Unless she takes all day to have the child. I’m not sure if I can escape the harridans that crowd my house now.”

She was still sitting on the bed, in all her naked glory, when he left the room.

She smoldered with anger. He was going back to that one, wasn’t he? After all his promises, he had allowed her father to sell her off to the detestable Guy Burroughs, Baron Caversham.

Her father had wanted her out of the way and he was not going to wait for a fickle man to propose to her, if she could land Guy Burroughs.

He had hated Cyril from the start; for his handsomeness, his easy manners and his roguish pirate ways. Back then Cyril was only the old Earl’s second son and Terrence Fitzhenry had wanted a title in his family; a title he found in Caversham’s young, new, but dissipated baron.

He had never shown any regret about her marriage to Guy after Cyril had landed the title of Earl of Rotherham when his brother Perry died in a fight at sea.

Terrence Fitzhenry had known that Cyril Fairfax would never ask for his daughter’s hand in marriage because he had recognized the

opportunistic streak in Cyril Fairfax, something which Ellen always preferred to ignore.

Why buy the cow when the milk was already being given away free?

Cyril Fairfax would move on to grab fortune and possible glory wherever he could. He did not need Ellen at all.

Terrence had cursed his strikingly beautiful daughter's wantonness and had planted her with Guy Burroughs, who had been after her for years.

Cyril had not dared to show himself for a long time after the bloody event of her marriage, until he came home with that French bitch with her crooked accent and her sweet manners.

Not much later, Cyril had told Ellen what a bad mistake his marriage to the French countess had been and she had fallen for his excuses... again.

If she could only deny herself the pleasure of those afternoons in the Tanners' little hut! Nevertheless, she knew she would keep stealing those afternoons until she was too big with the new child to ride a horse.

"I wish I could hate you, Cyril Fairfax!" she said aloud.

At least now she understood that there had been a dowry, that he had not married Annette du Plessis for love; small consolation that!

She dressed slowly. Tonight she would tell Burroughs that she was breeding again. Maybe he would leave her alone now and go to one of his

milkmaids, who did not disapprove of his cruel bed manners, or get himself back to York to his whores. She wanted a long reprieve from her sadistic husband's rough ways.

Outside the hut, she untied her horse.

She looked at the sun.

It was late; the children would be awake when she came home.

She slid on her saddle and sighed. She could have slept in Cyril's strong arms forever: this new babe was dragging all the energy out of her already.

Her thoughts shifted to Annette du Plessis, who at that moment was crying out in the throes of labor.

Good luck to you, Countess, she thought darkly.

You bought him with your gold, but that could not keep him from bedding with me while you are thrashing about in pain due to the babe he put in your belly.

Cruel world, no?

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KIT BRONDEMEIRE'S PROLOGUE

-

London, 1807

"Good lord, Kit! Are you still here?"

Anthony, Marques of Andover, fell onto the couch in the brothel's sitting room next to his brother.

"I don't think he intends to go anywhere except for another turn upstairs," a lazy voice commented.

Tony looked at the disheveled figure of John Montgomery, Marques of Lorna and Kintyre, who lay slouched in an oversized wing chair.

"He's awaiting Broadhurst's return. They happened to fancy the same chit tonight," Lorna declared with a yawn, reaching for his brandy glass.

"They threw up a coin as to who could have her first and now the loser is still at it."

Tony frowned at his tall dark-blond sibling.

"Shouldn't you be home with your new little wife? I understand you are under orders to go to Southend in a few days?"

Kit lifted a lazy shoulder.

"Home to do what, Tony? I understand the few times I was allowed within two feet of her I was only shooting blanks anyway. In any case, the little Lady Brondemeire has been indisposed for weeks on end, if you care to know. If you want an

heir for Andover you'd better get your sorry ass back to Pamela.”

Tony sat down next to Kit and frowned. Pamela birthed a girl earlier in the year and claimed not to be ready for any marital relations. He knew his beautiful little wife was sulking.

He heaved a sigh.

A fine mess he had made there! He should never have married her in the first place! He should have known better than to fall in love at thirty-two with Devon Broadhurst's little sister.

She was such a little beauty at eighteen, ethereal and innocent. The old reprobate in him had fallen painfully hard for her. His father's anger at his idiocy had only driven him on. He had wanted her badly; the little innocent beauty who became his heart's desire.

In the end, there was one month of marital bliss for him. Until the fateful day that his father put a pistol into his mouth and pulled the trigger, after having lost his last bit of un-entailed property to the loan sharks who had hovered around the dissipated marques for years. He was not addicted to the card tables only, but was also dependent of the stuff that came all the way from China, which was eaten and smoked by many an addicted man in the dark hells of London.

Pamela Broadhurst had brought him nary a pound when she married him in the chapel of the

rickety Allington Castle, the home of her father, the Earl of Allington.

Tony, in the throes of his love for her, did not mind her impoverished state in the least, because he was unaware at the time that his father was heading down the road of his final degeneration, dragging everything of worldly value into the pit with him.

Before he fell hard for Pamela Broadhurst Tony was too busy courting the King's daughter, hoping that the old monarch would not object to a future marques of the realm as a son-in-law.

He had been such an idiot!

He still was not certain if the little princess had been playing him false.

It was a moot point, anyway. She had died of an affliction of the lungs, leaving a trail of whispers that the lung disease had been brought on by the pox, which the King's doctor's son had transmitted to her person in the age old way. For God's sake, he was not even allowed to kiss her hand, but that filthy lowly swine had been seducing her and sharing her bed!

Tony turned elsewhere. This time it was the sister of a duke of the realm, but it was made clear to him soon enough that Lady Sophia Grey had decided to ignore her dead mother's wishes for a good marriage, however much she liked Tony Andover, heir to a Marques, out of spite and hatred for a self-centered egotistical mother.

When he fell in love with the beautiful sister of his younger brother's best friend, his sudden devotion to Allington's daughter seemed to have fogged his brain, making him unaware of the dire events that were threatening his father's sanity and the family's welfare.

He looked around the brothel, taking in the lush hangings and the expensive furniture.

Damn, he had earned his night with an expensive whore! He was always working hard, always, spying and manipulating, plotting and deceiving. Because he wanted it all back, all and more: the wealth, the power, the King's respect, everything.

He frowned.

His father's destruction of the Andover wealth had carved deep ruts into his mind.

Ruts that had almost extinguished all the feelings that a man could have for his wife, the one he had married for love and now despised because whatever she brought him had no value at all; her beauty did not fill his coffers and her sweetness had left her after so many ruthless rows and fights.

Ruts that had managed to extinguish the last of his tender feelings towards his mother, who had once been so beloved. Now, she was nothing more than a raving lunatic, frightening the daylight out of his little daughter.

Ruts that had already started to mar the last good feelings he still seemed to possess: his love for his younger brother who was going to leave him soon for a soldier's life on the Continent.

Dark thoughts started to swirl in his head. The years behind him had been the devil's bad luck and he wondered if he would ever see the end of it.

Some wise woman had told him that they would never end, not for him, not as long as he saw the use of his dark powers as the only way to survive in this world.

Esmeralda the beautiful fortune-teller was the epitome of one of his perverted sins as well: he had not done one important thing without having her peering over the cards to investigate the chances of the future. He had been perverted enough to pay her for her efforts with his body. She never wanted money, just his physical 'love' and now Tony dared not presume what that had made him into.

He gnashed his teeth. What if he kept going on, making the same mistakes all his life, doing the wrong things to get everything right?

He watched John Lorna with a frown. The Marques of Lorna must have been married for three years now, but there was no rumor of his wife carrying a child. Fat chance she would be, with her living in Edinburgh and him playing the cad in London!

John's mother had forced his father, the Duke of Rothford's hand on her deathbed. John had been twelve years old at the time, the girl had been in diapers. John had never understood why his mother had wanted him to marry the girl, until he had unexpectedly found out that she was offspring from his maternal grandfather's adventures in Scotland. His mother had wanted him to marry the chit to bring this granddaughter of her father back into the highest London Ton.

Who would serve that purpose better than the spare son who would never become an heir, with his brother Randolph the next Duke of Rothford supposedly sowing his wild oats wherever he fancied. How mistaken the old Duchess had been... Randolph preferred the company of handsome men a lot more than that of women, although he was known not to shun indulging in a sexual act with either. He had just always avoided marriage.

It seemed now that the future of the dukedom of Rothford was to fall into the hands of a rake, who bedded every woman he could put his hands on, except his own wife.

Tony took his handkerchief from his sleeve and blew his nose.

Damn, did they have lilies in the brothel? He always got into sneezing fits when there were lilies somewhere.

He stared at his younger brother who seemed to have fallen asleep where he was sitting.

Kit had recently married Julia Fortescue, but Tony doubted that it was going to be a prosperous union with Kit lounging in a brothel all night. At least with Julia's money he could afford expensive whores now, though that did not seem to make Kit any happier.

Tony scoffed.

Kit was too handsome for his own good. Standing inches taller than Tony, with his wild, wavy hair, and his deceptive brown eyes, which promised tenderness but gave none. He sported long muscled limbs and a broad chest. He only had to look a woman in the eye and she would lay herself down in front of him, lift her skirts and spread her legs in invitation.

Tony assumed that Kit was here because someone was apt to whisper of his debaucheries into the indignant ears of his shrewish wife. Tony knew how Julia Fortescue would pinch her lips together, and then balefully tell her father not to transfer their monthly allowance to the household in Lancaster Street, but rather to keep it in a secret location so that her whoring husband would not profit from that mercenary part of their marriage.

Vengeance would be short-lived for Julia though: Kit had owned a big bank account since the day they had wed; he did not need to dip his

hands into the household funds to pay for a whore.

The door to the parlor opened and a young ensign came tiptoeing in.

Kit awoke and looked at him through half-closed eyes.

“What are you doing here, Montague?” he asked, yawning, “Don’t tell me you’re looking for me!”

The boy could be sixteen at the most, Tony mused, looking at the young ensign dressed in an expensive red uniform of his Majesty’s hussars. It was rich Basil Montague’s little half-brother.

The ensign’s eager eyes flicked to the men all sleepily splayed out in the brothel’s fine leather chairs. His gaze lingered longingly on the red, plush carpeted stairs that lead to the rooms of pleasure, above.

Kit scratched his scalp under his officer’s wig. He wondered if there had been lice on the cushions of Paulina’s feather bed, the woman who had been his choice for the night. She was in big demand these days and allowed to have a new visitor every hour, not to waste income on sleepers. No doubt one of them had transported vermin from his dirty hair onto Paulina’s pillows.

Kit hated lice and every other form of vermin. He would have to ask his batman to inspect his hair the moment he returned to his lodgings;

otherwise he might be in for nights of frantic scratching and no sleep.

He threw a sour look at the young ensign. No doubt there had been another change of orders, which were going to prevent him from sleeping in Tony's apartments near Grosvenor Square. They were a wonderful luxury compared to the cold and bare military barracks in London, where he had to share a bunk with Barry Armonk, a lieutenant of the Fifth.

He had left his own house on Lancaster Street days ago, with no intention of going back there after the last humiliating row with his wife.

Kit sighed heavily. It would have been nice if his marriage had brought him some peace and quiet in his life. He had been haunted with worry and stress since the day his father had decided to end his life with one of Tony's finest Manton pistols.

It had been devastating to see what havoc his father had created with his last actions on this world.

Kit had watched his beloved brother change from a charming roguish rake into a hard, determined, and unscrupulous Lord of the Realm. He had to endure seeing his loving mother descend into a state of near insanity. He had watched his chances of a peaceful life at his own viscountcy Brondemeire dwindle to nothing when the Andover family turned out to be destitute.

“Orders have changed, sir,” David Montague said hastily, “Lieutenant Armstrong asked me to insist that you come back on the double. You are supposed to bring the men to Southend at six o’clock, he says, sir.”

Kit rose unsteadily.

“Damn,” he muttered, “that leaves me little time to sleep, doesn't it?”

He looked up the stairs, listening sharply.

“Broadhurst's still up there. You'd better warn him as well! Second door on the right, if you please, Ensign Montague!”

He watched the ensign race up the stairs and grinned.

“Might be very educational for our little Montague,” he jested.

He grabbed his tricorne hat from the couch, straightened his uniform, took a last swig of his brandy, and performed a short bow for the two men who had accompanied him in the parlor.

“My pleasure, gentlemen!” he drawled. “I'm off to war again! Hold the fort for me here!”

He was not certain if the look his brother threw him was one of mocking or of worry. He shrugged, placing his hat at a jaunty angle on his head.

From now on, Tony would be on his own, because no doubt Kit Andover would be off to a real war, thank God!

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ANTHEA FAIRFAX'S PROLOGUE

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Caversham, 1811

Anthea shuddered when his sausage-like fingers slid the wedding band onto her ring finger.

The bride is about to swoon, she thought, when his fat-lipped, moist mouth lunged toward hers for the kiss that would seal her marriage.

She tried not to retch when the mustiness of his blubbering mouth reached her nostrils. He certainly had not even bothered to bathe for his own wedding!

Distantly she watched how his few black teeth grinned at her. She thought that he should have had more teeth, even at the advanced age of fifty-five, if he had taken some care of them.

Then, she fainted, slipping quietly to the flagstones that were covering the church floor.

She came to in the rectory. She was lying on Mrs. Mulhand's faded couch.

Mrs. Mulhand was just changing a lukewarm wet cloth for a not noticeably colder one.

"Is it true then?" Anthea asked, "Am I married to... to Guy Burroughs?"

Mrs. Mulhand showed a toothless smile.

"And a fine husband you have in him, milady. Let me call him. He was very worried when you swooned."

Anthea shook her head.

“Where are my father and my sisters?”

Mrs. Mulhand scratched her head. Anthea watched her dirty hand gather unspeakable things when it re-appeared from under her grimy, festive, lace bonnet. She hoped the rector’s wife did not harbor any beasties that could easily jump over to her own hair. It was bad enough that she acquired a louse of a husband today; she did not fancy getting the itching sort of bugs as well.

“I think they went ahead!” Mrs. Mulhand answered brightly.

Anthea got up slowly from the couch. Her head was thrumming.

“Oh,” Mrs. Mulhand cried out, “you dirtied the lace on your beautiful dress!”

Anthea shrugged. That church floor probably had not seen water and soap since Cromwell had visited there to say his prayers on his way to the North.

Mrs. Mulhand approached her with a not-so-clean handkerchief.

“Let me help you wipe that, Lady Anthea!”

Anthea waved her away.

“No, no!”

She took a tentative step back from the dirty, too helpful woman.

“I must rejoin the party.”

Mrs. Mulhand stubbornly grabbed the back of Anthea’s dress. They both froze when they heard a ripping sound.

“Please, don't bother, Mrs. Mulhand.”

She hurried outside, wondering why her sisters and father had not waited for her.

A hulking man stood on the church path. He was dressed in his ‘best clothes:’ a purple-tailed coat, a red and blue embroidered waistcoat over unfashionable purple breeches that must have seen the last century.

His face was fat, round and ruddy. He wore a gray wig with stiff curls. His belly was a hulking mass and his stockings were definitely grimy.

Behold my husband, Anthea thought. Oh father, how could you do this to me?

“There you are, my dear!” he leered, trying to appear jovial for the sake of Mrs. Mulhand who had followed her outside. Apart from bad teeth, she now smelled the scent of brandy on his breath, which was a vast improvement to his bodily stench.

Caversham held out a mocking arm to her.

She took it, shuddering when she thought she saw something moving into his wig, near his ear. She wondered if she was going to faint again when she detected his oppressive body odor, the moment he moved his fat arm.

“The party has already gone ahead for the wedding breakfast. Let's hurry, my dear.”

When they were inside his carriage, he took hold of her sleeve. She looked down at his dirty

hand and black nails, trying not to shudder too visibly.

He moved his ruddy face close to hers, his small pig's eyes narrowed into slits.

"Why did you faint?" he asked harshly, "Did he get you in the family way?"

She was too stunned to move away from him.

"N... no, of course not!" she muttered, wondering if she would vomit on his already dirty breeches, "I told you he did not touch me."

His hand moved to her bodice, grasping a lace-clad breast.

"I'd take you here and now if it wasn't so damned uncomfortable," he leered. "Just you wait, missy...!"

Anthea knew that fainting again during the carriage ride would not help her to stay out of his dirty clutches. During the entire ride to her new home, she stared out of a grimy carriage window, forcing herself to breathe superficially so as not to succumb to his stench.

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Lucy pottered silently about the bedroom that was to belong to Lady Anthea Burroughs, the second Baroness of Caversham.

Anthea sat up straight against the headboard of the opulent oak bed. She wore a lacy shift that opened at the front.

When Lucy made a choking sound, Anthea looked at her questioningly.

“It’s the filth of the place...” Lucy breathed with an apologetic smile, “I’ve never seen such a dirty house in my life!”

Anthea did not want to think about it; she refused to notice anything about her surroundings. Her new career as lady of the house, however filthy, would begin tomorrow and she knew she had her work cut out for her.

“It’s too late to see to it now, Lucy,” she warned. “We should be glad that I had the foresight to bring my own bed sheets, although...”

She shuddered.

That dirty man that was now officially her husband would come to her tonight and besmirch her body and her bed. She felt like vomiting again.

She gasped when the door to her bedroom slammed open.

A very drunk Lord Caversham stumbled into the room. As a prank, his friends had removed his breeches, shoes, and stockings. Part of his hairy white belly showed from under his waistcoat. A purplish fleshy pole protruded from the gray shaggy-haired nest underneath his belly and seemed to point straight at a repulsed Anthea.

This is no time to faint, Anthea thought, panicky for the twentieth time that day.

When her husband lurched toward the left side of her bed, she jumped off at the other side. He swayed towards her.

“C’mere, wife,” he slurred. “No hiding from me, I tell you!”

Anthea ran behind a big armchair, and saw Lucy escape through the connecting door to the dressing room.

“Lucy!” she yelled, “Don’t leave me, damn it!”

Her husband slowly approached the chair.

“I like a lady with spunk,” he mumbled. “I like...”

His florid face suddenly lost all color. He gasped, struggled for his balance, and crashed face first into the chair.

Anthea stood frozen behind the chair, with a hand over her mouth trying to stop herself from screaming.

She gingerly stepped from behind the chair. Perhaps Lord Caversham was playing a stupid prank on her.

What was that terrible smell?

When she looked down at Lord Caversham’s naked fat buttocks, she suddenly realized the cause of the stink.

She raced to the dressing room, grabbed an old, smelly chamber pot, and vomited until she assumed she did not have a drop left in her stomach.

Lucy brought her a moist kerchief to wipe her mouth.

Anthea used it, crumpled it, and then started to laugh hysterically.

“Saved, Lucy,” she hiccupped. “I am saved! My esteemed rotten husband is as dead as a doornail!”

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Chapter 1: MANIPULATIONS

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London, Carlton House, 1814

When the woman dashed into the antechamber, a footman sprang in front of her.

“He is not to be disturbed,” the burly man announced, looking down on her from a great height.

“I must see him,” she hollered. “Get out of my way, you idiot!”

Two strong hands grabbed her shoulders from behind.

”I think not! Stop making a fool of yourself!”

The tall man grabbed her waist, trying to force her to turn around, away from the door that she was determined to open.

She turned to slap him, but when she came face to face with him she let her hand fall.

”Oh, it’s you...”

“Yes, it’s me,” he growled. “Let’s go!”

“Please, I must see him,” she whimpered.

He heaved a long sigh.

“Don’t be such a bloody fool! He is through with you, and you know it. Just accept what he’s offering you and move on, for God’s sake!”

She looked at him with wary eyes.

“Who’s with him?”

He walked her out of the room, ignoring the triumphant glares of the footmen.

“Molly Sugden.”

Her face burned.

“Not that fat cow!”

He shrugged.

“She’s all woman and no trouble, and she’s fun. Exactly how he likes them, especially if they cannot talk politics with him. We’ve discussed this before.”

She smiled weakly, hauling at her sleeve that had fallen away, when he turned her around.

“I’m not a very good pupil, am I?”

He drew her against him, leering at her very low neckline.

“We’ll fix you someone else,” he murmured.

“He has all those brothers who will be happy at the chance, now that you’re free.”

-

He fingered the letter thoughtfully.

So he had at last taken his advice and would be looking for another bride now?

He heard a rustle behind him and he quickly covered the letter with a book.

”I’ll ask Mowbray to hail you a hackney,” he said without looking at the woman. “I have a few things to do that can’t wait.”

She stamped her foot in anger.

“That’s no way to treat me, you egotistical rake!”

He turned to face her.

”What more can I offer you than the use of my body?” he asked with a sarcastic grin.

She huffed and turned to the door.

“It’s more than you will get from him!” he hollered after her.

He scowled and turned back to the letter. The stupid chit had made him lose his temper, while she meant nothing to him, nothing! The woman who could crack his armor nowadays was yet to be born!

Somebody with hair the color of silver blond ash and equally silver-colored eyes rose in his imagination. All right, she was born already, but that one he could never have, not now that he was married to a young woman who would probably live to be a hundred.

He rose to light another candle and sat back at his writing desk.

“We’ll have to do it right, this time,” he muttered, raking a hand through his hair. “No mistakes with this one!”

-

He picked up the letter, delivered to him when he came home from his box at the opera.

Ah, the vultures were coming home to roost; nothing was more enticing than a bundle of banknotes in the hands of a destitute and blackmailed man.

He grinned when he reread the missive. The desperate ones were always the easiest to handle,

and this one was more than in despair. Well, this one could wait. He had handled the blackmail before and it was not going to let off until the fool started screwing his wife instead of boys.

He rested his elegant hand under his chin, thinking about his most profitable endeavor.

It was a pity about Smythe; he hated to share a commission with anybody. It had been his idea from the start, anyway. Smythe just fell into a feathered bed. Her annulment had been discussed in the House, and he would be able to cash into that at once. On the other hand, he feared that he could not cancel the actual auction without Smythe's interference. If Brondemeire got suspicious and did something stupid or rash, they would have a hell of a problem. Brondemeire was not to know he had gotten a wife freshly saved from the auction block because his brother wanted him badly to marry this one. There was too much money involved. He could not make another mistake like the contract over the damn Fortescue chit.

He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes.

He knew he had to live with some of the choices he'd made in his life; although it was better if they were left far away in the recesses of his mind.

Bloody Julia Fortescue was one of them.

He studied his hands. Was he still imagining there was blood on them?

Damn nonsense! He had been looking at his hands strangely since he'd seen this Macbeth performance in the Aldridge Theatre. He shook his head in disgust. Whatever he had done, it did not serve him at all to look back.

After Kit left for the Continent, he had sought out his half-cit wife.

The girl had been suspicious of him at first, but his elegant and easy ways had swayed her into ridiculous adoration. She certainly was a title-hunter, just like her merchant father and her homely mother.

It had needed a lot of patience to seduce her into submission. At least, afterward she had been like wax in his hands. Brondemeire just did not understand how to handle her. He was too much of a gentleman, no doubt, to hit his wife, but that was what she had been asking for.

He grinned sardonically. The new one would probably hit him back if he tried that tack with her. If he had ever known a no-nonsense amazon, it was Anthea Fairfax. She would no doubt teach her new husband a lesson or two, but at least she would not shun a good swive, which was all that mattered in Kit's case.

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Chapter 2: A LUCKY STROKE FOR THE VISCOUNT

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St. Jean de Luz, France, March 1814

Kit wondered if he could move his little finger without perishing on the spot. He breathed superficially through his nose, trying to clamp down the sick feeling in his stomach.

Good Christ, yesterday's party had beaten anything they had ever done before!

It had all started quite innocently. John Jenkins had brought him a caller while he was in his tent working at the hated military administration. He heard the man's deep rumble and his heart skipped with joy.

"Hengist!" he had shouted, scooting from his chair, "Hengist Agnew!"

Hengist Agnew had been a major in Portugal when Kit had begun his duty as a young lieutenant in the Peninsula. The big Scotsman was by then fed up with the war, and with the aid of a luscious mistress, he was able to wrestle a leave out of Wellesley.

Hengist went to London not knowing that his brother Viscount Morvern had married on the day of his arrival. His brother's new bride was Marguerite Ross, widow of William Alexander, one of England's richest ship owners.

The lady had not suspected that Lord Philip Morvern had no inclination to ever bed his new bride, as Lord Morvern's sexual appetites leaned toward the burlier specimens of his own sex.

Hengist, recognizing the new Lady Morvern as his childhood sweetheart from Edinburgh from his days as an ensign, had taken matters, including the Lady, into his own hands.

Marguerite's aristocratic husband had died a premature death in a London prison after having been suspected of committing sodomy with a footman. The scandal had rocked Albion from its white cliffs of Dover to the Hebrides in the North and Marguerite's best option after having birthed a son in Portugal was to marry the brother of her former husband. It was everybody's guess that in reality Hengist had fathered Marguerite's firstborn son.

Hengist and Marguerite decided to outlive the scandal in Portugal. After growing bored with the defense of Portugal, when all the war action moved into Spain, Hengist eventually changed his battledress for the rich garb of a ship-owner.

He still served the army however, organizing timely arrivals of shiploads of food, arms and soldiers.

For days the food situation had been dire in St. Jean de Luz. The army had gathered at the Basque port without victuals of note, but now Hengist had arrived with three of his ships, bringing dried

meat, honey, tea, coffee, and the nasty stuff the French called Pinot, which Hengist had taken on board at the isle called Ile d'Oleron.

Hengist had joined the evening's festivities with crates of bottles of Pinot. A sumptuous dinner and a feast of liquor had ensued. Even Wellington had joined them for the party and had taken his fair share and taste of the heady drink.

Kit hardly remembered when the women had started to come in. They were eager for a taste of the French cognac-wine and an extra coin on the side. The last thing he remembered was an experienced hand fumbling its way into his breeches, but he was unable to recall if he had followed up on the woman's sexual admonishments.

Now, even when his head was throbbing like a drum, he fervently hoped he had not succumbed to the woman's urgings. He surely had been too drunk to take out his French letter, his only protection against a dose of the clap or the pox.

He cursed inwardly.

The flap of his tent opened, letting in a sharp shaft of light that made Kit wince. A tall shadow bent over him.

"Ah," Hengist laughed, "they don't make them in the army like they used to. Here, I brought you coffee."

He put a tin cup on Kit's writing desk. He sat down in Kit's folding chair, which creaked in loud protest, when it caught Hengist's full weight.

Kit squeezed his eyes shut before he attempted to rise.

"Good Christ, Hengist," he muttered, "it's just as well old Boney didn't know he could easily beat us with that stuff you poured us. We'd all be in shackles right now and prisoners of the French Empire."

Hengist's laugh rumbled again. He blew ostentatiously on his own tin of coffee.

"I came to check on you. I want to leave on this afternoon's tide. Cherie sends you her love and I'm in a hurry to get back to her to get my own."

Kit nodded prudently, picking up his coffee. Hengist had been fortunate to snatch the wealthy widow after his brother's own organized suicide.

"How is she?" he rasped.

Hengist leaned back comfortably.

"We had another boy last year."

He frowned.

"I swore this would be our last one. She has not been very well with this little mite. Three boys are more than enough, I would say. But there's another bun in her lovely oven."

Kit smiled thinly.

"Four sounds more than enough to me. I wonder how you are coping."

Hengist's amused bark made Kit wince.

“I would not trade my life with yours!” Hengist announced, “Gads, Kit, that woman who was all over you last night was filthy and stank to high heaven, didn't you notice? It took me all my strength to pull her off you and get you back into your tent! I thought you had better taste than the likes of her.”

“Oh, crikes, Hengist, mind your own business, will you?” Kit said, a bit miffed.

He frowned.

“So that’s how I came back home. Did you like spoiling my chance of a free lay?”

He reached for the coffee, which was still tasty and hot.

Hengist just shrugged. He knew better than to expect Kit's gratitude while he was still under the effects of a giant hangover. People with hangovers never made delightful companions.

“How old are you now, Kit, thirty-five, thirty-six?”

Kit grimaced.

“Thirty-four and still kicking, my friend! That stuff you brought must have aged me in a day's time if you think me older.”

Hengist crossed a muscled leg over his bare knee. He was wearing the short battle kilt he usually favored. As a true Scotsman, he did not mind wearing a kilt, but he hated the longer, restrictive ones.

“I married Cherie when I was almost thirty,” he grumbled. “Frankly, I was so bored with the army at the time that I was glad to be able to escape to London where I found her.”

Kit shrugged with apathy.

“I was married once and I don’t think the experience needs to be repeated.”

Hengist shook his head.

“You obviously married the wrong woman, Kit, God rest her soul. She pretended delicacy where she had none and she held her daddy’s purse over your head with every supposed wrong move you made. She was no doubt too self-centered to think of your welfare. Take my advice and find yourself a good woman with deep pockets. Bed her every day for a year and you’ll fill your nursery with your offspring in no time; and then we’ll talk again. You’re getting too old for cheap whores and dirty hangers-on. If you go on like this the pox will find you one day and it would be a good life wasted.”

“How do you know I’m not already riddled with the Black Lion?” Kit asked Hengist angrily.

Hengist leaned back in his chair again.

“I know, because I checked, my friend, last night. I had to get you back into your breeches before I carried you here.”

“You carried me here?” Kit asked with awe.

At six foot seven, he was hardly a small man.

Hengist grinned again.

“I dragged you at some stage! You’re bloody heavy, Kit! But I got you in here, that’s most important of all, don’t you think?”

Kit gingerly touched his head where it hurt most. He wondered if he had hit his head when Hengist was dragging him around. That would account for the pounding headache he still nurtured.

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When Kit limped into Bernard’s small office without announcement, the secretary cast him an annoyed scowl. He prided himself at being a real dignitary of the Crown of England and did not appreciate the roguish ways of His Majesty’s officers, with or without noble titles.

Kit could not care less about the not-so-honorable Bernard Johnson. The man had borrowed his deceased cousin’s name to add to his own importance in a futile effort to draw respect from his peers. Not that it had helped him. Bernard was a wily, big-nosed man who would do anything for some extra coin and by now everybody knew it.

Kit’s eyes narrowed slightly when he remembered Bernard’s perverse sexual tastes. Kit had seen him grunting and groaning in a dark spot during a wayside hanging, hiding his obvious fumbling under his greatcoat. Regrettably, hangings had occurred in vast numbers in the last weeks of the campaign in France. Wellington had

no patience for looters and robbers and hangings had become an almost everyday event. Poor consolation that Bernard Smythe Johnson was one of the few to enjoy them to the full for his own perverted gratifications.

“So you’ve found me a bride at last?” Kit asked, falling down in one of the two sturdy horsehair chairs, which were cramping the already overcrowded small study.

Bernard nodded slowly.

“As a matter of fact one came up very recently. It was not easy, you know, taking your circumstances in consideration. If it had not been for the Marques...”

Kit interrupted him impatiently.

“What did you come up with?”

Smythe showed his teeth in a crooked grin at Kit’s impatience.

“Rich little girl, an Earl’s daughter. I think it will be a perfect match.”

“Anyone I know?” Kit inquired, studying his nails.

“I wouldn’t think so, unless you were ever in the North. She is from Yorkshire, actually, never had a come-out, totally bluestocking, I would say. His lordship, her father, died a year ago, leaving her a convenient amount of money. His heir, the new Earl, did not get a penny of his personal fortune. You had better be quick about this one.

The fortune-hunters don't yet realize she's on the market."

Kit nibbled his thumb pensively.

"Fortune-hunters, you say? Are you going to tell me her name?"

"Lady Anthea Fairfax, daughter of the Earl of Rotherham, Cyril Fairfax."

"Cyril Fairfax died recently?"

Bernard looked at Kit with badly hidden surprise.

"You knew Fairfax?"

Kit tapped his hand on Bernard's desk with mild irritation.

"Of course I knew Fairfax. Everybody knows about Fairfax. He was a genius privateer and later on part of Nelson's fleet. He must have left the Navy seven years ago, after Denmark. He was married to a French wench, one of the early French fugitives. She tried to flee to the Americas; Cyril's ship intercepted her. A French countess, they say. She came to England without a penny to her name. They say he married her for looks and love: sort of a love at first sight, whatever that may be. They say he was a damned lucky bastard."

Bernard Smythe peered sarcastically at Kit.

"What's the matter, Brondemeire? Turning into a romantic, are ye?"

Kit clenched his jaws.

“No, of course not,” he spat, not interested in keeping his sudden foul mood hidden.

Bloody hell! He would have some frightful bluestocking forced upon him and they expected him to like it?

He considered whether he should offer Bernard more information about himself. He decided it might smoothen this important case. It was obvious Tony had brought in the Slime because he needed him. Kit knew very well Tony was astute enough to solve his own problems without the use of the likes of Bernard Johnson if he did not need a mediator. Whatever he could tell the creep was already common enough knowledge amongst his friends and enemies.

“My first wife, Julia Fortescue, was approved of by my aunt Leticia, Lady Grange. She was Debutante of the Year. Dad was wealthy and Mum was the poverty-stricken daughter of a baron. My dear wife was not smart enough to survive the London climate: she succumbed to pneumonia after wearing all those stupid flimsy dresses in winter. I married her seven years ago when I was in England before Koge. I was home for too short a time to implant something of worth in her. She died within eight months of our marriage. I have followed Wellesley to the Peninsula and have been away for three years in a row now...”

He suddenly realized that he was actually babbling in front of the hateful Smythe!

“So Lady Anthea Fairfax it will be?”

He tried to cover his ramblings hastily.

“Who do I need to ask for her hand?”

Bernard shuffled through a few papers.

“Gilles Blackwood, he’s the new Earl of Rotherham and the new head of the family. Mind that he is inheriting the title, but not the money, only the earldom. He’s her cousin. Mrs. Blackwood was Cyril Fairfax’ sister. The new Earl will be in need of a percentage of the girl’s money, given the circumstances, and I suppose your credentials are the best, being the Andover heir and all that.”

Kit nodded with pursed lips. When his aunt had arranged the marriage with Julia Fortescue trivial things like money were not mentioned, even if he needed it as badly then as he needed it now. His aunt had shaken her head over Julia’s father, who was nothing but a very rich London merchant, marrying his daughter up in society to become part of the Ton.

Fortunately, for them, Julia had been a triumph for her parents, a fragile blond beauty who took the lower Ton by storm. Kit had been charmed and delighted that she chose him, until the wedding night, of course.

“Tell me, Smythe,” he said slowly, “how come the little lady is suddenly on the market? As you

remarked, her mother died years ago, she must have been out of mourning for ages. Do I smell a rat here? Even if Cyril only died recently, she still must have been a great catch for her dowry alone.”

Bernard blushed profusely.

“I remember the whispering of a tiny scandal,” he muttered. “She was married off to one of the barons in Yorkshire, a man notably more than twice her age.”

His face turned fully red when he said: “It seems that she was widowed on her wedding night. Nothing to be concerned about, though. I understand she got her dowry back, all in good order and all that.”

Bernard suppressed a scowl. It was no use telling the Major about the annulment and the scandal. If Brondemeire's brother, Anthony, Marques of Andover, had not objected to the chit, who was he to do the telling? He would have married the chit himself if he had been in the possession of a title. Her cousin, the new Earl of Rotherham, had insisted on a title, and Christopher Andover, Viscount Brondemeire, super war-hero and heir to the Marques of Andover had barely been good enough for the ambitious Earl. On the other hand, not many high titles in the London Ton would touch Anthea Fairfax with a ten-foot pole, let alone with a wedding ring. Everybody suspected scandal

behind the waves she obviously had created herself.

Therefore, the penniless Viscount would think himself fortunate in a way.

Smythe was convinced that Brondemeire would be aware of his good fortune. If Anthea Fairfax had been an 18-year-old virgin, without a blemish, she would have easily caught herself a royal duke, given her money and her father's title. He could not be so ignorant to think there was nothing wrong with a girl like that. Impossible!

Kit nodded, deep in thought. If any of this 'bride-digging' was his brothers doing (and frankly, it bore his stamp all over it), everything would turn out to be fine. Tony always knew what he was doing, at least for the last eight years after their father had cocked up his unworthy toes.

Kit got to his feet. He was a very tall man. Without his officers' wig, his dark blond hair fell to his shoulders. His deep brown eyes were pensive.

Bernard scowled. Some damn people had all the luck. Kit was a handsome man at the age of thirty-four. He now possessed the ruggedness that made his face less angelic. Every woman following the drum seemed to be ready to fall uninvited into his bed and he knew it well. Now he stood on the brink of having a well-needed fortune deposited into his lap by marrying a Yorkshire bluestocking, all handed him on a

platter by his powerful brother. Although he was the brother of the Marques of Andover and Viscount of Brondemeire in his own right, his only hope of money would be to marry an heiress. Marrying for money was frowned upon in some circles, but Kit Brondemeire certainly seemed not to be balking at the idea of acquiring blemished gold.

“She has two sisters, you know, equally rich. One is said to have been betrothed to a captain who died in Portugal, but she is entirely unattached now.”

Kit shook his head.

“I may as well go for the oldest one. I don’t want to lose this chance if they will not allow the younger ones to marry first. On second thought, how old is she?”

Bernard suppressed a smile.

“Twenty-six would be my guess. Bit long in the teeth, don’t you think?”

Kit shrugged. What did he care? Twenty-six to his thirty-four seemed fine to him. He’d hate to marry another simpering deb that might turn into a shrewish witch after their wedding-night. The idea of having to bed another Julia Fortescue made his skin crawl.

Bernard shuffled through some papers.

“Right, we’ll arrange a proxy. I will write the proposal and you will only come back to sign. Piece of cake, Major.”

Kit's face split into a smile at last.

"I knew I could count on you, Bernard. Do tell me the date of the proxy; I'd dearly like to know when I can change my recent widower's status for the married one again."

Bernard looked up in consternation.

"You are not planning the proxy here on the same day, then?"

"Oh, good Christ!" Kit growled impatiently, "For God's sake, who is to know? I am to follow Wellington any day, now that I have recovered from my wounds. I'll come back tomorrow and sign your bloody papers here. You find some witnesses; I don't care who. Fill in the date that Blackwood will propose afterward, and no one will be the wiser. I will not go for any other agreements but the normal nuptial ones. I am a Viscount, for heaven's sake, and who knows, perhaps, Marquis of Andover one day, that is if my brother does not stop fathering mere girls. Send me your bill as soon as the lady is signed, sealed and delivered!"

Bernard reddened with anger. It was quite rude of Brondemeire to treat his new bride as a parcel to be delivered to him. His remark that Bernard would get a fee, no, a recompense, for his troubles was uncalled for.

Kit gave him a mocking smile. He guessed what Bernard was thinking. Oh, he was grateful for the trouble Bernard must have gone through to

unearth this new bride for him and of course, it would earn Bernard his fee. He had known of Bernard's lucrative side steps for years now; Bernard was as bloody mercenary as they came.

He had no doubt that it was also Tony's incessant prodding on the subject of his little brother marrying another rich girl.

What worried him was that Tony had obviously lost faith in his ability to sire sons. The idea saddened Kit. He had always liked Pamela, his best friend Devon Broadhurst's little sister, and if it would be Kit's turn now to supply the Andover family tree with heirs, he could count on it that Tony had given up on his marriage with Pamela.

Kit sighed. The family's finances were obviously still in a crisis. An heiress was a must if the Andover family tree was not to sink further into the quagmires of poverty. They descended from stray Tudors and even a Lancaster duke; two, if one looked deep enough into the family history.

Noblesse Oblige, Kit mused. A pity his father had not felt that way.

Kit smiled sardonically. He had been an idealist for a long time, but the war had turned his stomach and his heart once too often. He only wanted to go home and get a life. If that meant he had to marry a bluestocking heiress he would not be the one to object or complain.

As long as she was not like the late Lady Brondemeire! He would have liked to insist on a bride that would not screech at his touch.

However, appallingly, aristocratic brides could only be tested on the wedding night. By then, God only knew, it would be too late to go back on the wedding vows.

He had no scruples left when it came to bedding a woman. With an army on the way or a battle approaching, you took whatever was offered and closed your eyes if the woman underneath lacked some teeth, was inordinately ugly or halfway bald. Kit had learned early in his fighting years that the beautiful ones always had pretenses, were arrogant, demanding, and very rarely good bed partners.

There was to be bedding, he mused. Tony wanted him to sire a son, which would only be proper and right, but when? Although the army had entered France, there was no telling how long it would take to defeat Napoleon.

He could hardly defect from the army to marry.

He thought, without one backward glance, of the swath of women he had bedded from Portugal to Spain and here in France. After seven years of anonymous women, he must now hope to become accustomed to his new bride-to-be and more importantly she would have to comply with him. There would be no Julia Fortescue in his bed anymore!

He had often told his friends that he considered fucking a woman akin to the inner workings of a mechanical device; it was all about rubbing and ensuring excitement. His friends had laughed and called him a cynic.

“Will ten in the morning suit you, Smythe?”

At Bernard’s sour nod, he grinned victoriously.

“Right, ten it will be,” he declared.

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Kit walked to the hall of the small townhouse. When he left his Majesty’s ‘Embassy’ at the market place of St. Jean de Luz he tried to conceal his joy.

Coming into money again would solve a few nasty problems and allow him new freedom. He could buy the gold necklace Juanita had been hankering at; offered to her by a plunderer, and which had probably come from the treasures of Burgos, treasures they had conveniently come upon when the town fell. It would be a good fare-thee-well present for his Spanish mistress, who was actually boring him to distraction. The girl was always nagging him about taking her back to England with him. Fat chance! He knew that Tony and his bride-to-be would not be amused if he took a blanket-girl home. One could wonder if she really was a Spanish girl. Peninsular women were always kept under lock and key until they married. Although most of the whores in St. Jean de Luz were French, some Spanish ‘ladies’ had

followed the army to find their luck with the officers. Some of them had been able to snatch an officer. Kit's good friend Harry Smith of the 95th. had married an innocent beauty, who had almost been raped by the French in Badajoz. Harry was deliriously happy with her, but then Harry was a bit of a nut without a title and the girl had brought him a nice dowry.

Only the lowest-class Spanish women were camp followers, earning their money as laundresses and working a bit on the side if a soldier took a fancy to them.

It had been Wellington's worry that many of the soldiers had started a family with the Spanish women. There was no saying how such a thing would work out when the war was over! Kit was now certain he would not follow their example. He would have a bride to go back home to, even if she might be a little smudged by circumstances.

He grinned; smudges, scandals, dirty old husbands... It would all be compensated by buckets of money! She would not be the only one he had bedded in the dark for those reasons.

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Chapter 3: A DRINK WITH FRIENDS

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In the hastily acquired officers' mess, Devon Broadhurst and David Montague had joined Kit as soon as he had sauntered through the double doors.

The edifice had been confiscated only a few weeks before. It currently housed as many of Wellington's high-ranking officers as possible, as it was far more preferable to have the benefits of a house than to live in a tent. Biscay in early spring was not as warm as one would imagine, particularly the Basque coast where the Atlantic Ocean surged in and brought ugly and freezing weather to its shores.

"Come tell us, Major!" shouted David.

Kit seized a bottle of the best French Cognac available and asked the butler to pour three glasses. He looked at his friends with twinkling eyes...

"Cyril Fairfax's daughter," he announced.

"Good Lord!" Devon exclaimed, "Which one of the three?"

Kit toasted his glass and then asked, "You know them?"

Devon shook his head.

"Not really. I don't think they ever came out. Fairfax and his countess preferred Yorkshire to London. The girls were all of an age to come out

when the countess died a few years ago, so I think that settled the problem for Cyril, what with the obligatory years of mourning.”

He studied his friend with a comical expression and asked with laughter in his voice: “I do hope you are prepared to marry a bluestocking country spinster. At least that's who I seem to remember of the tales...”

Then he laughed aloud.

“Oh yes, now it comes back to me; she's a giant, that's what I heard about her! Must be her Viking ancestors. Imagine marrying Goliath!”

Kit shrugged.

“Bernard told me she was long in the teeth and implied her on the shelf as well. Who cares, if I don't? I will be rich enough soon. At least coming from the North she will not object to wearing a fur coat. We don't want her to die of pneumonia too soon. I will need to father a child first to lay my hands on her money; usual clauses.”

David murmured his agreement. He had been only an ensign when Kit's first wife died. Kit had been more concerned about the dowry that had to be returned, rather than her unexpected death.

“Are they ugly?” Kit asked abruptly.

“Beats me...”

Devon laughed again.

“Are you having second thoughts, Kit?”

Kit shrugged.

“Who cares! I can always bed her in the dark, can’t I?”

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A handsome officer heard his cynical remark and looked up at Kit.

“Brondemeire!” he exclaimed.

Kit turned in his chair to look at the dark blond major sitting just behind him.

“Loveall! Christ, it is good to see you! Where did you come from? So they got you to St. Jean de Luz all right. Sit with us; I’ve got something to celebrate!”

Loveall limped into the circle of Kit's friends.

“This is Major Armstrong, Lord Loveall. We battled side by side at Vittoria.”

Kit introduced David and Devon.

“Ah,” Devon said with a mocking voice, “you are in your best Ton manners today, aren’t you, Kit? Introducing me to an old friend, no less. How are you doing, Lionel?”

Devon smiled. He knew that Lionel Armstrong was the heir to the Wentworth earldom, but that fact had not kept him from taking his place in the army as a Captain in the King’s Cavalry three years before. Now a major, doubtlessly, he was due to be promoted soon to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He was one of Wellington’s favorites because of his brains, his courage and his title. He was a baron in his own right. Every girl with brains of her own had batted eyes at Lionel

Armstrong, but Lionel was reluctant to form any alliances of the romantic kind. He was known to have bedded a woman occasionally but they had mostly been too humble to claim the chance to remain by his side. He had the reputation of being fastidious, the sort of reputation Kit had left behind during the last years of the war and Devon was of late following his best friend rapidly in his deplorable example.

Devon did not care to investigate why he was adapting Kit's rakish ways so fast nowadays. The only thing he knew was that fastidiousness was boring, that he had noticed a liking for fucks with women he would only remember because they were really good at bed sport, if he remembered them at all the next day.

He frowned. His mother would not be very proud of her son nowadays if she would ever hear about his debaucheries. His father would probably threaten to disinherit him, but that would not be a big loss: the Earl of Allington was as poor as a church mouse and the entailed properties he still owned would go to Devon's oldest brother Percy.

"Share some Cognac with us, Major," Kit invited.

"Pray do not listen to that puppy there. I am to be married."

Lionel smiled a white-toothed smile.

“I think congratulations are in order then, Major. I wish I could say that I've found a chit of the marrying kind for myself!”

“Ask Bernard Smythe,” David murmured, “he gets you anything and anyone for the right fee.”

Kit sent David a sour look, but Lionel barked a laugh.

“I hope we go home soon and then I can put myself to the task. I am fortunate to have a brother who might be able to produce an heir for Wentworth, before I do. What with all his practice, he could be a father already.”

They all grinned. Harry Armstrong's escapades with the ladies were known even on the shores of Basque country.

“Well, I wish you good hunting, my friend. Did anyone take care of that leg of yours? You are limping quite badly. Worse than I am,” Kit said cordially.

A shadow moved over Lionel's face.

“I must get rid of that limp. My father does not know about it yet and he would no doubt have another apoplexy if he found out I have become a bit of an invalid! Hales told me that the best way was to break it again. Can you imagine? I'll think about it once I get back home. It can't be too long anymore before this war finally ends.”

“Damn,” Kit remarked, “I hope you are right. I am fed-up with the war. It's just that I have a notion that Wellesley wants to go into Aquitaine

to battle Soult. He's lurking somewhere in the Southeast. We'll just have to try to stay alive a little longer."

Everybody grew silent.

Lionel raised his glass.

"To lives and wives," he proposed.

Devon smiled ruefully.

"What about His Majesty?"

"Ah, yes," Lionel agreed.

"To His Majesty and the pox!"

They erupted into loud laughter.

Lionel studied Kit's face.

"Would I know the bride, Brondemeire?"

Kit emptied his glass and looked inquiringly at his peer in battle.

"As a matter of fact, you might. She is from Yorkshire, Rotherham. Her name is Anthea Fairfax."

Lionel smiled wide.

"Don't tell me you are the one to land Anthea Fairfax!" he exclaimed. "Before she married that ogre Caversham she was the catch of the North. I did fancy her, you know. She's a bit tall for a woman, but she has spunk. Moreover, I would say she's a handsome woman as well. Unfashionably long legs, but they give a man something to fantasize about, if you don't mind me saying so, and a good bosom as well. You're lucky to have her!"

“You know about her marriage to Caversham?” Kit asked in a cool voice, not to betray his anxiety.

Lionel laughed ruefully.

“Everybody knew about it. No one understood it, though. Caversham was an absolute horror. I still cannot imagine why Rotherham wanted the marriage in the first place. Caversham must have had three or four children of his own when he married Anthea. One of his sons serves as a lieutenant with me in the Cavalry, nice chap and a good soldier to boot. Anthea escaped the worst when his father dropped dead on their wedding night.”

He shook his head.

“I gather she only had the marriage annulled very recently. No doubt it was a matter of money. If the marriage had been valid, her dowry would have gone to Caversham's oldest son Nigel. Now you are the one to get the brunt of it, lucky man!”

“She had the marriage annulled?” Kit asked with slight trepidation.

“Sure, the old man obviously died before the marriage was consummated. So there was no reason to call it valid. It seems to me her dowry was reverted to her and it must have been a big one as Cyril's pockets were extremely deep.”

Lionel looked at Kit inquiringly.

“You'd better remember that, Brondemeire.”

Kit nodded. He had been marrying the Fairfax chit six hundred miles apart. Christ, what a complication, he thought. Suppose something happened to him before he could bed her. She would probably start that annulment exercise all over again and leave Brondemeire and Andover in the dire straits they already found themselves in.

Lionel shifted in his chair.

“There's something else. After her father died, she suddenly tried to stop the annulment. However, it was already treated in the House of Lords and they had declared her unwed, instead of a widow. Imagine the Burroughs' devastation that they got nothing in the end! I understand there's no money there! It is said that Nigel Burroughs died of some sudden nasty illness or another or was it his brother Evan? If the marriage had not been annulled, my good Lieutenant Jeffrey Burroughs could have been on the receiving end of her fortune! Just think of how rich he could have been, overnight!”

Kit lifted his glass in a salute.

“I'd rather not,” he declared with a very wry smile.

Lionel nodded at him.

“Do you know that the Peer made some very flattering remarks about you at dinner the other day? I did not know you were so well acquainted. It's very unusual for him to praise an officer in public.”

Kit suddenly coughed.

“Apart from the casual drinking meetings in the officers’ messes, our acquaintance goes as far as Denmark, where we turned out to have the same taste in women. I was only a newly appointed second lieutenant in a house of loose virtue, when I tried to lay my hands on a nice plump eager young chick, but it turned out that Wellesley had his eyes on her as well. With him a Lieutenant General and me a poor sod freshly arrived on Cyril Fairfax's ship, I had to pass on the wench to him, of course. At least he was good enough to appreciate the gesture; I became a first lieutenant within a month without having to pay for the commission.”

Lionel lifted his mouth in a smile.

“Don't you think your heroism in Koge had anything to do with that?”

Kit made a dismissive gesture.

“That was very much exaggerated, my friend. I'll take compliments that are my due, but Koge was just me being at the right place at the right time and them being sods on clogs, poor souls!”

“So when did you marry that first time, wasn't it after Denmark?”

Kit grabbed an almond from a wooden bowl and popped it into his mouth.

Thank God for St. Jean de Luz, he thought. At least there was food in relative abundance. The local people adored the English as Wellington had

insisted that the British army actually paid for the victuals, contrary to what the Grande Armée used to do.

Wellington was also able to keep plunder and rape at bay, which earned the English the gratitude of the French population.

“I married Julia a few months before Koge. People thought me quite the hero when I came back to London, stupid farts!”

He mused that Julia had been very lovable in the eyes of the Ton in those days, but as soon as he tried to join her in her bedchamber he had found her door barred from that sort of love.

“She died shortly after I joined the army in Portugal. I wasn’t there...”

They both fell silent for a while.

“Do you miss her?” Lionel asked quietly.

Kit searched his pockets for a handkerchief to wipe his hands.

He shook his head.

“That marriage was a disaster. She would not let me touch her and after our first night together she was so abhorred of the whole thing that she would hide from me whenever I came home.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Lionel said slowly, “at least you won’t have to go through all that with Anthea. She seems to be a healthy woman, rides like the very devil and if not flirtatious, she knows how to keep a man’s attention. I think you two would suit remarkably well.”

Kit blushed and nodded. He had thought about obtaining a wife, but hardly pondered what it would be like to live together, really live together in harmony, something thoroughly unknown to him. His father had married Elisa Wharton for her money. Her pretty figure and face had come as a bonus, although not much appreciated by Andrew, Marquis of Andover. He had squandered her fortune on betting, horses and mistresses, digging himself an early grave due to his debaucheries. Elisa was a nice well-bred young lady but her marriage had gradually changed her into an unfortunate nag.

Kit hung his head.

Tony's marriage had not been different. As the saying went; 'like father like son.' Most definitely one could have similar thoughts about his own marriage to Julia, although in his own conception it had been Julia's abhorrence for his bed manners that had spoilt it all.

After their disastrous wedding night, when her bedroom door remained firmly closed to him, he had looked and found what he needed with the married ladies and widows of the Ton, and the many brothels he'd started to frequent. The Ton matrons had welcomed the lieutenant with open arms and the girls at the brothels had been flattered to catch the attention of someone so dashing.

To marry someone to live with in peace and quiet; Kit smiled sardonically at the thought.

He would not know how to accomplish that!

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After Kit and Lionel left the mess, David looked thoughtfully at Devon.

"I would not mind a piece of that pie as well," he said to his friend. "There are two more sisters?"

Devon nodded and then shook his head.

"Don't be too hopeful about catching a Fairfax and becoming rich in the process. I would think Kit's bloody lucky. Tony has fathered only two girls and Pamela probably does not want to go through another birth, so the chances are that Kit's fixture as Tony's heir is near a hundred percent. I'd say that must have decided the matter for him. Someone must have been truly in a hurry, though, to get this older sister married and out of the way. She can't be that young. Cyril married his French countess somewhere in the eighties when she was fleeing France, before the threat of Madame Guillotine even existed."

His eyes crinkled in a smile.

"Kit's sure got himself an on-the-shelf bluestocking, probably not to be gotten rid of in the North, why else would she marry by proxy? Fortunately, he will be rich enough to bed half of London's harlots if he wants to."

David cursed enviously under his breath.

“Well, I happen to be first in line to become the fourth Marquess of Ware.”

“Sure,” Devon agreed mockingly, “just ask your brother to renounce the title now. He may live to be a hundred!”

“He does not have any offspring after three, I repeat three, wives,” David stated curtly. “He’s already past fifty.”

“And as tight as a maiden’s purse!” Devon teased the younger man.

David rested his hand beneath his square jaw. He did not care to repeat what was known throughout the entire army; that he had squandered away his fortune as soon as he could lay his hands on it, on his twenty-first birthday.

His brother Basil had afterward not felt inclined to throw his own part of the inheritance into David’s bottomless pit. The age difference was almost thirty years and Basil still considered David a brainless young puppy.

Basil himself had made huge investments in industrial ventures such as mining and hide factories. He also bred fine premium horses at a farm in the Midlands and in Richmond, a certain thing of value, now that England had been on and off at war with France for more than two decades. Basil’s recent wealth was almost legendary now. He was however utterly disgusted with David’s lewd and irresponsible way of life, apart from the fact that David was an asset in the British army;

he was promoted to the rank of a captain at the young age of twenty-two years, first as a brevetted captain, until the rank had been confirmed by the Horse Guards administration. The last thing Basil wanted however was to surrender without a fight one of his titles, or a part of his fortune to his useless half-brother.

David pushed his hand through his tawny blond hair, his green eyes thoughtful. He had a very sensual mouth set in a square jaw and a straight nose on his handsome face.

Devon poured another drink, brooding a bit over Kit's approaching fortuitous undertaking.

They had been friends from the moment they attended school at Eton. Kit was always a winner where sportsmanship was concerned: cricket, horse racing, horse jumping, and wrestling, whatever was the offered challenge at school. Kit's striking good looks carried him through every adventure with girls, their mothers, courtesans, and maids. Whoever he fancied was prone to fall victim to his charms and his much-visited bed.

Devon had been like a shadow to Kit. He was good looking enough with his brown curly hair, gray eyes and classic face, sporting a lean, straight body of more than medium height, but when Kit appeared on the scene Devon's presence seemed to melt like snow in the sun.

Kit and Devon were relatives because Devon's sister Pamela had married Kit's brother, Anthony, Marques of Andover. When Pamela married Tony, she had thought him a great catch because the Andovers always had the reputation of being a very wealthy family. Pamela was appalled when that proved untrue, discovering that Andrew Andover was responsible for the destitution of the proud family.

She often returned to her family in Kent, stating that she would never go back to that rake with his lecherous father. She had tried to safeguard her very small dowry from Anthony's lean fingers, but it was to no avail.

At last Tony started to stay away from the mansion in Andover, preferring to live in London rather than next to a sulking and often angry wife, however beautiful.

Devon was due to follow Kit into the feared snake pit of marriage. Just like Kit, he was thirty-four and was expected to fill a nursery with some wife or another. He had two older brothers and a younger one whose grave was now covered by Spanish earth.

Devon, being the third son of the Earl of Allington, did not have a title, except for the courtesy title of 'Lord.' The Allington family was not wealthy and the only thing he could hope for was a blessed heiress, just as his best friend had landed that day.

At twenty-one, Devon had married an American girl who claimed to be an heiress. Cathy's family, who lived in Virginia, became quite wealthy in the trading business. Although Cathy's dowry was smaller than expected, they'd had a few happy years before she'd died of an affliction of the lungs. The unhealthy London air had been swift to bring her to an early grave.

Devon did not return Cathy's money to her family, as their marriage contract had not stipulated it. He had bought himself a lieutenant's commission in the army instead. He always led a quieter life than his friends Kit and David had. After losing his beloved wife he would not often indulge in the lecherous behavior of most of the unmarried officers, until of late.

There were a few near-fiancées; widowed officer's wives and aristocratic visitors, but when the army moved on he had quickly forgotten about their existence.

Now that the war seemed to be dragging to an end, it would be wise to find himself another consort; a rich one would be nice. After living a rigid army life, he did not intend to live in a one-person household like a lonely bachelor again.

He nodded at a brooding David, who equally morose, signaled the butler to bring him two more glasses of cognac.

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Chapter 4: MUSINGS

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London, March, 1814

When Mowbray came into the library with another royal message, he groaned.

Damned royal summons, and they all expected him to do it for free! Recently he'd become Prinny's whoremaster just for the pleasure of staying in the royal confidence and so that he could earn a pretty penny on the side.

Living in the highest circles of society was costly, but the price of being Prinny's pimp really became steep indeed if it did not gain him an income for his precious time.

He liked his other businesses a lot better and suddenly chuckled, thinking of the Fairfax-contract. Smythe had to be paid handsomely for his tip and he and Blackwood had stipulated a nice commission themselves, after leaving Smythe a small part of it.

It was a pity that brides had to be delivered 'intact' with hymen and all. He most definitely fancied a juicy lady in her twenties like that Anthea Fairfax, who was supposed to be a lively lady with a grand bosom.

The second girl was to be reserved for Richard Grey, the Duke of Lindley.

He had taken care of that part in the agreement. He had sent for his old conspirator Lady Ross to

see to it that number two did not squander her affections elsewhere as long as Grey was touring Europe on his diplomatic missions. Of course, Lindley was not yet conscious of having a new bride coming his way, but he was not apt to refuse. The girl would be too good to be true, even if she might prove to be too young for his taste. Not that the Duke liked them almost ancient, like Prinny, but Lindley was known to prefer women who were riper, wanton and experienced.

Everybody knew that Lindley's first wife had been an innocent lady who was barely able to tolerate him in her bed. Some people in the Ton suggested that Grey was relieved when she died in that carriage-accident in Cornwall, together with their only daughter.

The Fairfax girl had to do, though. Lindley was not getting any richer, what with his sumptuous lifestyle while he was on the Continent and with all the women on whom he spent his money lavishly.

Lindley had hoped that his sister Sophia would make a good match, but she turned out to be a confirmed spinster, rumored to prefer the company of females rather than that of the specimens of the opposite sex.

There had been rumors about Lady Sophia quite some years ago, but they stayed unconfirmed. The Prince Regent had fancied her

and he would have followed up on that fancy if some debaucher had not gotten to her first, taking her innocence in a situation that could be easily classified as rape. Sophia had sworn she would never marry, more to annoy her domineering mother, at the time the Duchess of Rothford, than to avoid the opposite sex.

The third girl would be going to a marques or an earl. There were plenty of them old enough and willing to pay. It would be just a matter of the highest bidder. That despicable Blackwood, their cousin, was fully in on it. Funny how men lost their scruples once they needed the cash.

He opened the Prince Regent's summons, frowning when he read it. Same old story, dammit: how to get rid of another unwanted courtesan. At least there was always money involved in those problems. He quickly calculated how much he could make for himself on this new assignment and called for Mowbray to bring him his coat, cane and gloves.

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Chapter 5: THE BLESSING OF RELATIVES

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Rotherham, March, 1814

Anthea frowned in annoyance when Gilles Blackwood strode unannounced into her parlor. Gilles' attitude had changed a great deal towards her and her sisters since he had become the new Earl of Rotherham.

Lord, she missed her father, even after all that had happened with Caversham, more than three years ago.

Although the earldom had gone to Gilles, Cyril's money was left entirely to his three daughters, because that part of the inheritance had been unentailed.

Gilles had to make do with the ugly old castle of Rotherham and whatever funds the earldom brought him. He now lived in the castle with his homily wife Bernadette.

The girls stayed in the lovely mansion, which her father had built entirely to his French wife's taste. Annette du Plessis hated the medieval castle of Rotherham on first sight. She allured her husband into building the beautiful place that she called Petit Versailles. Visitors were often amazed to find an abode of such finesse in Yorkshire and the inhabitants loved the luxury of the place with its many convenient appliances, which made life a

lot easier in the unbalanced climate of Northern England.

Anthea rose with a frown and raised her wrist so that Gilles could pretend to kiss her hand.

He threw her a disapproving look; she was wearing a green woolen skirt and a sensible white cotton blouse. She had draped her shoulders with a merino wool shawl, not only for warmth, but obviously also to hide the neckline of her blouse. She wore no jewelry.

Gilles felt disgusted by her modest appearance. She was the daughter of an earl, for God's sake, and had inherited an immodest amount of money. The ugly cotton bonnet, which hid all her thick chestnut brown hair, appalled him more than anything else.

She had been wearing spectacles while reading a book on farming and breeding management. At least she had thought to take them off when he entered the room.

"Would you like me to ring for tea, cousin?" she asked in her musical voice.

It annoyed him greatly that she had adapted the rolling 'r' of the North.

Dammit, she should reside in Cyril's townhouse in London entertaining the Ton, instead of hiding away in this God-forsaken place.

"I'll settle for some of your Dad's whiskey," he said curtly.

He helped himself to a glass and a bottle from the large side-buffet.

When he sat himself down in a chair opposite to her, she raised her eyebrows. She did not care for his impolite attitude even though he was her cousin and the only family she had left, apart from her sisters.

“Well, I suppose you did not ride down all this way for my father’s excellent whiskey... Do tell me how we can be of service to you.”

Gilles did not miss the sarcasm in her voice, nor her purposeful use of the majestic ‘we.’

He became angry, deciding to match her sarcasm with his own.

“You won’t believe it, but I received a marriage proposal for you.”

Her gray-blue eyes opened wide. Then she smiled.

“Already? News travels fast, doesn’t it? I supposed you’ve accepted, being the head of the family, with all that power you think you hold over us?”

Gilles coloured and choked away a curse.

Why did he try to compete with her with words? He had known her all his life and he hated her for the smart, tart, rich girl she had always been in his eyes. The sooner she slid into a marriage with some deluded poor aristocrat, the better. It would serve her right to learn some rotten facts in life, married to an unfaithful rake,

who would no doubt run through her money in a year's time and give her a dose of the clap for gratitude.

"Well?" she inquired, her eyebrows raised.

"Am I going to hear the name of my future gallant husband or will you keep it from me till the day I walk the aisle again?"

After a moment of reflection, she said: "You'd love to tell me he is another fifty-five year old smelly drunkard with a title, who has squandered away his money, and was deserted by his last wife without leaving him a subsequent heir."

Gilles could not help a faint smile.

"Nearly a bulls-eye, cousin!"

That remark seemed to sober her. To his unholy amusement, he saw her stiffen.

"Apart from the age, I mean. You will be happy to hear he is only thirty-four years old and playing soldier in Wellesley's army, excuse me, Wellington's army, wounded at Salamanca or some such or another stupid place. The soldier, who considers himself a war-hero, wishes to marry you by proxy as there is no way he can be physically present for your nuptials."

She raised an eyebrow at his mention of her future husband's injury. No doubt, she imagined some invalid sod, who was missing some important limbs or worse.

"Come now, cousin, do I have to torture you for a name?" she almost grumbled.

Gilles kept silent for a few moments more, enjoying the obvious annoyance in her face.

“His name is Christopher Andover, Viscount Brondemeire. He was a second son of the Marques of Andover, the 7th. Marques to be precise, the one who killed himself after having gambled away his last pitiful penny. Brondemeire’s brother, the recent marques, has been married for years, but has yet to produce a son. As an earl’s daughter, you could do worse.”

Anthea understood at once that Gilles tried to put his finger on the sore spot. What he meant to say was ‘as an earl’s daughter, who has submerged herself in scandal and who is considered on the shelf as an ape-leader.’

She suddenly wondered why her relationship with her only male cousin had always been so bad. They had always been at odds. It was true his mother, her father’s sister, a long dead aunt, had made the unforgivable mistake of marrying into a cit-family for love, turning her only son into a nobody, until the day he inherited Cyril Fairfax’ title as the only male descendant in the family.

While Anthea was being educated in the art of managing a big estate and household, his mother in the meantime was turning Gilles in some sort of an honorable farmer. His father had died only a few years after Gilles’ birth and the Blackwoods had gotten rid of the unwanted side of the family by buying them a farm.

The only advantage Gilles had over his cousins was that he had received a gentleman's education at a boarding school close to York. Nothing really fancy, but he always felt like he'd 'been out in the world'.

Annette Fairfax refused to allow her girls to go to London for a come-out and most definitely a boarding school for young ladies was entirely out of the question. The Countess of Rotherham had been a Countess Du Plessis in her own right and no low-born teacher of some boarding school was going to educate her precious girls. That she refused to make her curtsy to the scoffed at English Queen was due to the fact that she had been in the doomed French Queen Marie Antoinette's favor, while the London Quality was known to look down on the 'poor refugees' of the French Ancient Regime.

The girls never minded their mother's stubbornness in the matter. She was worldly and she knew everything about social etiquette and dances. Their French was impeccable and their manners were superb. For the rest they had been educated by a string of governesses, who were ugly enough not to catch the Earl's fancy.

Anthea tried to understand Gilles' need to always want to humiliate her.

He had purposely not asked her if she would even agree to a marriage, which was an insult to her. They did not exactly live in the Middle Ages

anymore. Of course, he was just trying to annoy her, but deep in her heart, she felt hurt.

She was silent for some time.

“He has no money?”

He shook his head.

“Not a blasted penny.”

“A former wife?” she asked.

“He was married to a rich girl, but she died within a year of the marriage. The marriage was known to be a disaster.”

He tried not to gloat openly, when he saw her eyes widen.

“How long ago was that?”

Gilles sucked his teeth, thinking hard. He would love to see more of that shock on her face while he was briefing her on her future debauched husband.

“It must have been about seven years ago. He had just begun his career as a soldier. He met her when he was on leave in London; she came out that year and was a splendid success. The story goes that she died of pneumonia or some such affliction of the lungs. London can be damn unhealthy, you know.”

That was another hint in the direction of the unpleasantness that would be awaiting her.

“He must be at least good-looking if he could pin down an heiress so fast,” she mused with glee.

Gilles looked sourly at his cousin. That girl’s quick wit would be the death of him one day! He

was, in truth, not overly pleased with the prospect of gaining a new good-looking cousin-in-law. If it was up to him, Anthea deserved another filthy swine like Caversham.

“I did hear he has a reputation with the ladies,” he added, “any ladies. You might be in for another lecherous bastard!”

Anthea ignored the use of his foul language in her presence. She knew he did it to annoy her, nothing more.

Only a boor like Gilles would think nothing of using abusive language in front of a lady, assuredly if the lady was his cousin. He definitely wanted to show her that he did not think of her as a real lady. In this respect she always wondered about his poor plain wife, Bernadette. What it must be like to live alongside a snob and a boor like him!

She looked down at her hands in her lap and shrugged.

“I’ll have a husband whom I expect will want to live in London and not bother me overtly much, especially when he likes the enjoyments of the demi-monde, so why would I mind? He gets a fortune and hopefully a wife who can give him several children. I get the blessed marital status and London will be mine at last! Truly, dear cousin, don’t worry about me, I’ll be happy to get out of your hair. I’ll have my own money to amuse myself silly if I wish to.”

Gilles scowled at her retort and crossed his booted legs.

He was not sure about this cousin bearing any children; the woman was bloody thin. He even acknowledged that she would be far better looking when she did not resemble a rail. He knew she had nursed her dying father for months, but did she really have to look like a corpse as well?

He suddenly realized that it was not the ordeal with her father that had caused her to become thin; she had actually lost weight after the scandal of her first marriage and the ensuing annulment. Well, he was not going to mention this flaw to anybody. That would only reduce the price of the goods, wouldn't it?

Anthea drank her tea in silence.

Gilles Blackwood had not wasted any time in marrying her off, had he? No doubt he would cash a nice percentage of her inheritance!

Damn Father to have given Gilles the right to act as head of the family and damn him to allow a spiteful Gilles the chance to treat her like a pig for sale at a fair!

Why had Father done it? Father had disapproved of the love she had felt for Jeffrey Burroughs for almost half her life. To be married off now to somebody unknown, an invalid, and no doubt someone out of the disreputable circles of reprobates in London!

She rearranged her skirts dourly, feeling the weight of her disappointment. She tried not to imagine Jeffrey, but his handsome face rose immediately in her mind.

Oh, if father had only been reasonable about Jeffrey Burroughs; her bribed suitor, her childhood sweetheart, her life!

It had not helped her at all to make herself ugly and unattractive, in the end; somebody whom she had never seen in her life had offered for her and worse, had been accepted on her behalf. A possible refusal, due to her unattractiveness, had been cleverly avoided by organizing a proxy marriage, to a man who was a thousand miles away and who would only see her after their marriage, if ever. Oh, bloody hell!

The door of the parlor opened and two blonde haired nymphs dashed into the salon.

Gilles smiled broadly at his two cousins, and wrapped them in bear hugs when they eagerly greeted him.

“Aline! Attelante! How utterly lovely you two look today!”

Anthea studied Gilles darkly from the couch.

Yes, her sisters were lovely. Christopher Andover did not know what a mistake he had made in asking for her, instead of courting her sisters. They were beautiful and lovable, although they could be terribly naughty and spoilt at the same time, in their charming way.

What her husband-to-be was going to get was an almost manly, thin woman, who looked at the world from a greater height than would ever be fashionable for any girl.

Anthea wondered if she should regret having been studious, that she could ride like the very devil and had been able to look after Rotherham's financial affairs. She should have been the boy her father had wanted so desperately.

She could well pretend to be a lady, her mother had taken sufficient care of that, but she was certain that she would never be able to give up her fast horses, her 'manly' financial acumen, her bookishness and her memories of Jeffrey.

Too late, too late, Jeffery, she thought wistfully. You should have come back to me when father died. Now it was too late, now I must marry someone else!

Marrying ought to have advantages, but she could think of none.

She might well hope that marriage to an unknown man would help her never to feel heartbreak again. Maybe this marriage would get over the hurt of the denial of romance due to the rules and obligations of aristocratic hierarchy and her station in life.

It was stupid to fall in love and to believe that she, a rich earl's first daughter, could marry a mere third son of a lowly, degenerated baron.

Her father had always been harsh and unforgiving about her adoration for Jeffrey, although he had always been good and welcoming to the boy-next-door himself.

He had bought Jeffrey off so that he would go far away from her, buying him a commission within the famously expensive Kings' Cavalry, the part that was to go to aid Wellesley in the Peninsula. Everybody knew that being part of the Cavalry was dangerous; they always got themselves easily killed in battle. She did not know if she could say that the possibility of Jeffrey being killed, if he stayed on with the Kings Cavalry, was her father's desire. Jeffrey had always been the daredevil and a miracle with horses. No, the Cavalry had no doubt been Jeffrey's own choice and after all Father had done for Jeffrey; this had been the final big present.

She grabbed her handkerchief and blew her nose, softly so that the chattering girls who were laughing and jesting with her hated cousin would not hear her snuffle.

At the time, she had urged Jeffrey to take the money and the commission, the three full-bred horses and all the gear he had needed for his dashing new future.

She understood her father had offered Jeffrey a buy-off, but Jeffrey had considered it as a chance to better himself and come back a more acceptable man.

Had she known that her father had intended to marry her to Jeffrey's lecherous sire, she would have gone down on her knees to beg Jeffrey to stay close to her and protect her, abduct her to Gretna Green, anything!

After her disastrous marriage to Caversham, she had received other proposals, but her 'widowhood' had given her a good excuse for two years and when the Earl fell ill she considered it her duty to stay close to him until his heart finally gave out. Another year of mourning for her father had left her out of the clutches of the fortune hunters, but the day she was free to marry again, was the day that somebody had wrapped her up in a parcel and offered her to the highest bidder; a reprobate without any cash and with a marques as a brother.

She had been happy enough here, in quiet Rotherham, hoping one day to reunite with her blond giant.

Now Gilles could not wait to get rid of her, of course. Father's steward had gone into his service to stay with the earldom, and it was no longer up to her to oversee the ever-mounting accounts. Gilles was not interested in her interference in the matters of the earldom, on the contrary; he was a spiteful man who only wanted her to suffer for the fact that he was so insignificant.

Now she had been an easy sale on the marriage-market. God, the world was unfair! She

had always known it was a man's world, but it was horrible that she had become its victim.

She frowned. If you looked closely it was all Father's doing: his incomprehensible demand that she would marry Jeffrey's father as soon as her mother had closed her eyes forever, Jeffrey's banishment from Rotherham, there was no other word for it, and now this horrible cousin who had inherited nothing but the title and the fact that he could decide what was going to happen to her in her life.

A niggling voice told her that her father had never been worth the adoration she had always bestowed on him. She quickly pushed away this devastating idea. She did not need more terrible thoughts when her world seemed to be crashing down on her.

Anthea could now only hope for one thing; that her husband would not be small. She imagined she would be the laughingstock of the country next to a tiny man.

Her face parted in a grim smile. So this was what she had become; a ninny who had no hopes for her second marriage, only that her husband would not be too small. That was truly lowering!

She wondered fleetingly how much longer the fighting against Napoleon would go on. Obviously her new husband could only come back home after the war against the French was finished. Would it be months or even years before

she met him at last? Napoleon was in a bad way now, after his Russian debacle and his last year's losses in Prussia.

She pondered that at least she felt glad that she would be able to go to London, now. This northern part of England had started to lose its appeal now that Gilles was the earl, her father dead and Jeffrey gone.

One thought perked her up a bit; she would surely take Attelante and Aline with her wherever she had to go. Never mind Christopher Bloody Andover's eventual objections to having his in-laws in the house; he would have to cope with them like he would have to cope with her. It was really not much to ask in exchange of the money she would bring him.

A small smile started to play around her mouth. No doubt the girls would be overjoyed to leave Rotherham at last, even if they would have to live with a brother-in-law who was a total stranger., an invalid and a rake.

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At first sight, the girls looked like twins. They both had white-blond hair that was a welcomed feature however strange it was, considering that Annette Fairfax had been of Anthea's dark blond coloring and Cyril's hair had only been a sort of ruddy peppered hue.

Their eyes were deep blue, and at twenty-two and twenty-three, they were fashionably chubby.

Marriage-proposals had been legion for the girls, but Cyril Fairfax had insisted that neither of the girls should marry before the older one. He had kept to that rule even after Anthea's widowhood and later annulment of her marriage. Anthea wondered now if he ever wanted them to marry at all. He had told them often enough that no man would be good enough for them.

Now that the barriers of mourning had disappeared, Anthea would be able to help them find fine husbands, as long as Gilles did not feel inclined, as the head of the family, to decide their future husbands for them.

She knew that Gilles was overly ambitious. If given the chance, he would string the line of the Rotherhams and Blackwoods to the best names and titles in the country.

Gilles was married to Bernadette Warleigh for five years. Bernadette was his second wife, a Scottish baron's third daughter. She had not yet conceived and his first wife had never been known to be in the blessed state, either. Gilles was now forty-one years old. Time was running out for him. Anthea was certain that he did not like the idea of the Blackwoods losing the Earldom of Rotherham to one of Cyril Fairfax's eventual grandsons, but as long as Gilles failed to sire a son that was exactly due to happen. Thank God there was some justice in this world!

Anthea sobered. The only setback in all this was that she actually liked the new countess Bernadette Blackwood. She was not really pretty, true, although Anthea had noticed men slavering over Bernadette's more than abundant cleavage.

She knew from the stories that the now five years deceased Countess of Loghaire, Lady Audrey Agnew had done her utmost to bring Bernadette's marriage with Gilles about, just as she brought about that one of her husband's bastards had been adopted by and raised in the bosom of Bernadette's family. Anthea knew for a fact that two of Bernadette's brothers had quite recently perished when they were hunting in the Scottish Highlands and that the remaining brother was ailing. The adopted brother was some captain or major in Wellington's army and it was now certain that if Bernadette's third brother did not live and sire boys, this same adopted brother would inherit Bernadette's father's barony. Once when Anthea had asked Bernadette, or Detty as she would call herself, if that seemed right, Bernadette had laughed and told her that it was truly terrible that she loved her adopted brother Peter more than the brothers that were her true siblings, so that she would definitely not moan the fact that Peter would become Baron Irving Wallace. She added that she had often wondered about the name of her father's barony that he had

acquired in 1806: Wallace had been the name of Peter's mother, who died in childbirth.

Anthea send a quick look at her sisters who were almost romping with Gilles.

It was good that she had a chance to flee all this, even when she had no clue what her new husband-to-be was like. She consoled herself that she would be the one who held the purse strings. She could always hold them over his head, couldn't she, just to avoid too much unpleasantness from his part.

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Chapter 6: CELEBRATION

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St. Jean de Luz, March 1814

“So, as of today, you are a married man again, Kit?” David inquired.

Kit leaned back in the couch at the so-called officers’ mess, which had been a wealthy Frenchman's home before it was confiscated by the British army.

“That’s what it seems,” he said lazily.

He opened his arms wide.

“Meet the new millionaire,” he drawled. “If I didn't hate the stuff so much, I’d pour you Champagne.”

David declined with a mocking, disgusted face.

“No thanks, Major, the Cognac will do very well. Imagine drinking the girlie stuff! Save it for your bride, or even better your mistress!”

Kit smiled wickedly.

He had at least some coupling to do on his own wedding night. On a night like this, the prospect of a sturdy French whore with a blessedly big bosom the size of a cushion had its festive quality.

He frowned when he thought of his new bride, who was known as being thin and therefore distinctly ugly. At least he would only have to cope with her until she conceived.

He had hastily turned in a request asking to be released from his post as soon as the regiment no longer needed him, but he realized that the request would be futile. Wellesley wanted to go after Soult, who was lurking in Aquitaine. It was a matter of pride for the Peer.

Kit preferred to do his duty to his wife as quickly as possible and be done with it, thus ensuring the fortune that she brought into the marriage, but Wellesley was never in a mood to send anyone on leave, even when they were half-dead.

Everyone wanted to go home and have the war over and done with. Napoleon had lost the battle at Leipzig the year before and Spain was back in Spanish hands. One could hope that the end of the war would only be a matter of time.

Kit was still awaiting marching orders into Aquitaine. He had suffered a long time from saber wounds, a bullet through his left arm and another in his left foot. The wound in his foot had kept him limping for a year, but as a major, he could always stay seated on his horse, so the limp had never been a reason for the Peer to send him home.

Kit was profoundly tired of being in a war; the romantic adventure of battle had worn off a long time ago. He had seen too much and experienced too much pain and anxiety. He had become a sardonic veteran, who had begun to appreciate the

things he had considered so insipid years ago: peace, quiet and a family life.

It was time to go to London. His new bride owned a big place in Mayfair. Therefore, he could sell his house on Lancaster Street without a qualm. He realized very well that he would have to be careful with money until she gave birth to their child. He had to refrain from gambling from now on, not to incur too much debt. He definitely could not afford another disaster by losing the hereditary portions that Anthea would bring into the marriage after already spending it.

Bedding a thin wife; he shuddered at the thought. Julia had been overly slim as well.

Thank God, he could always close his eyes and imagine a woman more exciting. He did not mind the act itself. He knew he was too sensual ever to fail with any woman, but still...

He bit his lip.

It was time to go and poke a nice girl a few times. There was no way he was going to spend his wedding night with Juanita. It had all been too good to be true in the beginning, until she became a mercenary shrew. For some reason all women seemed to change after a time. Kit had often wondered what could have spoilt a simple relationship with a woman so fast.

He leaned over to David and said:

“I feel like a change today, David. Where is that house you frequently visit after those boring parties with the local gentry?”

Devon chuckled.

“If you’re done with your mistress, why don’t you throw her my way, Kit?”

Kit smiled faintly.

“Even the best foods consumed every day get boring, gentlemen.”

“I’ll have my batman show you the way, Major! No correct that, I’ll show you myself!”

David rose from the couch with his usual enthusiasm.

Devon stood also, buttoning his coat.

“Wait up for me, gentlemen, I dare say it’s time for my monthly tumble, doctor’s orders,” he grinned.

David laughed.

“Your months are surely shorter than a week, if I remember well, sir.”

Devon fumbled in his pockets.

“Did I forget my French letters?” he asked.

Kit shook his head, laughing at Devon’s preoccupation.

“You can always have one of mine!”

“You use them even when you are with your mistress?”

Kit slapped his friend on the shoulder.

“Especially when I’m with my mistress,” he said in a stage whisper. “We don’t want her to force a little bastard upon me, do we?”

David shook his head.

“You don’t need the bloody shields here, gentlemen, the house claims that the girls are healthy and innocent!”

Kit and Devon laughed.

“Why of course, David!”

Devon clapped him on the back.

“And my grandmother died a virgin.”

“Anyway,” Kit announced, “because today somebody made me the happiest of men it’s my treat, provided I get first choice. It’s not every day that a man gets leg-shackled.”

“In that case,” Devon pronounced loudly, “many happy returns of the day, Major!”

Their laughter echoed in the large hallway of the mess.

They were overtaken by three other officers at the front door.

“Wait up for us, Brondemeire, we’re joining you!”

Kit turned around.

“Captain Williams?” he asked pointedly.

Rory Williams cast him a mocking grin. He was a captain in Kit’s regiment.

“We have not been to this Casa Rosso, yet. We heard they have new fresh girls there.”

“Fresh?” Devon cocked a brow, “It’s none of my business, Williams, but why pay for something you can get for free?”

Rory Williams blushed a peony red colour.

“Have you ever seen his wife?” David whispered, “All long bones, just like a horse.”

“Cordelia is always with the wounded!”

Williams ground out harshly, “If I did not know any better, I’d say she fancies that stinking sawbones Hales. Who are you to ask, Broadhurst? I’d have you mind your own business!”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, let’s restrict the fighting to the battlefield and the enemy!” Kit urged them soothingly.

He sent Devon and David an urgent message with his eyes.

Devon shrugged at him and gave Williams a foul look.

The group turned into the long alley leading to the harbor where the brothel was situated.

“I know her,” Devon said quietly to David, “she’s no beauty, but she is very nice.”

“Nice?” David asked unpleasantly, “You fuck nice?”

Devon shut his mouth in a grim line. Maybe David was right. Not all men appreciated ‘nice’ women. Maybe it would be better for Cordelia Williams to be a calculating hussy, instead of a caring nurse that followed the drum; she might

keep her husband in her own bed, instead of with all the mercenary women that serviced the army.

His gaze fell on Williams again.

Stupid bastard, he would probably never appreciate how lucky he was to have a wife like Cordelia.

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Chapter 7: TOULOUSE

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